

There was a time... presents:

Some Thoughts on First Person Interpretation of Historical Persona

By John Salicco

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I will assume that the readers of this subject matter are either living history re-enactors or individuals attempting to understand why seemingly normal people in every other respect of their daily lives, choose to dress up in funny clothes and pretend that they are living in another time period.

The latter will undoubtedly be disappointed, for I can offer no rational explanation for our behavior. The reason “why” must be left to the philosophers... or at least to the psychoanalysts. What follows then is more of a “how to” approach for those who have already decided to become time travelers.

Costumed Interpretation

Costumed historical interpretation falls into two main categories; “Third Person” and “First Person” interpretation. With “third person” interpretation, you are an educator or lecturer expounding on people, events, places or things and answering questions from the perspective of the present. Sometimes in attire of the period you are talking about, sometimes not, you are a guide or a facilitator for discussion of some past event.

In “first person” interpretation, you educate and facilitate discussion from the perspective of the past. You are dressed in period attire. You assume the role of a person from the past and converse from the perspective of the past. You portray a person who does not yet know how things are going to turn out.

Sometimes in a lecture format, a 1st person portrayal may be accomplished in “Chautauqua” style. Without getting into the history of Chautauqua in general, it has come to mean a 1st person portrayal where the first third of the presentation is done as the character from the past. It is essentially a lecture format with or without props. The second third of the presentation is still done as the character from the past, but it is done as a question and answer (Q&A) period with the audience. In the final part of the presentation, the character portrayal is dropped and presentation reverts to the present. This is a Q& A with the audience allowing the presenter to provide insight and context that the historic character would not have known.

At a public living history event you can play with combinations of the two forms, but generally it’s better to just do one or the other at a single event. If you’re going to an event with a mixture of the two, it’s best for the “first person” interpreters to be identified in some way, so the audience understands that they are different. If you need to break character, one common technique is to remove a hat or perform some other physical gesture like taking a step sideways as you explain to your audience that you are now going to step into the present to answer their question. Once the explanation is completed, you should do the same physical gesture in reverse, explaining that you are now returning to the past.

Something that really detracts from an event is a mixture of “1st person” re-enactors dropping in and out of character without warning, while others maintain character throughout the event. If you’re going to do a “1st person” portrayal, it’s most effective to stay in character when you’re in view of the public.

If you have been to Disneyland, you have seen this principle in action. The costumed characters never drop their character while in public view. If they need a break, they go “off stage”. The illusion remains consistent. Disney is a corporate owned private park and can fire employees for breaking character. Living history events usually can not. Most re-enactors are volunteers and since a majority of these events are open to the public, you can’t control walk-ins. You can attempt to coach participants, but in the end you have to live with what you get. As a re-enactor, the only person you can control is yourself.

As you gain experience in historical interpretation, you will find that event leadership holds the key. With strong leadership setting clear appropriate standards, an event seldom has problems with anachronistic detractors. When everyone else is “doing it right”, participants rise to the occasion. If you are fortunate enough to be involved with one of these groups, your own interpretive skills will quickly develop and you will find a tremendous satisfaction in being part of the ensemble.

Though in general terms, no one method of interpretation is necessarily superior to another and the interpretation of a novice can be as valid as that of a twenty year veteran, the organizers of an event have a responsibility to clearly communicate expectations and set the stage for an event. Unless you are doing a solo performance, you shouldn’t just go your own way. Your portrayal should complement the ensemble.

Accuracy of Portrayal

Try to pick a character within a few years of your actual age. If you physically resemble the character, that’s a plus, but not a necessity. Whatever personage you choose, try to pick a race or ethnic group that you at least have some resemblance to. If you do not resemble the group, you need a plausible explanation for why you look different. Say you’re 40 years old, weigh about 240 and want to portray a French voyageur. Voyageurs were lean young men. If you are neither young nor lean and you still wish to portray a voyageur, perhaps you may wish to portray a retired voyageur. Plausible is the operative word here.

If you’re going to do an accent, get it critiqued by a couple of third parties before attempting it in public. Unless you have a real knack for it, fake accents will detract from your portrayal. You’re better off just speaking naturally in your own voice.

