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Living with Stories

William Schneider

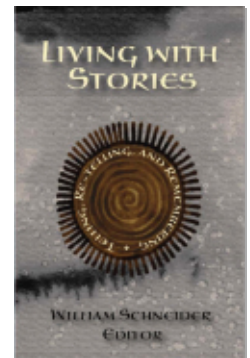
Published by Utah State University Press

Schneider, William.

Living with Stories: Telling, Re-telling, and Remembering.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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Performance/Participation

A Museum Case Study in Participatory Theater

Lorraine McConaghy

Lorraine McConaghy is staff historian at Seattle's Museum of History & Industry and is active in regional and national public history associations. In this essay, she introduces us to a readers' theatre project that engages visitors to the museum with the oral history of Seattle and the Pacific Northwest. Unlike the other authors in this volume, McConaghy stages retellings as a way to present and preserve historical experiences. She chooses the stories of people who are not well recognized by the public and gives guests to the museum a chance to read transcripts of the interviews. Despite the passage of time, the cultural divides, and the lack of familiarity with the individuals, she finds that readers identify with the stories and the experiences of the characters. She maintains that respeaking spoken words offers program participants the chance to slip into another persona and encourages the emotional engagement that precedes, contextualizes, and encourages learning.

Over the last twenty years, the oral history collection at Seattle's Museum of History & Industry has undergone dramatic change. Originally, oral history interviews were gathered as research material to support the development of specific exhibitions, stored away

at the exhibition's conclusion, and inaccessible to the public. Then, the museum collected interviews that documented the achievements of Seattle's elite, as acts of respect and to encourage financial support of the museum. But over the last decade, the *Speaking of Seattle* oral history project has mounted an intentional effort to gather stories that first document the workplace experiences and perspectives of a diverse community and second provide balance to the elite experience and perspective that are well documented by the museum's other collections. Third and most recently, we have experimented with ways to bring these stories into the galleries, not just as recordings for visitors to listen to but as scripted programs in which gallery visitors re-voice the stories of others and are then encouraged to relate their experiences through their own stories.

Today, the *Speaking of Seattle* oral history interviews are incorporated into the library collection and made available to the museum staff and the public for research purposes. But beyond the standard oral history archiving and research function, in the last five years the museum has also developed a set of readers' theater scripts drawn from the oral history collection. In a very positive way, readers' theater has effectively claimed public space for these personal narratives and given them new life in each new retelling. The dramatization of personal experience has translated from professional performance to visitor participation, as we have shifted the presentation of readers' scripts from the stage to the gallery, from actors to visitors. This radical transfer of perspective and authority has offered ordinary people the opportunity to emerge from the audience and engage with the material as performers. As our visitors have participated in readers' theaters in the museum galleries, they have seamlessly role-played other experiences and other personae, giving their own voice to the provocative stories of other men and women. Immersed in these stories, our passive visitors have become active participants, using the power of the spoken word to share another's past experiences with an audience who then in turn become performers and relate oral history to their own lives.

This form of direct engagement with the past is revelatory and disorienting: imagine an African American man speaking the role of a white female Amtrak clerk, or a Japanese American teenaged girl speaking the role of a male African American welder. We often say that a museum is a safe place to explore unsafe ideas; the participatory readers' theater exploration of unsafe ideas is deeply experiential but safely abstracted by dramatized expression and



Photo Howard Giske/Museum of History & Industry

Readers present *Speaking Out*, a readers' theater script largely based on oral history interviews, developed by the Black Heritage Society of Washington State and Seattle's Museum of History & Industry.

stylized interactions among readers. The script sets the rules. For a few moments, a museum visitor speaks a different memory than her own, stands in shoes other than her own, internalizes a different Seattle experience than her own, and then externalizes that experience with her own voice. The "I" shifts from the individual to the other, to the others, through the freeing medium of theater. These experiences and points of view are often painful and dangerous, speaking from the heart of a troubling past that one cannot venerate or romanticize.

