

Award for Outstanding Achievement Shuttle Launch Experience

the interpretive power of theater



by Mark Hayward

When I was 17 years old, a visit to an art museum changed my life. It was a retrospective of work by conceptual artist Chris Burden. I had been interested in art as a kid, but this show completely changed my perspective of what art is and what it can be. The experience flipped a switch in my head. In fact, it was one of the things that motivated me to attend art school.

Museums are very good at turning these switches on. Traditional museum exhibitions give the self-motivated visitor the opportunity to explore topics and stories at their own pace and in their own order. It's a free-range experience - you construct your own narrative based on the knowledge and experience you bring with you. The more prior knowledge you bring, the richer the potential experience you can create by linking personalities, places, artifacts and specimens to one another. But what if you don't bring much prior knowledge?

For example: Having studied art history, when I visit an art museum I already know Van Gogh and Gauguin's stories. I know about their relationship to one another, and even their relationships to other artists in the same museum. Seeing new works by these artists enriches my existing understanding. I walk into the museum and see Van Gogh and Gauguin almost as if I know them. A story develops in my head. But a person who hasn't studied art history might walk into the same galleries and see the same pictures without

perceiving many of the connections or being able to build meaningful stories. For this visitor, traditional museums may not provide the tools with which to do that.

Most theatrical experiences, on the other hand, start out with the assumption that the viewer may have little or no knowledge of the story. It is the responsibility of the playwright and director to embrace the audience member who knows nothing about the subject, and provide him or her with all of the information needed to become involved in the unfolding drama. To paraphrase Lewis Carroll, you begin at the beginning (of the story-journey), continue to the end, and then stop. Therefore, the action in a play tends to be highly compressed, controlled and sequenced, so that the patron can have a complete experience by the end of the show. A successful production captures the audience's attention so completely that they forget they are sitting in a dark room surrounded by others.

Incorporating a theatrical experience into the museum setting can help bridge the gap, giving visitors certain information that acts as a lens through which to view and better understand the items and artifacts in an exhibit. In other words, theater can effectively and efficiently convey emotional themes and messages that enable viewers to forge new personal connections with the subject matter. These shows don't necessarily teach names, dates and other facts; they create impressions that help viewers construct emotional memories.

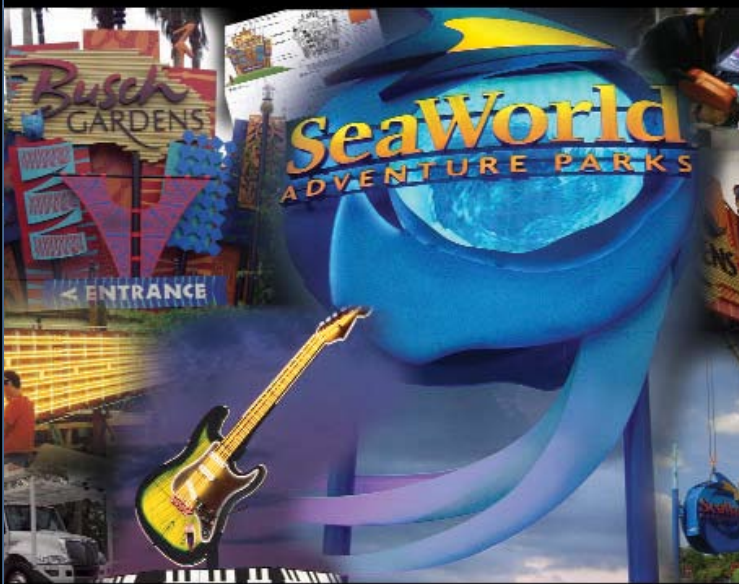
Shuttle Launch Experience, one of our company's recent educational projects, demonstrates the interpretive power of theatrical experiences in museums and museum-like settings. It employs a full-immersion motion-base simulation theater.

Theater can transport an audience to a different place or time, suspending disbelief and focusing attention through the director's



Mark Hayward is the director of museum project development for BRC Imagination Arts. Prior to working for BRC Mark was the head curator of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, where he also held the positions of Senior Exhibition Developer and Associate Curator. Mr. Hayward has also served as a consultant for the Chicago Architecture Foundation, American Bar Association Museum of Law, and Garfield Park Conservatory.

EVERY SIGN TELLS A STORY... LET US TELL YOURS



Classic. Creative. Custom.



*"Know the Legacy."
60 Years of Service*

**Don Bell Signs
365 Oak Place
Port Orange, FL 32127
800.305.7033
Fax: 386.763.4762
DonBellSigns.com**

use of storytelling and stagecraft. We all understand the suspension of disbelief is essential for fiction - but what about non-fiction? What if you want to take visitors to a real place, but visiting the place itself is not an option? For most people, a real visit to outer space is not within reach.

With that in mind, imagine designing an experience that takes an audience for a ride on the Space Shuttle! Shuttle Launch Experience opened late spring 2007 at Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. It is a full-immersion simulation of the launch of the Space Shuttle that takes an audience of 176 guests on a high-fidelity five-minute journey. Now, I want to emphasize that, while this "ride" is thrilling, it is not a thrill ride. Twenty-seven veteran shuttle astronauts were interviewed in depth about the sights, sounds, sensations and emotions they experienced during launch. Astronaut Charles F. Bolden Jr. is the host and narrator. The experience is never portrayed as a "real" launch, but as a simulation, similar to the ones that shuttle astronauts train on. It is as close as you can be to simulating the reality of a space shuttle launch within the confines of Earth's gravity.

The experience begins with an in-depth pre-show that walks guests through a real shuttle launch sequence in detail. The idea here is to prepare guest "crew members" with the specifics of the science and technology of the launch sequence by showing them step by step. Sound and light effects, rumbling floors and fog generators dramatize the launch in the pre-show. Next, guests board the crew pod simulators and buckle into their seats. Charles Bolden reappears and again acts as the guide. He leads the audience through the launch sequence referencing back to the information he provided during the pre-show. The simulator recreates the sights, sounds, and vibrations of lift-off. The adventure continues as guests experience Max Q, a period of time when enormous forces squeeze the Shuttle, Solid Rocket Booster Separation, Main Engine Cut-Off and External Tank Separation. The entire experience leads to the climax of reaching low Earth orbit – and some other surprises.

Today, much of the Kennedy Space Center is dedicated to supporting manned shuttle missions. So when guests visit Shuttle Launch Experience, they are not simply observing the workings of the Space Center, they are cast as the players who participate in the story itself. For a few minutes, they are astronauts. The theatrical experience helps them build an emotional framework for the subject, or reinforce the framework they already have. Instead of relating facts, it puts them into a story. The use of theater and immersive techniques – filling the field of vision; bathing the visitors in soundscapes and musical scores; adding tactile elements and visceral effects – all are designed to bring the visitor closer to the subject.

They may not have "learned" facts and figures, but they have formed an emotional tie to the subject. This may inspire them to seek out further information and create learning on their own terms. In other words, it flips the switch on.



This article originally appeared (in a longer version) in the May 2007 issue of IPM.