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# Stages of Experience

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## Theatrical Connections between the Seven Stages of Experience and Historical Museums

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**H**ISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS and sites are increasingly theorizing ways to craft experiences for their guests and shape what society remembers about the past. Sandra Richards observes in her research about Ghana’s historical tourism that “the project of memory, upon which travel to historical sites or heritage tourism is built, raises other issues familiar to theater scholars. Like theater, memory is constructed through processes of selecting, repeating, forgetting—willfully as well as unconsciously—and reassembling narratives”.<sup>1</sup> Richards’s analysis of African slave castle tourism and how these sites construct memory may also be applied to other types of educational and commercial enterprises devoted to memorializing past traumas. With society’s increasing demand for entertainment, museums are searching for new ways to present information dynamically. Some museums offer experiences that are performance-oriented and immersive. The Titanic Museum and Attraction in Branson, Missouri, implements theatrical techniques, offering tourists an entertaining, emotional, and informative experience. Throughout the process of visiting the museum, guests form memories that persist long after the experience ends.

One method in the formation of memory was constructed by Disney designers. The method, called the 7 Stages of Experience, was created for the development of attractions and rides throughout their many parks. This method breaks down how an individual’s judgment and experience are formed, allowing architects to stage a person’s journey in a specifically organized direction. When analyzed, the 7 Stages of Experience can be applied to the Titanic Museum. The museum has carefully

cultivated guest involvement, beginning with guests receiving a unique boarding pass representing a real passenger. By incorporating hands-on activities and interaction with a cast of characters, tourists receive a true commercial performance experience, immersing themselves in the stories of their passenger, as well as those around them. By tracing a visitor's journey through the Titanic Museum and Attraction, this paper dissects how the 7 Stages of Experience can be implemented within both commercial theatre and historical museums.

At their core, historical museums and commercial theatres are built upon similar foundations. In the first chapter of their book *Stage Money*, Tim Donahue and Jim Patterson list some of the characteristics of commercial theatre: "1) Typically formed as a partnership or company to produce one play only and then disband. 2) A production is often planned as an open-ended run, playing for as long as ticket sales support it. 3) Box office results determine if a show runs. 4) Profits for investors are taxable; losses are deductible for the most part."<sup>2</sup> Using this definition as a foundation upon which commercial theatre is built, one could compare it to the business structure of a museum.

Museums are constructed to accommodate the partnership of the owners with artifact collectors to share a specific incident in history. For example, the Titanic Museum collaborates with private collectors and the Titanic Historical Society to present the stories of passengers and crew members who were on board the ship. Museums are also produced to withstand long periods of time. As long as admission sales or donations are able to sustain life within the business, the museum remains open. In a similar realm, if an exhibit is able to boost the museum's ticket sales, that exhibit will remain for a longer duration; if not, plans are made to present a new exhibit with intent to further profit. Profits from a museum are taxed accordingly and any losses are considered to be primarily deductible. Donations made by private collectors are also considered a deduction in taxes.

At their core, however, both commercial theatre and museums aim to attract the masses. Perhaps, then, it is the responsibility of theatres and museums to provide a lasting experience for their guests in order to achieve commercial gain. With the current generational addiction to technology and immediate results, customers are expecting an expedited experience. Forrester Research and Consulting, a company specializing in the research of rapidly changing trends in customer service, suggests that companies begin reconstructing customer experience by measuring tactics and how well they are received, engaging with customers and deciphering strengths and weaknesses in practices, and, finally, managing new techniques in service.<sup>3</sup> These techniques often set the course for how

theatrical and historical experiences are formed for audience members and guests. The 7 Stages of Experience is one such technique.