The testimony of oral history offers dissenting voices to a comfortable narrative of Seattle's untroubled past. When the Seattle and King County Historical Society organized in 1911, the founders were largely the descendants of the city's first American settlers, prominent and well-to-do. They hoped to perpetuate and enshrine a heroic mythology of Seattle's past. Their merged personal collections of family memorabilia became the core of the society's collection, which continued to grow under the founders' vision, privileging elite costumes, artifacts, scrapbooks, and journals. In effect, the entire collection became celebratory of a founding and building legend—a set of trophies, icons, and hagiographic relics to illustrate a story of success.

After World War II, the trustees devoted tremendous energy to opening a history museum in Seattle, named the Museum of

History & Industry. With this proposed title, the trustees intentionally courted the city's industrialists, entrepreneurs, and businessmen, joining well-heeled newcomers with the distinguished descendants of old-timers. In the proposed museum, the heroic story of pioneer progress embraced twentieth-century heroes, too. The historical society's story of industrial innovation and success comprised a comforting civic narrative of progress, self-satisfied and optimistic; indeed, it was that onward-and-upward story that the founders of the museum promised their supporters they would celebrate. This strategy successfully fulfilled the historical society's midcentury fundraising.

By the museum's opening in 1952, the collection richly supported stories of pioneer heroism, industrial progress, and elite success. There were many examples of elaborate wedding dresses and Parisian haute couture but no housedresses or riveters' overalls. Many examples of industrial products but not the tools that made them. Many examples of elaborate dinner settings and shining silver tea sets but no humble tableware. And on and on. And, like it or not, a museum's collection determines the stories told in its galleries. Curators have a powerful responsibility to the existing collection of artifacts, and museum visitors expect to see those artifacts, believing that the museum's authority springs from the collection's authenticity. At the Museum of History & Industry, curatorial work became connoisseurship, and rarely was an artifact presented in an interpretation that told all of its stories as a socially constructed object. For instance, an elegantly embroidered tablecloth might have been used as a point of departure to explore the lives of the Swedish piecework needleworker who sewed it, the Chinese laundryworker who washed it, the Irish housemaid who ironed it, and the Black cook who made the dinner—as well as the society hostess who decorated her table with it. But our collection didn't include those other stories.

The museum's history exhibitions became fables about the bravery of pioneers, the just rewards of honest toil, and the inevitability of progress, illustrated from the collection. There was a time when one could visit the Museum of History & Industry galleries and learn nothing about native history, economic history, labor history, the histories of people of color, women's history, or environmental history. During the 1960s, the museum's most influential trustee barred inclusion of Seattle's labor history in the galleries. The museum's longtime director refused to allow mention of Seattle's

Japanese internment in museum exhibits; the traveling exhibition *Pride and Shame* was shown in 1970 while she was on vacation. Seattle's real histories were perceived dimly, as a pallid backdrop for vivid corporate and personal biographies presented as morality tales. But this didactic narrative was inaccurate, incomplete, and unsatisfying. What was really missing in the galleries were the ordinary people whose experiences could bring honesty and reality to the story, whose experiences could make the history in the museum's galleries make sense. Museum visitors knew that Seattle's history wasn't just about silver tea services and embroidered tablecloths, signing business deals and building skyscrapers. By 1975, the Museum of History & Industry was known as an elitist institution, speaking from its collection to a smaller and smaller slice of Seattle's museum-going public.

Changing a collecting policy is an act not undertaken lightly; it has dramatic consequences far into the future. But the Museum of History & Industry has changed its policy; for more than twenty years, the museum has no longer collected only the correspondence, dining tables, and sable capes of the rich and famous and has aggressively sought to diversify what it does collect. Future museum curators and historians will be grateful for the sea-change that is well underway. But little can be done to redress sins of omission in the past. Many opportunities to collect the material culture of ordinary people have gone, never to return. The housedresses and overalls are worn out and thrown away; the tableware broken and the tools forgotten. Fortunately and in the nick of time, oral history offers a slender bridge to that lost everyday past, to the stories that contexted those artifacts.

The museum's earliest oral history interviews were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s to support specific exhibit research, and also with the city's movers and shakers. These interviews with prominent industrialists, businessmen, and politicians were often wide-ranging and interesting, but they suggested to a new generation of curators a means of accessing different narratives of Seattle's history. In fact, oral history offered an explicit, intentional strategy to broaden the collection and balance its elite emphasis by gathering a wide variety of people's stories. The museum has aggressively pursued an oral history program to interview a broad cross-section of narrators: generally to document stories of experience, point of view, and way of life, and specifically to enrich the museum's mission-driven emphasis on work, workers, and the workplace.

