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ARTICLE

Embodied Engagement Inside the Museum: Using Performance to Experience the Exhibits

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Abstract

This article explores the use of performance in museum spaces as a way to encourage museum visitors to have embodied and experiential opportunities with exhibitions. Drawing on a South African museum theatre performance case study, called *Unwrapped* (2025), the notion of embodiment will be explored. The use of performance allows possibilities for participation and tangible interaction with the displayed items encouraging a different encounter with the museum exhibitions, rather than only prioritising sight. Museum theatre, thus, encourages a three-dimensional experience of the museum space, which the digital cannot fully create, by filling the space with multiple bodies all sharing in the present moment as they engage with museum narratives, objects, and new memories.

Keywords: embodiment; museum audiences; museum objects; museum theatre; participation

Let us set a possible theatrical scene to begin our discussion:

A street outside a museum. Two friends are eyeing the museum entrance.

Amelia: Should we have a *look*?

Karabo: At what?

Amelia: The stuff inside.

Karabo: Why?

Amelia: Why not. We may learn something.

Karabo: C'mon, I'm hungry.

Amelia: Just a few minutes.

Karabo: Fine. What do you expect to *see* there anyway?

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Amelia: History—stuff from the past.

Karabo: You mean old things … dead things.

Amelia: Important things.

Karabo: And?

Amelia: And what?

Karabo: What will you *do* when you get there?

Amelia: I'll have *a look around*, I suppose.

Karabo: Ever been tempted, to *touch* the things?

Amelia: Absolutely. Can we do that?

Karabo: I do not think so. But I'd like to.

Now, if we played the same scene again but changed just one word in Karabo's previous question: What do you expect to *see* there anyway? To:

Karabo: What do you expect to *experience* there anyway?

Amelia: Experience?

Karabo: Yes, not just with your eyes.

Amelia: How do we do that?

The new question proposed by Karabo raises an additional line of thinking regarding how museum visitors can experience a museum so that we move beyond just *looking* at the museum's contents. This article is, thus, interested in exploring what this idea of *experience* in the museum might include and how it can assist in generating audience interest in the exhibitions. As I am a theatre maker, a piece of dialogue felt like a fitting way to begin the discussion around looking for opportunities for experience within the museum, particularly through performance. In the age of streaming series, easy access to the Internet, video calling, and various other digitally orientated ways of viewing life, it has become harder to find the drive to leave the house, when everything is packaged on our personal devices. The ease in finding entertainment and information through a screen has made visits to external places and institutions harder to come-by. As a result, the museum is being challenged to find ways to encourage people to choose to come physically to the exhibitions and displays rather than only relying on what can be found digitally.

This article argues that one way to make exhibitions experiential is to create opportunities for greater sensorial engagement in which the body is included in activities around and with the exhibits. While there are multiple ways to encourage active experiences in the museum, the main focus of this article is the role performance can play in the museum and thus the particular form of experiential engagement addressed in this discussion is museum theatre. This form of performance uses drama in museum buildings, galleries, and places of historical significance to encourage "live" and "immediate" encounters with the displays. The aim of

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museum theatre is to get those visiting to look at the exhibitions with new eyes as they explore the objects, narratives, and other displayed aspects through their senses. Therefore, visitors are encouraged to encounter the museum multi-dimensionally (in terms of immersing the body in the space with other humans) and thus creating opportunity for Karabo's question around experience to be engaged.[1]

1. Participation: Using the body as a source of discovery

When visitors to museums become audiences, in what Anthony Jackson calls the "performance frame," their role among the exhibitions shift.[2] They become part of the action rather than only viewers of the work. The frame Jackson identifies signals that the space has also become a performance space and that a theatrical work has begun.[3] The museum space's function takes on a duality; the space is both a museum and a performance space, thus prompting people visiting to choose how to orientate themselves to what is being offered and what they are viewing. They have to choose how to participate:

> *Karabo:* What is going on here? Should I stay or should I go? How do I react to what is unfolding around me in the gallery?

The museum visitor's role shifts to one who is experiencing the museum through a performance—thus effectively also becoming an audience member. Yet, I argue this can be taken further to include what Stephen Di Benedetto calls an "attendant," instead of just an audience member or spectator; the visitor becomes an attendant because "it suggests presence … and participation."[4] This notion of attendant—one whose body participates—is a useful term when looking at museum visitors (and audience members) as participants in experiencing the museum's contents, and not just as an observer. The visitor chooses to become an attendant suggesting some form of involvement and emphasising the experiential nature of the event.

