



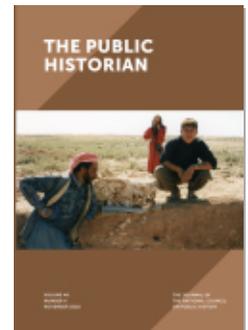
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*Performing History: How to Research, Write, Act, and Coach
Historical Performances* by Ann E. Birney and Joyce M.
Thierer (review)

Amy M. Tyson

The Public Historian, Volume 40, Number 4, November 2018, pp. 207-209
(Review)

Published by University of California Press



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(ARBC). The ARBC was originally purposed with creating in quite conventional terms a nationally coordinated celebration of America's place in the world, rooted in the success of the Revolution and the conviction that all Americans had benefited from its promise. However, this sentiment by this time felt quite out of step with the experience of most Americans. As Ada Louise Huxtable noted in the *New York Times* in 1970, "Are gaudy, extravagant, technology displays obsolete? Is a World's Fair-type Bicentennial festival appropriate for a country racked with social, racial, and environmental agonies?" That sense would only deepen, particularly after the Watergate revelations. In consequence, Rymsza-Pawlowska reveals a fascinating turn, when commemoration efforts decentralized and increasingly sought to recognize the bicentennial as a moment not of celebration but of reflection and reexamination, "turning to the past as a means of making sense of current events" (6r). Later chapters explore exhibitions inspired by the bicentennial in Boston and Washington, DC. The final two chapters view the bicentennial through the lens of a number of reenactment or activist organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the People's Bicentennial Commission, both of which sought to use the occasion to criticize the federal government and its leaders for a variety of failures and shortcomings.

Of course, no break from previous practice is this abrupt or clean, and Rymsza-Pawlowska takes a risk in arguing that everything changed during the 1970s. Early living history museums, Wild West Shows, period dramas, radio and television serial Westerns, World Fairs and their Midway spectacles each worked in various ways to conjure emotional responses to an imagined past, long before the 1970s. Following the 1970s, likewise, a litany of instructive, reflective, and visual representations continue to loom powerfully in how Americans make sense of the past. We should not lose sight of the porous nature of these practices across time. However, Rymsza-Pawlowska effectively establishes the 1970s as a moment when many novel practices gained unprecedented momentum and dissemination on both national and local levels. *History Comes Alive* will make a fine contribution to undergraduate as well as graduate courses in public history.

John Troutman, National Museum of American History

Performing History: How to Research, Write, Act, and Coach Historical Performances

by Ann E. Birney and Joyce M. Thierer. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. xi + 241 pp.; preface, notes, illustrations, appendix, index; clothbound, \$79.00; paperbound, \$35.00; eBook, \$33.00.

Authors Ann E. Birney and Joyce M. Thierer are joint collaborators in the first-person living historical interpretation troupe, *Ride Into History*, which Thierer founded in 1989. With *Ride Into History*, the two have toured the country performing first-person interpretations of historical figures such as Calamity Jane and Amelia Earhart. For most of their historical performances, Birney and Thierer

adhere to the following presentation schema: they perform their historically researched monologues in character; they then take questions while remaining in character; and finally, they take questions out of character, wearing the mantle of historian/performer. Birney and Thierer have also coached others to develop their own first-person historical performances by leading workshops and directing week-long historical performance camps. Based on these dual experiences of performing and coaching, *Performing History* offers would-be historical performers and would-be directors of historical performance workshops or camps many useful tips and motivating anecdotes.