Three projects gave us the opportunity to sharpen our focus on such stories and incorporate new perspectives into the larger collection, suggesting compelling ways to retell and rehear these stories in our galleries and programs.

First, the older level of our collections supported an interpretation of World War II as the Good War. There was plenty of material to interpret industrial success at Boeing and at Puget Sound shipyards, men in uniform, and civilian defense. What we did not have were personal accounts that we could use to interpret recruitment of African American workers to Seattle that boomed that community's population by 400%. We could not interpret the recruitment, training, and experience of women workers, the wartime Rosie the Riveter. We could not interpret internment of people of Japanese descent from Seattle. We could not interpret the effects of wartime shortages, anxiety, rationing, and discipline on families. We could not interpret Seattle as a quintessential home-front city, working and partying twenty-four hours a day. Our ongoing *Homefront* project intentionally gathered stories to redress these omissions. We were able to interview a conscientious objector, a wartime labor organizer, a newspaper editor, a number of Black shipyard and Boeing workers, housewives, a Seattle policeman, and women industrial workers. These interviews gathered stories that deeply enriched our interpretation of the wartime home front and richly nuanced our interpretation of artifacts. Displaying a B-29 model as a triumph of engineering was very different than displaying a B-29 model as the product of many hands in multiple production, the funding of war bonds, the hectic world of the home front, the reward of the cost-plus contract, the product of a work force more than 55% female and about 9% African American, the plane that delivered atomic bombs to Japan, *and* a triumph of engineering that would stand Boeing in good stead during the Cold War. These were stories that had not been publicly told; they needed to be voiced. The *Homefront* oral history interviews entered the library, and their stories transformed gallery interpretations in written labels and photograph captions. They provide us new ways to engage the public in an unspoken history. Consider, for instance, given our twenty-first-century ears, the impact of the following account of Rosie the Riveter's experience by Inez Sauer:

One day in 1942, there was a big splash in the Seattle papers. Boeing would be interviewing for women workers, no experience necessary. I

went right to work in the tool room. My supervisor said that he'd never heard of such a thing as putting women in factories, and that it was certainly not going to work out. He said, "The happiest day of my life will be when Boeing decides they can't use women, and I can be there personally to kick them out the door!"

Second, our attempts to broaden the interpretive framework received a boost when the Washington state superintendent of public instruction developed a school-to-work initiative, designed to help middle-school and high-school kids explore a broad range of jobs and to better prepare themselves for those jobs. We had interviews in the collection with CEOs, but we had none that described the work of ordinary people. We took advantage of the opportunity to record audio and video interviews for our collection with a diverse group of workers across the whole face of information technology in 2002, manufacturing in 2003, and food industries in 2004. These videotaped interviews explored in detail what people did all day, the kinds of challenges they faced in their jobs, and what their pathway was to those jobs. The superintendent of public instruction developed curriculum from our interviews for classroom use, and the museum ended up with interviews that ranged from a CNC (Computer Numerical Control) mill operator to a winemaker, a glass artist, a chemist, a machinist, a guitar maker, a web-based marketer, a farmer, a cabinet maker, and on and on. This project was an important development for two reasons: (1) the curriculum offered new ways for these stories to be heard again and again by new audiences, and (2) we learned new aspects of Seattle's industrial history from the people who lived it. As the museum's historian, I would give a great deal to have the equivalent interview sets from the 1930s or the 1960s. We used the opportunity offered by these interviews to gather artifacts that enriched the recorded stories: the chemist's lab equipment, a guitar built by the guitar maker, software developed by the software designer. The integration of collecting artifacts with oral histories was a big step forward.