Museum theatre thus encourages attendants to encounter historical figures being portrayed by actors through evoking narratives from the past staged in the present through theatrical means. The emphasis of experience is placed on the bodies of those in the museum to sensorially come into contact with the historical events that may feel removed from "us now," which instead are brought into the present through live actors, in the attempt to make connections between the various beings, past and present. While museum theatre is still gaining traction in South Africa, various performed heritage events have been staged. These include, but are not limited to, *The Clanwilliam Arts Project* (held annually from 2001) staging a number of plays around stories of indigenous South African/Xam people; *Whispers in the Corridors* staged in Constitution Hill Women's Gaol; and the *iSamangaliso Wetland Project* initiative, exploring conservation and the heritage of the world heritage site.[5]

2. Embodiment: The body as the foundation to experience

The importance of the body's role (this includes the senses, emotions, and mental processes, as the term "body" is viewed in a wholistic manner) is highlighted when engaging performance in museum spaces. The notion of embodied and sensorial engagement with the

[1] Bridal 2004, 104.
[2] Jackson 2011, 17.
[3] Jackson 2011, 17.
[4] Di Benedetto 2007, 126.
[5] Du Plessis and Durden 2011; Fleishman 2011; Jenkins 2024.

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site (including exhibitions and their contents) and the living bodies in the space is central to museum theatre, emphasising the importance of experiential engagement. The visitor is thus encouraged to engage through the body with the museum, which the digital cannot offer to the same extent. The aim is also to go beyond only prioritising sight, as Amelia emphasises when she asks, "Should we have a *look*?" in the opening scene. This idea of looking is often promoted in the digital realm (and in removed observation of artefacts and in other forms of engagement with the world). Through incorporating the whole body, including sight, the visitor is encouraged to engage in the tactile and kinaesthetic (movement), so to encourage a greater embodied encounter with the museum, instead of only looking.[6]

This notion of participation of the audience is central to museum theatre's aims by encouraging the opportunity for activity and participation which involves the attendants engaging with the exhibitions so that they are involved in learning about the past in some respect. Performance is not the only technique for encouraging interaction in museum spaces, but it is one which offers a three-dimensionality which gives the visitor an opportunity to "do" rather than just receive, aiding in memory-making and interest generation. People tend to learn about or engage with information more readily when it involves the opportunity to do. Studies have shown that opportunities that encourage learning-by-doing assist in greater memory retention, with school-going learners remembering 90 percent of what was learned through learning-by-doing versus only seeing, reading about, or hearing about the activity.[7] Activity thus helps attendants to become invested in what they are experiencing. I note that the inclusion of opportunities for empathy, feeling with others which performance fosters, allows "the narratives and the people and their situations depicted [to] become real for the learners [and other museum visitors], and are not just something that happened in the past unrelated to them."[8] Thus, moments of interaction on behalf of the attendant, both through activity and deeper emotional connection, assists in fostering links to the exhibition and those visiting.

3. Objects and textiles: Tactile artistic creation through *Unwrapped*

One manner to explore embodiment further is through encouraging the possibility for tactile interactions (touch) to be included in the experience of the museum. Tactile not only covers touching objects but also using the body in performance to move around galleries and create and interact with characters, thus, encouraging opportunities for interaction between bodies and objects. The inclusion of touch in participatory activities within the action of a museum theatre performance was observed in *Unwrapped.* This museum theatre case study was staged in *Bokgabo ba mašela: The Art of Textiles* exhibition in the University of Pretoria Museums, South Africa, in 2025. The audience booked to attend the event and were aware that they were going to watch and engage with a performance around the textiles displayed in the gallery, particularly focusing on those created by various South African female artists. The performance engaged with a selection of five displayed textile works through creating a performed vignette around each artwork. All five vignettes were linked together to create a cohesive 45-minute performance, with the aim of exploring the story behind each of the five textiles and their artist/s. Five post-graduate University of Pretoria Drama students (who from here on will be referred to as student-performers) acted in the work and created various artworks as part of the performance process, including sculptures,

[6] Jenkins 2021.
[7] Dinesh 2016, 8.
[8] Jenkins 2021, 140.

