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30 Minutes with John Brown at the Smithsonian

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Abstract

Last week, my folks were in town from Ohio visiting me and doing the 'tourist thing' in our nation's capitol. On one of their days in town, I met them after work at the [Smithsonian National Museum of American History](#) (NMAH). We saw the Great Garrison Flag and the gunboat Philadelphia. My mom saw the First Ladies' dresses while my father and I went to the military exhibit instead (we're not much for fancy dresses). And although they were tired, and by this time had had their fill of history, I convinced them to let me drag them along to see two of the Smithsonian's interpretive programs. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interp Examples, John Brown

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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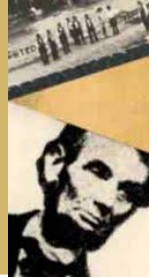
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2011

Last week, my folks were in town from Ohio visiting me and doing the 'tourist thing' in our nation's capitol. On one of their days in town, I met them after work at the [Smithsonian National Museum of American History](#) (NMAH). We saw the Great Garrison Flag and the gunboat *Philadelphia*. My mom saw the First Ladies' dresses while my father and I went to the military exhibit instead (we're not much for fancy dresses). And although they were tired, and by this time had had their fill of history, I convinced them to let me drag them along to see two of the Smithsonian's interpretive programs.

Before then, I'd never seen one of the Smithsonian's historical theater programs, although I'd heard a lot about them - the NMAH's blog [talks about them all the time](#), and word on the street from anyone I talked to was that the Smithsonian's programs were top notch. So, tired and aging parents aside, when I got down to NMAH, I *was going* to see some of their historical theater programs. (In the end, my parents were happy they saw them too, for they did not disappoint!)

The program I want to focus on for this week's post is the "Time Trial of John Brown." Held in a small confined theater that sits about 25-30 people, the program introduces the audience to the story of John Brown, and then it goes a step further - by asking visitors to consider how they feel we should deal with John Brown's memory today. A historical interpreter or actor portrays John Brown, assisted by a museum docent or facilitator. The program starts with the program facilitator



introducing the program and its interactive nature, making visitors feel at ease and building a rapport, and when the time comes, introducing John Brown and a little bit of his background. John Brown is then permitted to speak a few words about his actions. The actor portraying John Brown relates a story of John Brown's youth, a story in which he met a young negro boy who was his equal in all aspects of human life except for his

I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land...

skin color. That distinction meant all the difference, as John Brown was treated with respect, while the negro boy was beaten and abused. That was the turning point for John Brown - the fact that he didn't stand up to defend the boy, that he allowed that injustice to happen.

After a few other remarks, the facilitator then shifts the onus of the program on the visitors, asking them to consider the questions that John Brown's story raises - questions of slavery, vigilant justice, treason, civil rights, human rights, and memory to name a few. Visitors are allowed to ask John Brown questions, and the facilitator helps in moving things along, and sometimes setting John Brown up for an easy fastball over the plate. Someone in the audience (might have been me trying to instigate things...I dunno) asked John Brown if there was any difference between freedom fighters and terrorists and what he thought about the differing distinctions. he replied first by asking the facilitator, what the word terrorist meant, as it seemed to him a modern term. (John Brown knew only the events 'he was told' after his death...) The facilitator rephrased the question, helping lead him in talking about treason, the rule of law, and fighting for freedom.

What amazed me the most was how much ground the program covered in a half an hour. John Brown and those of us in the audience covered topics ranging from whether Brown was a religious zealot, the definition of a martyr, the question of, "who will watch the watchmen?" to topics on his memory via the song John Brown's Body, how you can commit treason against a state you were never a citizen, does the end justify the means, and what does it mean to be a terrorist or freedom fighter - all of which are relevant historical and present-day issues that the case of John Brown represents.

Perhaps what was most telling to me was my parent's commentary after the fact, especially the comments coming from my dad, who by this time was tired, grumpy, and falling asleep when the program started (we were early and in a dim-lite room). He stayed awake throughout the whole thing, enthralled with Brown's story and the discussion that followed. Afterwards, my dad said, "You know, Jake, they should teach like that in school. History would be more interesting..." I agreed, thinking to myself that what we saw wasn't teaching but interpretation - speaking to us as a whole.

If you are ever around when the Smithsonian presents this program, it is well worth your time - only thirty minutes is all it takes for the trial of John Brown.

Check back next week to hear all about the second historical theater program...

Thanks to the NMAH's blog, [O Say Can You See](#) for the image of the program.

[EDIT: NMAH published another post on their blog, [O Say Can You See](#), about John Brown this time with video! I'd be remiss if I didn't addend it on to this post. You can check it out [here](#).]