Third, Tim Milewski, director at Seattle's Annex Theater, approached the museum with a partnership idea that became the next step in the museum's efforts to broaden its collection, enrich its interpretation, and engage its audience. He wanted to follow in the rich tradition of Studs Terkel's *Working* and John Bowe's *Gig* and interview people talking about their jobs, but he planned to develop and stage a readers' theater script based on this material. *Working* was a bestselling anthology of oral history interview excerpts and

had become a much-talked-about musical, but Milewski was particularly inspired by the *Laramie Project*. In the *Laramie Project*, actors from the Tectonic Theater Project conducted extensive oral history interviews to explore the little Wyoming town where Matthew Shepard had been brutally murdered. The actor/interviewers then portrayed their subjects in a scripted theater experience, which *Time Magazine* described as “a new genre, a radical redefinition of what theater is capable of.” Tom wanted to create a theater experience that shared the *Laramie Project*’s immersive creative process, and he wanted to use it to explore Seattle’s urban workplace, including the kinds of edgy worker interviews that Bowe’s *Gig* had pioneered: white collar criminals, sex workers, drug dealers. He called his project *Verbatim*. The museum agreed to train his six actor/researchers in the skills of oral history, and we convinced him that their interviews should enter the museum’s collection, so that the primary collection would outlive the single product. Little did we realize that this theater partnership would generate a powerful series of gallery experiences and programs that transformed our visitors’ engagement with the oral history collection.

The *Verbatim* actors borrowed museum audio recording equipment and received museum copyright agreements, and each actor went out to interview eight or so Seattle people about their work. The museum’s archival commitment to these hour-long interviews encouraged narrators to be frank and reflective; many interviews are sealed in part and some interviews are only available with the narrator’s name withheld. Most of these archival controls end in 2010.

Milewski’s script for *Verbatim* was drawn from these fifty interviews. The show opened at a downtown Seattle theater on May 22, 2002. Here are excerpts of a critic’s review in *The Stranger*:

“It’s not who I am; it’s how I make my money,” says a \$250–an-hour escort in the Annex Theatre’s new production, *Verbatim*. It was cast in October, with six ensemble performers participating in interviewing Seattleites about their jobs. . . . They play minimum-wage slaves, card dealers, booksellers, former dot-commers, strippers, librarians, firefighters, teachers, and a silhouetted futurist. *Verbatim* crackles with wit and humanity, building up to a completely organic emotional payoff spun directly from the mouths of its interview subjects.

Verbatim opened at a downtown theater to a hip young crowd who laughed in all the right places. This readers’ theater world of work in Seattle was filled with laid-off software engineers, dissatisfied

baristas with master's degrees, and burned-out teachers. Most people who had service jobs in Seattle couldn't afford to live there. Homeless workers lived in their cars to make ends meet; workers from China and Mexico lived ten to a room, doing pickup work at local restaurants and landscaping companies.

We decided to bring the edgy play home to our museum and offer it to our usual program audience. We turned our events rental space into an impromptu theater-in-the-round and staged *Verbatim* at the museum—and we produced it literally verbatim, too, with clear warning in our publicity that the language and subject matter were frank and adult:

Jeff and I work together at the Lusty Lady—that's a peep show downtown on First Avenue. And we also work together at the hospital as pathology lab assistants. At the Lusty Lady, my job is to allow the gentlemen to have a good time viewing all of my body in its nude glory. And my pathology duties are data entry on the computers to assisting on autopsies. Basically, in both jobs, I'm working with stiff. (Michelle Sigler)

The realities of work, workers, and the workplace in people's own words were deeply unsettling and profoundly moving. *Verbatim* received a standing ovation in its two performances at our museum; clearly our audience was ready for this provocative, challenging material. *Verbatim* was subversive of Seattle's sense of itself as the "most livable city," a place of constant innovation, cutting-edge technology, and total employment. Its performance brought significant balance to our interpretive voice, the inclusion of the *Verbatim* interview transcripts in the museum's library continued the rebalancing of our collection, and it opened our eyes to the power of theater as a way to retell stories.

Verbatim presented real life as subject matter worthy of dramatic interpretation. By simply paying respectful attention to everyday stories, *Verbatim* nuanced the narrative of work in Seattle. Oral history produced first-person testimony about work that connected with its audience as insiders and participants, not as visitors or audience-members. *Verbatim* showed that people do not need or want palliative, comforting history. They applauded a museum program that convinced the intellect and connected with the emotions; they wanted theater that was resonant with their own experience of reality. In fact, judged against the standard of personal experience, through its efforts to record and retell a wide range of stories from all segments of the population, the museum

earned another kind of authenticity aside from that conferred by its artifacts.