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poetry, and photographs, that were incorporated into and displayed as part of the performance, and will be briefly discussed further on.

The performance experience, thus, involved five performed vignettes that were created using various theatrical techniques including singing, the playing of a drum, poetry and characterisation. Creating characters was one of the primary ways the performance conveyed the story of the textiles by having the student-performers playing the characters of each of the five artist/s. This characterisation included voicing sections of verbatim text taken from secondary sources in which the words of the artists had previously been recorded and subsequently transcribed into the performance. The student-performers effectively enacted the words spoken by the artists as a means to provide greater insight into each of the five artworks through performing the words of the artist in character. The student-performers used a combination of first-person narration and third-person narration. First person (in which the student-performers spoke as the artist, using "I" and "me") was used to embody the artists. They also moved in and out of character (as they also played multiple characters and did not remain in role) to provide commentary around the artwork by raising questions, such as how we read and receive art. This was delivered in the third person, by referring to the artist/s and artwork/s as she/them/it, as an outside observer.

An example of verbatim that was used in the performance is seen through the theatrical creation of the character of Allina Ndebele, who is the artist of the artwork explored in the first-performed vignette: *The Feast* (2000) (see Figure 1).[9] The student-performer who played Ndebele, spoke to the artist's discovery of what inspired her artistically, in Ndebele's own words:

> I felt very little satisfaction when following fixed patterns or working out the themes that teachers provided me with. I could feel that was not my thing. When they told me to make a jungle, everything changed. … I could see animals and birds. I could hear the sounds and feel the heat. I wished I could continue forever.[10]

The earlier section of verbatim was enacted by a student-performer who voiced the artist's intentions in character, alongside scripted observations provided by the other student-performers as part of the performed vignette. The intention was to allow the audience to learn more about the displayed artworks and have a glimpse into the artist's intentions as interpreted by the student-performers. The student-performers embodied a number of roles enabling them to move in and out of character, and at times speaking as themselves, to add their own insights, observations, and stories around cloth and the artworks.

Activity, thus, became a central part of the creation and dissemination of the performance, both on behalf of the student-performers and the audience members who attended the performance. Before the play was staged, the student-performers grappled with the artworks on display as part of their preparation. This involved creating their own artworks through a series of workshops to form a conversation with what they created in response to what was already in the gallery (see Figures 2 and 3). Three workshops were held in which the students were asked to create and respond artistically. In the first, the students' contributions involved creating a cloth sculpture made out of scrap fabric that was created

[9] Allina Ndebele (1939–) is a South African artist widely known for her weaving and textile artistry. Her artwork, *The Feast* made out of wool, depicts a community in celebration during a time of plenty.

[10] Ndebele in Burmann 2000, 156.

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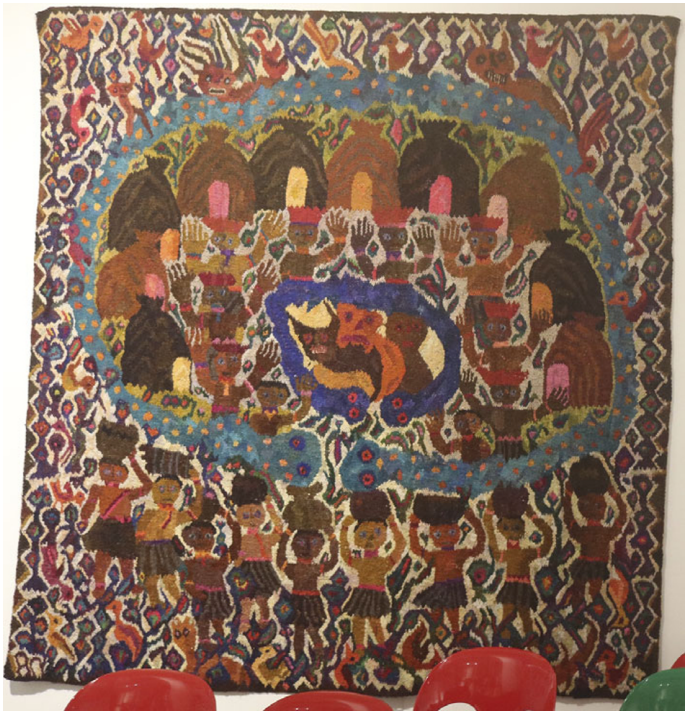


Figure 1. *The Feast* (2001) by Allina Ndebele as part of the *Bokgabo ba Mašela: The Art of Textiles* exhibition. Author's personal collection.