One of this book's strengths is in how the authors empower their audience of would-be (or current) historical performers to hold themselves to high standards and to consider themselves serious performers and historians. For example, chapter 2 coaches readers on best practices for historical research, including how to ask meaningful questions, where to seek out the answers for said questions, and why they should seek out the assistance of librarians and archivists. The seasoned historical researcher will not find much that is new to them in this chapter, but it will be of great value to those who have been out of the game for awhile (i.e., may not know what JSTOR is), or to those who have anxiety about adopting the mantle of "historian" for themselves. Chapters 3 and 4 deal more with integrating that research into the performances themselves, both in terms of designing performances that engage audiences with interesting stories (chapter 3), and how to work through the fears and anxieties most anyone would have before performing a public monologue. In these chapters, the advice draws on their own experiences (i.e., a useful chart shows a full range of entrance styles and accompanying rationales for *Ride Into History's* menagerie of historical figures), to what comes across as standard motivational speaker fare, for example, "Try writing your fears on tiny pieces of paper, then burning them or placing them in the trash" (92).

In terms of finding its intended audience, the cover art to the book is a bit misleading, as are many of photographs used in the book, which feature (by and large) children in the driver's seat with regard to conducting historical research and presenting first-person interpretations. In fact, of the book's seven chapters, just one (chapter 5) is aimed exclusively at those who are setting out to coach children to develop historical performances at workshops and camps. In this fifth chapter, the authors write expressly for those seeking to develop a model of *Ride Into History's* historical performance camps where children engage in local history research and become historical performers in their own right. A strength of this chapter is in the nuts and bolts details. It really is a practical road map on how to put these camps together, including ideas about the appropriateness of gender crossing for children's historical performances, as well as prescriptions for how to run registration, marketing, snacks, and even Birney and Thierer's recommended name tag materials: "plastic sleeves with string" (142). Of note, the appendices are exclusively devoted to templates and lesson plans for these camps.

Performing History makes frequent reference to Thierer's 2010 book, *Telling History: A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives*. This reviewer, incidentally, had not read *Telling History*, and so the many references to this earlier book gave me the sense that I was missing out and that this book was intended as a sequel, not as a stand-alone edition. For example, the authors begin the second chapter of *Performing History* explaining that it is for "those who have read all of the lists in the research chapter in *Telling History* and it is still not happening for them" (18). With such references, the authors seem to have unnecessarily limited the scope of their intended audience to return readers. And while public historians at large may not find the bulk of the book of much practical use, this is by design. As noted above, this book is mostly tailored for those who are interested in adopting the *Ride Into History* performance formula (beginning with the scripted monologue and ending with the out of character Q & A session)—and for those seeking to coach others to do the same. Interpreters at living history museums and historical reenactors should be able to translate some of the book's tips to suit their needs; likewise, museum professionals wanting to take on the task of developing small-scale living history programming, integrating historical performances, or, of course, hosting historical performance camps will also find the book's content to be of benefit. Given its audience, it should not surprise that the book does not critically engage with contemporary scholarship on living history, performance studies, or the like, but scholars of living history will find the book useful as insight into the demanding process of becoming a high-caliber first-person historical performer.

Amy M. Tyson, DePaul University

Dis-History: Uses of the Past at Walt Disney's Worlds by Jason Lantzer. Theme Park Press, 2017. v + 226 pp.; notes; paperbound, \$19.95.

Jason Lantzer is both a historian of American history at Butler University and a frequent visitor to Disney's theme parks. In his book *Dis-History: Uses of the Past at Walt Disney's Worlds*, Lantzer combines this professional background and expertise with his hobby to analyze Disney's theme parks within the context of public history and provides readers with detailed observations on how these parks portray and package the past for contemporary park goers, or "guests" as they are generally called at the Disney parks. Lantzer readily admits that the Disney parks are full of historically inaccurate or inauthentic depictions of the past, but for Lantzer these inaccuracies are only tangentially relevant to his central argument. Lantzer's main point is that the reworking of the past in the Disney theme parks is one of the ways in which "Walt Disney created an American mythology" (xx).

In keeping with the different themes represented at Disneyland and Disney World, Lantzer organizes much of his book around different landscapes or spaces within the parks, including chapters on Main Street, Fantasyland, Liberty