After the performance, visitors spoke about similar jobs-from-hell they had had, about being laid off, about their work being outsourced, about frustrating bosses, and about feeling unfulfilled by their jobs. They were eager to tell those stories to one another, and they spoke with a heightened sense of performance, of the dramatic power of the spoken word. For two hours, they had listened to professional actors speak the plain language of ordinary people, whose stories rang so true. That public experience of private stories changed the way each person regarded the history of their own lives. What if we offered the audience the chance to become the performers? And what if we followed the pathway suggested by *Verbatim*, that we mine our own growing collection of oral history interviews to develop a readers' theater script where those stories could be retold?

To test this, we experimented with a simple readers' theater—not as elaborate or rehearsed as *Verbatim*—but just a set of director's chairs and four museum volunteers, dressed in black. Our first script explored the World War II home-front oral history collection, offering brief stories about war, internment, family, race, work, and daily life, edited for clarity and style and organized thematically. Our readers simply sat spot-lit at one end of a darkened room and read their paragraphs, one after the other, from scripts on music stands. We tested the readers' theater as a free public program, publicizing it with friendly journalists and to our own e-mail list as an experiment. We packed the house. At first, the audience rustled uneasily when a Black woman read the memory of a Nisei internee—they thought we'd made a mistake. But the readers were deliberately mis-sorted to their stories, a step beyond *Verbatim*. And one could tell the readers weren't actors—they didn't speak or move like professional actors, they spoke like people off the street. And once the audience became accustomed to a Nisei man reading the reminiscence of a white Rosie the Riveter, they began to listen differently, to imagine more powerfully, to separate the experience from the experiencer, the testimony from the testifier. They realized that the readers were sliding into one persona after another, that at any time, a white woman could speak the experience of a white male shipfitter, a Black female welder, or a white male politician. The story became independent of the storyteller: it belonged to everyone, to anyone who would retell it and imagine the experience described.

At Boeing, you worked in a pretty clean atmosphere. But in some of them ships! You hang upside down, you crawl through the double bottoms. The smoke was awful from welding that galvanized steel! You might have three or four men welding down there, and only one manhole with a little sucker fan. After you got off a shift, you could tell if you had too much of that smoke—everything tasted sweet. A cigarette was sweet. Everything. And you'd wake up at 3 am, and you'd freeze and sweat, and freeze and sweat. The boss kept saying, Drink lots of milk; you'll be okay. One shop I worked at, they used to hand all the welders a quart of half and half every day, to counteract that galvanize. (Wilfred Miller)

The program evaluations were very strong, and people said aloud, "You know, what I liked most about the readers' theater was that I think I could do that myself. And it would be interesting to be somebody else and tell their story." Our audience continued to guide our readers' theater program forward, suggesting more experimental directions.

So next, we tried to remove the division between performers and audience. We appealed for a group from the readers' theater audience to join us a week later to read the script in an informal circle one afternoon. These readings were quite popular, and our list of e-mail addresses made it easy to find participants. We found that readers wanted to return again and again to read different parts; they sent e-mails saying, "I want to read on Thursday but I don't want to be Reader 1 again; Reader 3 has all the best stories." In evaluations, one reader noted, "I was fascinated to be reading perspectives that I didn't agree with. . . . I felt a special responsibility to do justice to them." Another wrote, "I felt like I was performing, but even more, I felt like the other readers were performing—I really paid attention to their every word." The readers' theaters claimed a special place for retold story.

We also developed a set of two readers' theater scripts for classroom use, with a curriculum guide suggesting activities and lessons that linked this work to the state educational standards in social studies and language arts. The first script explored the Klondike Gold Rush and was drawn from diaries, letters, and newspaper accounts. The second was adapted from the adult World War II home-front script. The recommended staging is simple, but it does transform the classroom—teachers usually arrange the desks in a circle and have kids read in turn, or they bring selected readers to the front of the class. Teachers tell us in their evaluations that

their kids are very conscious that as they read their stories, they are creating a piece of theater. The dramatic form makes it easy to slide into the persona of someone else. Kids are liberated by the requirements of performance, in a sense, to speak with a different voice and to “try on” a different identity and experience, walking in someone else’s shoes but without the heavy demands of a traditional script and staging. Consider the impact of the following story on a Chicano high school student who is asked to read it, speaking the words and imagining the feelings of the Japanese American student who originally told the story:

I didn’t realize the enormity of the situation until the next day, when I went to school. Even some of the teachers were saying, “You people bombed Pearl Harbor,” and all of a sudden I became Japanese instead of the American that I had thought I was.