The 7 Stages of Experience, or 7 Stages, were designed to enhance and individualize guest experience. Placed on a visual structure, the 7 Stages of Experience would look similar to the literary Freytag Pyramid, beginning with the informing of an audience, rising to a climax and ending with a definitive conclusion. Bryan Campen identifies the 7 Stages of Experience:

1. Image: The pictures and preconceived notions the individual has in his/her head prior to the experience.
2. Embark on a Journey: The first impression and glimpses one has at the beginning of the experience.
3. Labyrinth: The bombardment of information channeled through the senses causing confusion and a sense of overwhelming.
4. Beacon: The first visual of “the light at the end of the tunnel.”
5. Payoff: The conclusion of the physical experience.
6. Reintegration: How one adjusts to leaving the experience and entering the norm of life again.
7. Memento: The emotional, psychological, and physical additions made to an individual’s life as a result of the experience.<sup>4</sup>

What attractions hope to achieve through these stages are individual memories that will attach to people long after they leave, inspiring them to share their memories with others, inviting future consumers to partake in the experience, or spurring former guests to return in the future for a second passage. These stages can be used to shape the experience of a theatre patron before, during, and after their attendance at a theatrical performance.

The first stage, Image, is analogous to the preconceived notions audience members may have formed from previous theatre experiences, posters, or other publicity as they prepare to see a show. Preconceived notions can often be a determining factor in the decision-making process for whether or not to attend a production or attraction. For attractions in Grenada, for example, this process often involves specific choices in how destinations are portrayed in publicity. Velvet Nelson, a professor of tourism geography at Sam Houston State University, writes, “Tourism has been described as uniquely visual, and this visualization is a factor that is used for place promotion. Because it may be said that usually, the first contact a sightseer has with the sight is not the sight itself but with some representation thereof.”<sup>5</sup> By carefully controlling the publicity surrounding a production or museum, businesses are able to regulate public opinion from the start.

In the theatre, previous experiences can have a large impact on how a person accepts a new idea or concept. If people have had a negative experience, perhaps having attended a mediocre production, they might have developed a negative response to the play in general. In order to impact audience response, some theatres are reaching out to communities before they attend the play. For instance, the Woolly Mammoth theatre in Washington, D.C., is one of several theatres to use newer advertising techniques. In a recent production of *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, by Sarah Ruhl, Woolly media manager Alli Houseworth began a conversation via social media in connection with the play. Houseworth encouraged Twitter users to tweet about their secret desires and thoughts surrounding the themes of sex, fantasy, and fetish within the play. While the topic seemed scandalous, the conversation sparked interest in the production, causing it to become the highest-grossing in-house play in the thirty-year production history of the theatre.<sup>6</sup> The Twitter conversation clued potential audience members in on the themes within the play, causing them to attend it with preconceived expectations planted by the theatre itself.

Within the Titanic Museum, visitors also have preconceived notions upon entering the museum. Many employees are asked questions such as, “Well, what is this place? A show?” or “So, what do you do here?” This expectation stems from the physical environment in which the museum is placed. Branson is a town built around entertainment. Shows of a wide variety are offered to tourists each year and many people expect to be entertained throughout the duration of their visit. They assume that the massive ship in the middle of Branson is also a show. In addition, guests come aboard with a certain level of knowledge about the *Titanic*’s tragedy. These expectations can influence attitudes as guests prepare for their visit to the museum.

Similar to theatre-goers, museum guests often depend on previous experiences to inform their expectations of a visit to the Titanic Museum. Many times a crew member will hear, “I went to this exhibit in Vegas and I thought this was gonna be like that, but it wasn’t at all!” Another previous experience that affects a guest’s visit is the 1997 movie *Titanic*. In some cases, the movie inspires guests to come to the museum; however, it also sets a standard for what they want to see. They expect to find out something about the characters of Jack and Rose, they expect to see the Grand Staircase, and they have notions from the movie of events that occurred on the ship.<sup>7</sup> Finally, there are images that create a feeling of expectation for guests when they come to visit the museum. Guests around Branson see commercials, billboards, posters, and brochures that create an expectation when they visit the museum. Janie and Jamie, two

first-class maids aboard the *Titanic*, also shape expectations with appearances in commercials and events around town. Guests visit the museum expecting to see the Grand Staircase they have seen depicted on the museum's website, and to hold the fictional Heart of the Ocean diamond, made so famous by the movie. These expectations set the stage for how guests approach their journeys.