In this hobby you will constantly be faced with two types of information - documented information vs. not documented but plausible. (Let’s just ignore the not documented and not plausible.) Documentation is the final arbiter for what your character looks like, says and does. If you’re lucky you might have a painting or a photograph. Perhaps you’ll be fortunate enough to have a diary or some correspondence in the person’s own words. Maybe you’ll have a contemporary’s description of the individual. Most of the time, you’ll have little more than a name and sometimes not even that. It’s up to you to fill in the gaps.

In order to fill in the gaps, you need to be versed in the time period in which the person lived. Beyond general history books, there are many sources available. Be careful if television and movies are your primary sources. Some documentaries are excellent sources for background material, but movies often sacrifice historic fact to resolve a story line within the time allowed. I do not need to remind you that all published works in print or in other media are influenced by the author's and the sponsor's agenda. One source I particularly enjoy is old newspapers. Most libraries have microfilm of old newspapers and journals. While this journalism is also biased, at least it's biased from the time period's perspective. Just browsing the advertisements can give you some great ideas on what life was like when the newspaper was new. It also gives you a good idea of the word usage and grammar of the time. Before the internet, I could spend hours "surfing" the stacks at my local library.

Listening to other more experienced re-enactors can provide you with a lot of material, but as with the internet, be wary of biases and faulty information. In the end, there is no substitute for traditional scholarship.

We live in an era of almost unlimited access to information. So much information can actually be a curse and sifting through it all can resemble doing a Master's Thesis. Then there's the issue of portraying famous people. It can be a challenge because of the abundance of preformed concepts about that individual. The same problem occurs when Hollywood has popularized an historic role. Another potential issue is political correctness and modern sensitivities. Some historical personages, by our modern standards, were nasty bigoted people. Some were not particularly liked even by their contemporaries. Despite their flaws however, their story is still part of the historical tapestry.

With regards to political correctness and modern sensitivities, you must strike a balance. If you give offence to the public in period correct speech or behavior, there should be a diplomatic balancing force such as a docent or printed handouts, to explain to modern visitors the nature of your role. Some artists may set out to shock and offend, but this cannot be the norm in living history portrayal. You can get away with small amounts of this, but remember that most of these events are serving a general audience. History has to be sanitized to some degree, for the culture that views it. Remember that from the point of view of a previous time, our own modern culture of indulgence, tolerance and personal freedoms might appear dishonorable, evil and even corrupt. There are some eastern cultures that view us that way in our own century. Try to keep an open mind and to be sensitive to your audience.

We shouldn't hide all the warts of the past, but neither should we concentrate on them. We can't possibly portray an historical event in real time in full accurate detail. Only the actual people in their own time period could do that, so we, as performers, must interpret the facts, edit what we know and make choices as to what we put on display.

What People Really Come to See

Unless you're a solo act, it probably wasn't to see you. With the exception of students on an assignment, most people come to living history events to be entertained and or to

entertain their children in an educational context. They come to see the blacksmith. They come to make candles or see the costumes of the re-enactors. They want to hear musket fire and see old time activities. They come for hands on experience of basket weaving or pumping a butter churn. The public comes to these events expecting to see lots of activity and maybe participate in a couple of them. Very few come to hear a lecture on the political and social issues of the day, although a few visitors actually do!

Ideas for Conversation

Focus on the demographics of your audience. A presentation for a 4th grade class is going to be different than a presentation in a public park. You need to think of how your character can become involved in an activity of interest to your audience. For most periods in history, idleness is a privilege of the rich and a vice for everyone else. You need to have something to do. Once you have an activity to perform, you can make that the anchor topic of your conversation with the public and with your fellow re-enactors. Seeing you make something is always of interest to the public, especially if they can participate in some way. Preparation of food or just cooking over an open fire has a fascination for many modern people. Sharpening edged tools and weapons or cleaning firearms is another easy activity to hold an audience's interest.

If you are portraying a more well to do person, you can be holding a newspaper or book from the period and comment on what you've just read. If it's a book that still has modern readership (Irving, Hawthorne, Melville...) you can ask the visitors if they have read that particular title and you can ask them what they thought of it. You can be holding a letter from your relative in New York or London telling you about an event they witnessed. Perhaps someone driving a team at unsafe speed through town and overturning their wagon. You can talk about the levies you were assessed on your cattle or your imported linens and how the government wastes the tax money. You can talk about how the roads are terrible and full of holes, how enforcement of the law is appalling and thieves freely pilfer your crops and stock etc... You can talk about speculators driving up the price of land. In other words, several issues remain as relevant in modern times as they were historically.

