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Standing Up by Sitting Down: Join the Student Sit-Ins at the Smithsonian

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Abstract

Continuing my review and discussion that I started last week of the NMAH's historical theater programs, this week, I want to talk about the other program I attended on my most recent visit down to the mall: the Join the Student Sit-Ins program. Long story short, Join the Student Sit-Ins is another great interpretive offering from the Smithsonian Museum of American History. The program thrives on visitor involvement and reflection. It's engaging, historically deep, emotional, and probing for answers, ultimately asking more questions than finding answers. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2011

Continuing my review and discussion that I started last week of the NMAH's historical theater programs, this week, I want to talk about the other program I attended on my most recent visit down to the mall: the Join the Student Sit-Ins program. Long story short, Join the Student Sit-Ins is another great interpretive offering from the Smithsonian Museum of American History. The program thrives on visitor involvement and reflection. It's engaging, historically deep, emotional, and probing for answers, ultimately asking more questions than finding answers.

The basis for the program is a training session being held in the wake of the initial Greensboro Student Sit-In that occurred on February 1, 1960. Visitors are thrust into the role of students who have volunteered to help carry on torch, spreading non-violent sit-ins to lunch counters around the city and throughout the rest of North Carolina. During the program, visitors and the interpreter, portraying a student activist who is leading the training session, engage in a number of different activities. Together the interpreter and visitors discuss what non-violence means and what it represents. They practice non-violent techniques including a demonstration where visitors silently crowd and stare at several audience members chosen to sit on stools, the objective being to try and make those who are sitting uncomfortable by the confrontation. And lastly, the group sings. They sing protest songs used during the sit-ins and other civil rights demonstrations. They sing, using the power of music to unite themselves, to show their strength, pride, and resolve in helping to change America just as the students did in 1960. You can watch the entire program online below. It's well worth the twenty minutes of your time.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=usVzJ3qngSU

As you can see, Join the Student Sit-Ins is a very experiential program with deep emotional and intellectual connections. And its all achieved in a short 25-30 minute program held in the lobby of one of wings of the museum. The program is held in the same lobby which houses the original Greensboro lunch counter, on display for everyone to see. The counter serves a backdrop to the program, a tangible reminder of the events not so long ago that inspired the program. Along with the Time Trial of John Brown, the Join the Student Sit-Ins program is on my imaginary "greatest hits" record of interpretation. I really can't say enough.

But, what makes these two historical theater programs work so well? To me, the reasons they succeed come down to two simple things evident in both of the programs. One is both programs are about people. And two, the goal of the programs are not the instruction or education of visitors on historical events, but the provocation of feeling and meaning over those historical events. Let me explain.

Both the Time Trial of John Brown and Join the Student Sit-ins programs are about people. More than anything, they agree with John's definition of what history is all about (remember?...ideas put into action by people on a landscape) Both programs eschew getting caught up in the wide breadth of the overall events and movements the people are part of, instead just focusing on one man or a group of student's actions responding to the ideas of that particular movement. Instead of starting from a top down approach, by seeing the big picture and then focusing in on the details, these programs go from the bottom up - grassroots history of individual actors who play a leading role on the stage of American history.

Second, both programs focus on meaning and feeling. They ask provoking questions such as, "How do you feel we should remember John Brown?" and "What would you have done if you were at the Student Sit-Ins? Would you be able to be non-violent? Could you restrain yourself while everyone else around you bullied and terrorized you?" Instead of sending you away with a nice take home message or thesis such as, "John Brown should be remembered as..." or, "The Greensboro Sit-Ins were instrumental in..." The programs leave you asking questions for which only you can give the right answer - ultimately, what you think and how you feel about that particular moment in history.



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