Stage Two, Embarking on the Journey, is one of the most important. It is the first time audience members have the chance to engage relationally to a performance. Humans are wired to judge the aesthetics of their surroundings, and in the theatre a journey can start with the simple state of the building. Embarking on the journey is also an important stage in the guest experience at the Titanic Museum. Terri Tucker, the training coordinator for the museum, insists that these first impressions are the most important in a visitor's memory.<sup>8</sup> Like a lobby display in a theatre, the building itself provides a gateway to this historical experience. The building is a replica of the front portion of the *Titanic*. Upon entering the admission line, the patrons are informed that the building has been built to half-scale, meaning that it is half the size of half the ship. This immediately gives them an idea about the size and grandeur of the real vessel and allows them to begin the journey with an understanding of the actual voyage.

The key to the experience is human contact. Guests are immediately greeted by a maid or an officer standing at the ready to give them a boarding pass and kindly guide them to the appropriate line for their party.<sup>9</sup> This human contact begins the individualized journey for the passenger. Richard Chase and David Tansik suggest that in such high-contact areas of commerce, businesses should strive for effectiveness rather than efficiency.<sup>10</sup> At venues such as a museum where immersive experiences are encouraged, meaningful contact with guests can be far more beneficial to commercial gain than encouraging employees to overcrowd a tour. The same can be said of a theatre trying to determine main-stage versus black-box seasons when arguing quantity of people versus intimacy of show.

Patrons receive their own version of a program with their boarding passes. Boarding passes are quite unique in that each pass contains the story of a passenger who was actually on board the ship. Guests are encouraged to pay close attention as they travel through the exhibits because they "might just see their passenger somewhere on board."<sup>11</sup> This gives passengers an anchor to hold onto as they navigate through the museum. Cary Carson, retired vice-president for the research division at Colonial Williamsburg, insists that stories are one of the most powerful media a museum has in its possession.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to theatre audiences being allowed a glimpse of an exposed set or the mystery of a closed curtain, museum patrons are given an impression of the “stage” inside the museum, through the physical building. As they wait to process through admissions, visitors are introduced to the grandeur of the ship’s size through the entrance. Hung on the ceiling of the lobby is a giant propeller that is the same size as the smallest of the *Titanic*’s three propellers. To their right is a mural comparing the length of the *Titanic* to the height of famous buildings, statues, and monuments from around the world. These small pieces of information are only the introductory elements that a guest is exposed to before entering the attraction they are about to experience.

Within the Titanic Museum and Attraction, guests become quite engrossed in the ship’s experience during Stage Three, appropriately labeled the Labyrinth. The museum is laid out to tell a story. The Labyrinth of the Titanic Museum begins with the first rooms, where guests are introduced to the people and places integral to the building and planning of the ship. As they travel through the many exhibits of the museum they are guided through the classes of the ship. Passengers travel through the boiler room, where men toiled to keep the fires going and the ship moving, through third class, where guests experience the tight quarters and dim sparse hallways, and to the Grand Staircase, the halfway point in their journey. Guests embark up the stairs where they traverse through first-class staterooms, the dining salon, Marconi room, and the Captain’s bridge. The movie theatre allows guests to watch the only video footage ever taken of the *Titanic* and travel through the timeline of the disastrous night. Each room is filled with large amounts of information. Guests are encouraged to listen to the audio players provided during the admission process, giving them even more insight to the museum.