Relevance is the key. You can completely engage your audience with this technique. They will make the connection. Think of modern social concerns; then contrive a circumstance to address them in historical context. Think about modern "identity theft". Forgery was invented about the same time as writing. Could you create a prop consisting of a letter from a swindled person demanding an accounting and you are wondering how to clear your name? You're not going to use the modern jargon of "identity theft", but you can exclaim that some deceitful scoundrel has stolen your identity and cast aspersion upon your good name and credit. How about the modern concern over pollution? Why are the authorities not addressing the problem of manure in the streets and the abundance of sewage and refuse? These are just a couple of examples. All you have to do is watch "60 Minutes" or some of the other news shows and you should easily be able to find parallel period material that you can work with. Do you think the flooding of New Orleans is a unique event? Talk about relevance... Floods have always been a disruptive natural force. How did they deal with it back then? How about the war? There's always a

war somewhere and there are always arguments for and against. Enough said on what to converse about. Now, how can you best hold this conversation in character?

Building Your Bio for a “First Person” Portrayal

“First Person” portrayal has a large theatrical element to it. You’re performing either solo or with an ensemble in front of an audience. Unless your performance is scripted, you need to be able to improvise. Unlike improvisational theater however, historical “first person” improvisation assumes a knowledge base. It is structured improvisation. You can’t just make it all up as you go. In your historical portrayal, you are an educator as well as an actor.

Improvisational theater is much easier to perform than “first person” living history. If you are going to convincingly portray a person from another time period, you need to know not only yourself, but you need familiarity with the norms and eccentricities of the time you are performing in. If you are part of an ensemble, it is critical that you have a familiarity with the other members of the group. You need to know who’s who, if you are to react to them in an appropriate manner.

Most living history events will have some scripting. There are some specific events and topics that will be part of the presentation, but the majority of the event is usually unscripted and left to the performers. This being the case, there is an individual and a group responsibility for proper preparation. Not to prepare is a discourtesy not just to the public, but to your fellow performers.

Who – What – When – Where – Why and How

It’s all in the details. You can use elements of your own life experience or even events from general books or movies. Just remember, if it’s not documented, it should at least be plausible.

Who

Who are you? The basics – birth date; birthplace; social circumstance; education; siblings; your parents; grand parents; friends and neighbors?
Your memories of childhood?

What

What do you do? What does your family do?
Do you have a skill? Employment you’ve had. Employment you are seeking.

When

When are you living? Events and concerns of the day?
Key people of your time. Governor of the territory? President? Congressman?
Local Judge? Sheriff? Neighboring settlers?

Where

Where are you? The geography - Near the sea? In the mountains?
Distance from other settlements. Approximate travel time from other geographical locations – by water, by land, on foot.

Conditions of the trails and roads.
What is the local flora and fauna?

How

How did you get here? Overland? Sea? Challenges of the journey? Ferries? Trail cutting?

Details of the journey and geography crossed. Those that didn't make it.

Why

Why are you here? Is this where you intended to be or are you here by accident?

Do you plan on staying? Are you passing through?

You are probably not going to expostulate all of the above to any one visitor or fellow re-enactor. The reason you want this information is to give your character a center. The information is for you. It is your guide on how to act. As you engage in activities and conversation, some of these facts will emerge, but the majority will not – and should not. To borrow modern vernacular, it is not any more appropriate to do a core dump on anyone now than it was back then. But if you know the answers, it's easy to improvise an appropriate response to questions or comments about your character. Remember, you are not alone. You are part of the ensemble. Sometimes silence is OK and not knowing an answer is just as OK. Be natural and do not volunteer information as a re-enactor that you would not volunteer as a modern person.

As a mental exercise, think of how you might converse with a stranger in present context while waiting along the street of a parade route waiting for the parade to begin. How would the conversation start? What would be the topics?

Beware of anachronisms.

Beyond the obvious like wrist watches and other jewelry or apparel, concentrate on purging modern jargon. It may be rad, cool or totally awesome, but if you're going to say it out loud, choose appropriate speech for the period.

