

STORYEUM 2004-2005:

Public History on Stage

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LOCATED ON WATER STREET in downtown Vancouver's historic/touristic district of Gastown, Storyeum promises to bring alive British Columbia's "magical history." I visited Storyeum three times during August and September 2004, soon after its opening in June, going once by myself, once with a group of museum/attraction designers, and once with a friend. This review is based on the show that was in place when I visited; it is scheduled to change in the Spring of 2005. Operated as a private business by Historical Xperiences Inc., it costs twenty-two dollars for an adult to make the journey back in time.

Like many other museums and historical attractions, Storyeum takes a chronological and narrative approach to history, revealing British Columbia's story in a series of chapters. Much like the themed galleries of a museum, each chapter is presented in a dedicated space with a specially designed stageset. A range of techniques and tools, including projected images, sound, and light are used; much of the narrative is delivered by actors who "animate" the stagesets, which range from a Tsleil-Waututh Big House to Barkerville. Visitors move between the spaces at a predetermined pace, sitting down in most spaces to watch a seven-to-ten-minute show, and then getting up and moving on to the next space. The show lasts a total of seventy-two minutes, and, when

I visited, there was a show starting every half hour from 11:00 AM to 8:00 PM every day.

A fascinating experiment in history for profit, tied to the market and unfettered by the demands of the institution or the latest grant program, Storyeum provides a good case study of the many challenges of doing public history. For those interested in the historiography of public history, Storyeum is an especially thought-provoking example of how "recent" (say, less than thirty years old) scholarship, which has focused on the experiences of groups and individuals usually excluded from older traditional narratives, is being used, or not used, to interpret the past. Closely related to this historiographic question is the issue of the quality of the presentation as an interpretive experience. Freeman Tilden, in his classic text on the art of interpretation at museums, historic sites, and other public venues, defines its purpose as being, in part, to provoke and reveal.¹ The relationship between the historiographic choices and the capacity of a presentation to provoke and reveal should not be assumed: the problem of creating successful interpretive experiences with "the new social history" is still very much a "work in progress" at many museums,

¹ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 9.

historic sites, and in other media (such as television). Storyeum provides an opportunity to examine how this "problem" has been tackled in the context of a for-profit institution and what, for lack of a better term, I call "staged history."

The first hint of what is to come is provided in the lobby. Here, an extensive display of historic photographs is divided into sections with captions reading "They Walked the World You Walk Now" (Native peoples); "Built It with Their Vision, Their Faith, and Their Courage" (pioneers); and "Their Sacrifices Created Our Opportunities" (from Sikhs on the *Komagata Maru* to Japanese being interned, to Second World War volunteers, to Emily Carr, and many others). It is hard not to read these statements as conclusions rather than as arguments or as the beginning of a conversation about the past. Thus, the tone set in the lobby is one of authority, and the message is that *our* present is better than *their* past, that their sacrifices (which, it is inferred, everyone made) created what is inarguably and indubitably a better world. To doubt or question this would be ungrateful, rude, or, at the very least, ill-mannered. The Christian overtones of these grand phrases are hard to miss: who can forget that "He died for us?" It is strange to think of BC history as a passion play, and I doubt that is what the creators intended, but that is where the language took me.

From the lobby, visitors enter a large rotund elevator that holds more than 100 people. Once the doors are closed, the elevator descends about twenty-five feet as mountains of British Columbia rise up. And so the magical journey starts. We begin by learning about the geology of the province and its origins, then we learn about First Nations culture. This is followed by Captain

Cook and other explorers who are, in turn, followed by the sea otter trade. From the rush for furs, we move on to the gold rush and Barkerville. The construction of the railway and settlement follow quickly on the heels of the miners as we are herded and hurried through the history of British Columbia and back into the present. The last scene, a montage of historical and contemporary photographs of British Columbia, is presented in a second elevator that lifts us back up to street level. What we see is the traditional narrative, significantly foreshortened and then grafted to more contemporary social history. Parts of the story hold together reasonably well, while others, especially the last two "chapters," are very weak and seem disconnected from the larger whole.

Each chapter is essentially a short "skit" on a dedicated stage set. Some of the sets are quite impressive, with trees, buildings, and various props. Others, such as the salmon stream and King George III's palace, are tacky and reminded me of the haunted house at the local YWCA. The quality of the script, the actors, and the technology varies. Some of the spaces are very awkward: visitors sometimes have trouble following the show because of poor sound quality or because they cannot see the projected images. There are some entertaining moments: I enjoyed the shadow play of the cavorting sea otter (until he is shot) and Sir John A. Macdonald in his nightgown dreaming of building a railway. This latter scene has an element of music hall bumpiousness and subversiveness to it that is fun. In other places, though, the music hall approach is limiting: Spanish explorers, George III, and Mrs. Keefer (wife of CPR contractor Samuel Keefer) all come off as ridiculous people with not much

more than funny accents. Only one image has really stayed with me: that of the lonely ghosts of Chinese railway labourers haunting the mountains of British Columbia. The image evokes their vulnerability.