We thought our parents were in jeopardy because they were not citizens. We never thought that we, American citizens, were in any danger. But we all felt paranoid; very conspicuous, because of the curfew. When we went to the internment camp, we were told we could carry only two things, and we could only take what we could carry in our two hands. We had never gone traveling before, and we didn’t own any suitcases. So my folks went down and purchased some cheap luggage for us.

We were herded like cattle. It was just such a different way of being dealt with. And if internment was for our protection, why were all the guns pointed inward, at us? (Akiko Kurose)

Currently, the museum is testing a true drop-in readers’ theater in the galleries, with museum visitors. On a recent Saturday, we arranged five chairs around a table, and then smilingly asked visitors if they were willing to try an experiment, to test a new idea in our gallery. If asked, we told them that we were going to ask them to read a script out loud with us. When four visitors had gathered, we sat down with them and gave each one of them a copy of the *Homefront* readers’ theater script, in which the paragraphs were numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and so on throughout the script. We briefly introduced the experiment, making it clear that these experiences were gathered from recorded oral history interviews, that the stories were real. We explained that the museum staffer would read aloud all the paragraphs marked 1, and that the person on the left would read aloud all the ones marked 2, and so on around the table. Our visitors either liked the experience a lot or were embarrassed, uncomfortable, or bewildered. Some people



Photo by Kathleen Knies/Museum of History & Industry

Readers participate in the Homefront readers' theater gallery program, reading the edited oral history experiences of the four characters whose photographs are on the table.

found it difficult to read aloud, for a variety of reasons, from the type being too small to English being a second language to lack of familiarity with words like “Nisei” or “plutonium.” Other people reveled in the experience, often writing, “If this is acting, I’m an actor!” or “This was very moving.” Gallery visitors in 2006 were amazed by a *Homefront* experience like the following, especially as

the story is a puzzle whose unfolding meaning only becomes clear at its conclusion:

We knew we weren't welcome in most of the fancy restaurants in downtown Seattle. There weren't any signs, like in the South, but the policy was well known. I had a bitter experience during the war. I was early for a job interview, and I stopped in at a little sandwich shop and sat at the counter. It was a very warm day, and I stopped in for something cool to drink. I sat and sat, and eventually was told, We don't serve you here.

I said, What do you mean—you don't serve me?

And he replied, We don't serve Negroes.

Now we had known to avoid the bigger restaurants, but a little place like that—well, that was new. The owner must have moved up from the South, and brought his prejudices with him. (Arline Yarbrough)

Young people slid easily into the various personae and unaniously noted their familiarity with role-playing games on their evaluations. Better educated, more affluent museum goers seemed to find the readers' theater more engaging. Older visitors in family groups often helped younger visitors with their lines or with a hard word. Some people wanted to always read the same character and balked at being a union organizer one moment and a waitress the next. But when the experience worked, it seemed miraculous. Participants' voices changed, their seated manner grew more formal, their hands became expressive, and they tried to invest their reading with gravitas, emotion, and conviction. It is dangerous to draw conclusions from our small sampling, and we continue to experiment with this way of sharing stories.

We are working to develop a script that is more contemporary, that draws on the *Verbatim* collection, and we plan to try that as a drop-in readers' theater in the gallery. Perhaps it would also be wise to try, in the gallery application, scripting only five "characters" for four visitors plus one staffer, developing a home-front workplace drama among them—a conflict on the bus, a tavern debate, or some shared experience from their five different perspectives. If we remain flexible and responsive, our ongoing experiments will bring us closer and closer to a gallery experience that is intimate and powerful, transformative and unique. In the development of this program, each step along the way has built on the previous one, and at every step, it has been museum patrons who have suggested the way ahead. It is important that we continue to be guided by the visitors we hope to engage as participants and that we continue our emphasis on personal stories drawn from oral history. In

this work, we have found good ways to liberate the narratives from the archive's shelves and to put them to work with each new retelling of the stories. Part of the success is due to the range of perspectives in the oral history collection and part of it has come from the participatory nature of the retelling, which gives the reader a role in narration and a way to identify with the past.