Appropriate period music is really quite simple to find in this electronic age. There is abundant printed and recorded music from every imaginable time period. If you're going to sing or play an instrument, please choose appropriate material. Avoid anachronistic modern songs and tunes. It utterly destroys the illusion for the audience and disrupts the concentration of the other re-enactors. I'm not talking about the campfire at the end of the day when the public has left. At that point you're all "off stage" and pretty well anything goes (within the bounds of good taste). While the public is present however, when you are "on stage", dump the modern instruments. In a pre-civil war frontier context, a guitar would be about as common as a piano. If you're in a Philadelphia parlor of the same period the situation entirely changes. Keep it plausible.

Finer points include seeking out appropriate eyewear and hairstyles. Anachronistic hair styles can be covered by a hat, but please ditch the modern eyeglass frames! 30 years ago this was more difficult, but it is so easy today to find appropriate frames and have your

prescription set in them, you just do not have an excuse. Compared to the cost of the rest of your outfit, this is a minimal expense. If you really just can't afford it, go blurry for the day and just don't wear your glasses when the public is present. Besides, it is historically correct for most of history to not see clearly, if you had vision problems.

Behavior can be very anachronistic. In the past, people knew their place. Are you portraying a period when children should be seen and not heard? If you are younger, then you should completely defer to your elders. Silence is golden. Don't speak until spoken to. When you wish to converse, contrive situations where you are with your equals. It may not be politically correct in modern terms, but beware of your social class and know your place. For most of history, you couldn't simply walk up to your betters or even strangers and start jabbering away. It's the height of rudeness. You certainly wouldn't argue with them. Nor would the better class condescend to speak with their inferiors other than maybe with a simple greeting as they pass them by. Women certainly do not strike up conversations with men unknown to them. Nor would a polite gentleman address a woman with other than a nod or the tip of a hat in passing. Even exchanged smiles could be considered scandalous.

Proper dress is the other big anachronism to watch out for. Period fashion is a huge topic all by itself depending upon the time you are portraying. There are abundant manuals, patterns, books and vendors to guide you in this area, but there are a couple of general rules that cover most of the 18th and 19th centuries which transcend fashion.

1. Except in specific situations, regardless of weather, white men do not appear in public without a waistcoat or vest. Depending upon your social status, even appearing in shirt sleeves can be considered a state of undress. A gentleman would never even remove his frock in public.
2. White women do not go outside with their heads uncovered and all men and boys wear hats.

Public modesty is paramount for most of the 18th and 19th centuries. You do not leave your bed chamber without being fully attired let alone leave your house. This was also true on the trail. The lower classes mimic the upper class in terms of attire. The quality of the attire is lesser, but not the mode of dress. In areas of established white settlements, even the Native Americans mirrored white fashion in all but a very few exceptions.

If you are portraying a frontier situation away from the settlements, there is more flexibility, but propriety still ruled. Very few whites ever went "native". In fact most natives quickly began adapting to white modes of attire even though they may have retained some articles of traditional adornment.

Every era has individuals who are fashionably eccentric within their communities, but these remain exceptions and should not be portrayed as the norm. Non-conformity has seldom been sociably acceptable in any culture. In living history facilities, proper modes of attire should be clearly communicated for the periods being portrayed. This uniformity of style should be apparent to the public. Try to bring your wardrobe in line with what is appropriate to the event.

Final Words on Re-enacting

In any avocation requiring tools, proper equipment ensures a job well done. The tools become extensions of the craftsman's hands. A skilled carpenter doesn't have to think about what saw to use. He just reaches for it. It's second nature for the task at hand. Your persona, costume and accoutrements are your tools as a re-enactor. As you gain comfort and facility with their use, they will become second nature.

Mastering old time technologies is a fun and fascinating hobby. "Living as they lived" is hard to explain to those who have never done it. We can not of course, close the Pandora's Box of modern knowledge we possess. Even though we surround ourselves with accoutrements of another era, we possess an understanding of science, places and things beyond the wildest imaginings of our ancestors. We may have a different view of our place in the universe, but the common thread is human nature. We still experience all the emotions and insecurities of our forbearers. We still take pride in a job well done. We are still social beings dependant upon one another for our very survival. It is impossible to understand the present without an understanding of the past. History is our rudder as we steer towards our future. It's fun to be part of it!

There was a time... offers on site presentations for First Person Historical Interpretation as well as detailed half-day and full-day workshops for historical re-enactors. Please contact us for details.

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