Additionally, there are knowledgeable cast members and characters strategically placed throughout the museum. Terri Tucker stresses that it is human contact that elevates a visitor’s venture from good to unforgettable.<sup>13</sup> Cast members deliver speeches or simply interact with guests, pointing them in the direction of their passengers, or telling them stories about the events and people on board. Bombarded by information as well as the knowledge of what took place that night, guests begin to connect with the passengers personally. By the time they reach the timeline room, guests are so connected they may need an emotional release. The buildup of energy can cause confusion and frustration in individuals as they feel surrounded by all sorts of information with little way to process it. Gary L. Hunter, professor of marketing at Illinois State University, describes this pivotal moment of experience as information overload.<sup>14</sup> Many guests become attached to specific pieces of the museum

as an outcome in order to stay grounded: their character, the trade of a passenger, experiences on board, and the mechanics of the ship, among other things. This personal connection can be formed by the passenger's sense of self-efficacy, their belief in their ability to process information.<sup>15</sup> By connecting with something they personally understand, passengers are able to create a foundation and a "home" for retention. This journey is comparable to an audience member's experience throughout the rising action of a play.

Theatrically, the Labyrinth can have a similar effect on audience members as it does museum visitors. As the performance begins, the audience is introduced to characters, plots, information, and, of course, language. Trying to sort through all of this can be quite the challenge for audience members. They become caught up in what is going on and may feel overwhelmed by the story. In an attempt to sort through the chaos of a performance, many individuals will focus on a singular aspect of the play. This begins the unique experience for each person. They follow one character, or one plot that relates to emotional linkage, something they can connect to and empathize with. In the Punchdrunk production of *Sleep No More*, audience members are given masks that integrate them into the performance. Throughout their journey in the production, audience members choose a character or plot to follow within the story of *Macbeth* and watch the performance from that particular perspective.<sup>16</sup> With such an immersive experience, onlookers are also provided a place of sanctuary, a hotel bar, where they can release tension by shifting their focus from being a part of the story to interacting with the world around them.

Like the climax of a play, Stage Four is the Beacon, where visitors glimpse the end of the journey.<sup>17</sup> The Interactive Room is a place for guests to engage in hands-on experiences in the ship. However, it holds a much more important value for guests in that it is a chance to release energy that has built up throughout their time at the museum. Guests are encouraged to attempt Morse code on a computer as well as on a historical Marconi machine, walk the decks of the ship at various inclines calculated to simulate different points during the ship's sinking, sit in a full-size lifeboat, and feel the cold of the twenty-eight-degree water. This room offers the guests a mental break for the first time since entering the museum. They are able to process the immense amounts of information they have collected. Some of the experiences within the interactive room allow for physical connections to the night the *Titanic* sank. Cary Carson explains in her article on history museums that the tactile activities allow patrons to connect education to fun.<sup>18</sup> Imagery processing such as this allows an individual to retain an event or piece of information by attaching one of the senses to a piece of information. This process trans-

forms information from the abstract to the concrete.<sup>19</sup> By being able to process this information the guests will not feel so overwhelmed when they enter the next stage, the memorial room of the museum.

In studies of schema structure, students in learning environments expect specific aspects of plots when reading stories.<sup>20</sup> This expectation is seen in Stage Five, the Payoff. In this stage, audience members expect to be presented a conclusion within the story they are seeing. Once the play concludes, the physical experience is over. However, the emotional and psychological experience continues. At this point the audience receives the play that has been presented and begins to determine what it means and why it was interpreted that way. Is it relevant? In short, the audience's job has begun.

Similar to the conclusion of a play, passengers expect to see a conclusion to their stories on board the *Titanic*. The same is true with a museum, attraction, or production. After the cognitive release of the interactive room, guests enter the memorial room and the fifth stage of their journey, the payoff. This room is designed to bring honor to the people on board the ship. This is also where the guests find out the fate of the passenger on their boarding pass that they have come to know so well. On the wall are four glass plates, and each one is dedicated to a class that was on board the ship: first, second, third, and crew. Each plate has the names of all the passengers on them. If the names are underlined, they survived; if they are not, they perished during that fateful night. This room signals the conclusion of the story they have witnessed. As the 100th anniversary of the sinking approached, the museum decided to involve guests in a ceremony to honor the passengers of the *Titanic*. Each guest was given a rose petal and invited to take part in a ceremony that mirrored the actual anniversary tribute in which the Coast Guard released rose petals where the ship sank. By taking part in this ceremony, guests were able to pay tribute to the passenger on their boarding pass and also personally play a part in the story of the *Titanic*. The payoff of the rose petal ceremony and the discovery of their passenger's fate allow museum guests to have personal closure to their experience.