There are also lots of “puzzlers”: the sea otter trade gets a lot of attention but somehow the land-based fur trade is mostly ignored, and time is so compressed (and mixed up) that the same scene that depicts the sea otter trade features film footage of lumbering and salmon canning – all before we’ve even made it to Barkerville. We learn about the impact of smallpox on First Nations peoples, but there is no direct mention of the survival of First Nations cultures or, for that matter, treaties and contemporary discussions about land and resource rights that is very much a product of this history. Thus, while it was encouraging to see First Nations accorded two chapters – about which they were consulted, so that we are presented with place-specific stories from the Tsleil-Waututh rather than generic material – for the most part their stories were treated as a prologue to the main narrative rather than as an integral and ongoing part of it.

The problem of the present is most evident in the last two scenes. The second-to-last scene features a song-and-dance routine presented by a male engineer and an improbable female freight handler named Millie who rush through a litany of railway stops (any railway, doesn’t really matter which, since we visit Williams Lake, Blue River, and places on the Island). Apparently, they are “building a nation” while they sing about the abundance of salmon that will be with us until the rivers run dry. Most of the audience does not get the irony of the salmon song, and this, it seems, is all Storyeum has to say about the twentieth century.

For the last act, the audience enters a second rotund elevator for the ride back to the present. While a trade-showy collage of contemporary and historic images of British Columbia plays on the elevator’s circular shaft, we are asked to think about the meaning of community and place. The show has not prepared me for these questions; I came into the elevator humming the empty-headed railway workers ditty that neatly severed the past from the present. It is puzzling, until I learn that the second-to-last piece has been significantly changed from the original script. I assume the original, which evidently was a bit of a “downer,” was supposed to get me thinking about the connections between past and present; but instead the last scene is a non sequitur and a lost opportunity for these “stories” from the past to become – as John Tosh argues history can – “the basis for informed and critical discussions of current issues” that can have “a bearing on the cohesion of society and its capacity for renewal and adaptation in the future.”²

Lyle Dick, in his review of *Canada: A People’s History*,³ the book version of CBC’s recently aired television series of the same name, explores at length the Canadian attachment to the narrative form, which, he argues, is “deeply ingrained in Canadian historiography.”⁴ Dick asserts that “in a young country

² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (New York: Longman, 1984), 2.

³ Don Gillmor and Pierre Turgeon, *Canada: A People’s History*, with a foreword by Mark Starowicz and Gene Allen (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2000). For information about the television series, see <<http://history.cbc.ca/histicons/>>.

⁴ Lyle Dick, “A New History for the New Millennium: *Canada: A People’s History*,” *Canadian Historical Review* 85, 1 (2004): 91.

like Canada, the traditional forms appear to resonate more strongly than newer literary concepts introduced over the last century, such as the breaking up of story lines, the fracturing of image to draw attention to its subjective character, or the replacing of monological narration by multiple voices.⁵ At Storyeum, the problem is not a lack of multiple voices but, rather, the failure to couple those voices with the appropriate vehicles. By retaining the chronological narrative, Storyeum fails to yield to those voices their full power, which is to fracture the story itself. This is what I mean by referring to social history being grafted onto the narrative. The voices are inserted into the predetermined narrative (see above comments on the lobby). One thing that is interesting about some of the voices chosen is that not all are mere “corks bobbing on the surface of the ocean”;⁶ a few are individuals with distinct stories. What is not resolved here is the tension between the representative and the exceptional. This is especially evident in the treatment of women. “Women” appear first as the young woman, Slonite, and her grandmother, Ta-ah, high-status members of the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation, then as the wife of Samuel Keefer. Mrs. Keefer is followed by Florence Wilson, an entrepreneurial passenger of the brideship *Tynemouth*,⁷ and finally comes Millie, a singing and dancing freight clerk on the railway. The latter is improbable, but the others, while real enough, don’t begin to represent the experiences of women.

⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁶ Mark Starowicz cited in Dick, “A New History,” 89.

⁷ Peter Johnson, *Voyages of Hope: The Saga of the Bride-Ships* (Victoria: Touchwood Editions, 2002), 192-4.

The largest problem here is one that plagues the whole show: there is no layering of information and meaning, no attempt to elaborate on or connect the big ideas, no real effort to engage the visitor in more than vicarious nostalgia that fails to differentiate between the sacrifices of men who enlisted voluntarily in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War and Japanese Canadians forced by the state to leave their homes. The lack of any effort to engage or inform, to have any kind of a conversation (there is no question-and-answer debriefing at the end), and thus to provoke and to reveal, extends further than this: the orientation area has no map of British Columbia. We could be anywhere in sepia land.

Storyeum’s creators are big on big phrases. The back of the ticket quotes Herbert Marshall McLuhan: “It is misleading to suppose there is any basic difference between education and entertainment.” The problem here is not that education cannot be entertaining or vice versa; rather, it is that Storyeum fails to appreciate that people have to be engaged, intellectually and emotionally, in order to be educated or entertained. In the end, what was Storyeum? A magical experience? Educational and entertaining? Worth twenty-two dollars? Well, when asked, I tell people that I call it “Boreum.” It just never moves past being a bit of cobbled together stagecraft with some neat toys. There is a lack of direction to the presentation that suggests it was written by a committee or, perhaps, a series of committees. I did not feel challenged or changed, and only occasionally was I entertained or moved. I certainly never cared much about what happened to any of the characters I met as they all hurried by too quickly. And I never felt the whispering of their ghosts, which, I think, the creators of this show hoped I might.