As people read aloud the stories of others, they become eager to tell and record their own stories, and it is essential that the museum's galleries and programs provide the means. "If *these* stories are important," participants say, "then my own stories are important, too." The museum has offered drop-in oral history interviews in the gallery, conducting impromptu oral history with visitors and giving them a CD or cassette of their interview. These drop-in interviews became enormously popular, and they demonstrated that the museum valued the stories of our community. Occasionally, the museum has held a topical interview day of scheduled interviews to gather stories about hundred-year-old King Street Station or memories of the death of Reverend Martin Luther King. The *Speaking of Seattle* oral history program has continued to grow, recording interviews with mayors and activists, housewives and teachers to build our collection. The museum remains focused on its primary mission to interpret Seattle work, workers, and the workplace, but we have broadened our collection far beyond stories of heroic industrial success:

Zaaz.com was looking like a new brand of company. We had a lot of good projects and a lot of good money coming in. Which inevitably led to, "Let's buy this building on First Avenue and completely tear down the inside, keep the façade, and remodel the interior to make it this dot-com palace." It had fur-lined booths, for chrissakes! There was this booth that looked like a submarine. It's still there, with portholes and purple and orange fur on the walls. That was our meeting room. And we would huddle in the booth for conferences with clients. It was insane. Extravagant. No other way you can describe it.

We threw a party there. The open house was a big success. We hired a couple of security guards downstairs to not let the riffraff in. And everybody coming in envied us for working in such a great place. And everybody was just oohing and aahing about it. A few months later, the layoffs began. (Andy Rusu)

A history museum needs to build community among its visitors, to satisfy basic curiosity about the past and to offer a place for learning and discussion about the present and the future. But

the museum should also disorient its visitors somewhat. One way to accomplish this is to offer our visitors a point of departure that begins on familiar ground and slowly leads to a pathway toward more adventuresome, perhaps dangerous, stories that differ from their own. The most effective learning begins where we are and moves outward from there. An oral history readers' theater offers a magical chance to step into someone else's shoes and begin to walk outward from oneself. That's the value of the retellings.

The museum's collaboration with the state superintendent of public instruction and a young director from a downtown theater company have had many positive outcomes. The collection of interviews about contemporary work and workers grew by more than a hundred interviews in less than three years. This critical mass encouraged other work-focused interviewing projects—a set with labor and community organizers, a set with environmental activists, and so on. These resources have found their way into exhibitions, programs, and on-line features, but the museum's gallery experiments with participatory readers' theaters have been most provocative and intriguing. During the last five years, our museum's galleries and programs have become infused by the power of storytelling.

Public institutions, such as museums, play a vital role in providing a space to retell and rehear oral accounts. Each recorded oral history in the museum's collection is a unique performance by the narrator as he or she crafted experiences into a story to be shared with others, into the distant future. In one use, the evidence of oral history interviews in the museum's collection has helped to balance the collection and dissented from the comfortable generalizations of a therapeutic historical narrative. Oral history literally spoke truth to power. In a second use, actors and our visitors have been able to use edited oral history scripts to understand and identify with the original speakers, as they internalized the original experiences and externalized them in their own portrayals. As oral historians, we provide the means for members of our community to tell such stories to the present and future about their perceptions of the past. Their words don't stand alone nor do they stand still: they are contexted and mediated by gender, class, and ethnicity; by time and place; and by personality, memory, and style of personal expression.

A story's telling and retelling generates a set of translations into various languages of performance. Participatory readers' theater is

one possible performance mode among many based on the museum's collection of oral history interviews. Deliberately shorn of contextual associations, these scripts *insist* on words standing alone and call upon readers and listeners to provide their own context and understanding, to imagine themselves in the experiences they are reading aloud. As museum visitors mediate the experiences of Seattle residents, living and dead, through their own experience, speaking the words of others with their own voices, they engage with the past in ways that no static exhibit can offer. Their role play in a virtual reality is enabled by the power of their script and the recorded memories on which the script was based. Starting with their own experience, visitors read their way across the bridge of story to new places, new roles to play, and new realities to understand.