In Stage Six, Reintegration, guests begin the process of reentering the world around them as they leave the memorial room. The final room of their journey displays photographs and a video detailing the discovery of the sunken *Titanic* in 1985. This room provides hope, as it tells the final installments of how the stories and the memories of the people have been preserved on the ocean floor. It also offers a shock of reality for guests. Guests discover the realities of where the ship lies, the state it is in, and how the people of the world were truly affected by the tragedy. This room leads to the Grand Staircase, where the guests descend one



last time through the dream that was the *Titanic*. As they descend they catch a glimpse of the gift shop, which leads them out of the world of the *Titanic* and back into the world of today. In the theatre, this could be compared to the curtain call, where audience members are reminded that actors merely represent their characters but do not become them.

As the physical experience at the museum ends and the guests begin their journeys home, the Final Stage, Memento, describes what the guest takes with them as they leave. In the theatre, patrons may keep their program or ticket as a reminder of their journey through a story. At the museum, guests might go through the gift shop, choosing items that bring them joy and a reminder of what they saw inside the museum. Some hold onto their boarding passes, having connected with their passengers and not wanting to forget their story. Others attach themselves with cast members and ask for photographs so they may remember their visit to the museum. The most important memento that encourages guests to recommend the *Titanic* experience is the psychological memento. In the theatre, these kinds of memories can result in the sharing of a good or bad review. Within the museum, as guests leave it is the emotional and mental connection that will compel them to share their experience. By sharing their journey through word of mouth, others may feel compelled to go and experience the story of the *Titanic* for themselves. As in the theatre, word of mouth is the most powerful tool. A vicious critic can deter a person from coming.

Theatrically, the memento left from a play can be a powerful tool for a production company. Physical mementos such as programs, posters, and photographs with actors can remind individuals of a unique experience, adding psychological value to physical objects. Mementos aren't only physical, however; psychological mementos can stimulate conversation or thought after a performance, furthering an individual's understanding of history or culture. These types of mementos impact the review a person gives to others who are contemplating attending the show. Chad Bauman, managing director of Milwaukee Repertory Theater, reminds artists that word of mouth carries a crucial impact on ticket sales. Just as social media can impact a production before its run, social media can be a great ally or strong foe after a production opens. Bauman insists that theatres ignore social communication at their own peril. With the quickly increasing dependence on social media, people are relying on instantaneous reviews for inspiration. By providing a carefully crafted theatrical experience for an audience, 140 characters can have a great impact on audience development within the current generation.

Social media strategies used in the theatre have not gone ignored by theatre historians. According to Andrée Gendreau, "New developments

in communication, theatrical staging techniques, the exchange and circulation of works, and the plethora of international rapports are clearly putting rising pressure on museums, which are now among the most vibrant and productive cultural institutions in the Western world.”<sup>21</sup> By gently guiding guests through the 7 Stages of Experience, museums can implement theatrical techniques to educate and inspire visitors. In turn, however, its usage raises the question: Is the concept of the 7 Stages of Experience exclusively theatrical? Perhaps not, but it should be considered that using the approach is a wise business strategy, one that generates an effect on business through the implementation of theatrical tactics. With that in mind, theatre would do well to pay attention to these techniques, borrowing back the methods it invented to avoid being eclipsed by museum attractions. Care and practice go into both the theatre and museums to ensure guests a good experience. The Titanic Museum’s approach offers guests an interactive experience designed to provide a lasting memory long after they disembark. Similarly, theatrical groups such as Punchdrunk and Woolly Mammoth Theatre are implementing contemporary tactics using social media and audience immersion to encourage the engagement of the audiences of today.

### Notes

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