Figure 2. Five display stations, each showcasing the five Drama student's artistic creations. Author's personal collection.

through a series of prompts that the student-performers explored in relation to their own memories with cloth. Their second task was to take photos of the cloth sculpture in various spaces that had personal significance to the student-performer. One of the photos was then

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Figure 3. Drama student Caitlyn Ancillotti's display station, showcasing her cloth sculpture, photograph, and poem. Author's personal collection.

subsequently displayed with the cloth sculpture in the museum, as an additional part of the already existing exhibition.

Beyond being displayed, these artistic creations also formed part of the performance, with poems being incorporated into the dialogue and the cloth items being used as props. The third and last workshop task included the writing of a poem in response to one of the five textile works around which the performance engaged. These poems were integrated into the script of *Unwrapped* and delivered by the student-performers as part of the performance in the corresponding vignette. The performance, thus, acted as a vehicle for the student-performers' artworks to come into contact with the audience members who experienced the student-performers' stories, memories, and creations in relation to the official displayed artworks through live performance. This performance process also helped the student-performers to engage with and learn about the existing artworks by portraying the artists and enacting the stories behind the artworks creations. Artistic creation, through transforming pieces of cloth with the hands, thus, facilitated the connection of the gallery space and its contents back to those part of the performance experience.

The student-performers were not the only ones who were encouraged to create, as the audience was also given the opportunity to engage with cloth tactilely through interactive activities encouraged during the performance. These participatory audience activities revolved around the use of a memory board, which effectively became a collective tapestry created by those who viewed the performance (see Figure 4). The audience was encouraged to pin pieces of provided cloth to the memory board at various points during the performance (three occasions in total, each introduced by the student-performers), connecting what had happened in the previous performed vignette to the personal life of the attendant. While the audience was not asked to perform in *Unwrapped*, they were asked to get out of their seats and collectively write phrases and/or fold and pin cloth to the board as a way of leaving a memory or observation on the board. Most audience member chose not to engage in words but rather through the creation of shapes out of cloth that they pinned to the board to symbolically stand for a memory evoked by performance.

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Figure 4. A close up of some of the cloth and written pieces pinned to the memory board. Author's personal collection.

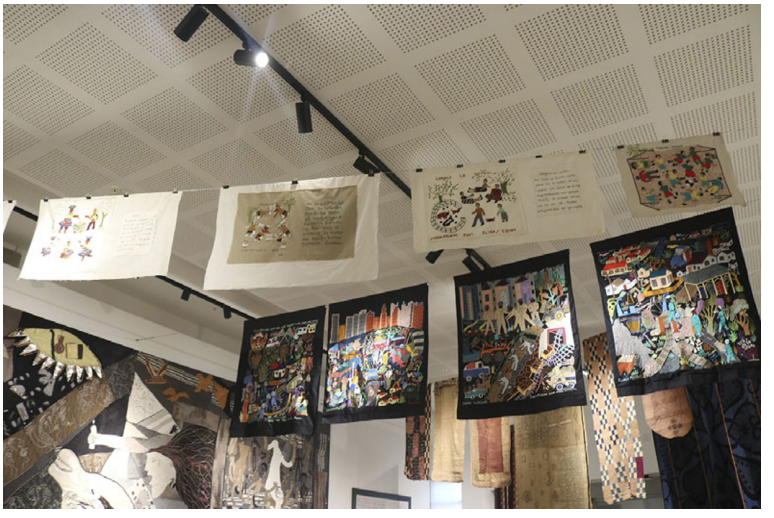


Figure 5. Mapula (with the black background) and Mogalakwena (with the white background) story clothes as part of the *Bokgabo ba mašela: The Art of Textiles* exhibition. Author's personal collection.

An example of a vignette that the audience responded to via the memory board, revolved around the Mogalakwena and Mapula Story Cloths (2000–2015) (see Figures 5 and 6). These artworks were created by several women who belonged to the Mogalakwena and Mapula communities in Gauteng, South Africa, where they used the art of textiles to create cloth archives in which they recorded aspects of their everyday lives, including their struggles and daily activities. These cloths, while a few do contain words, are not reliant on writing as pictures become the primary mode of expression, allowing opportunities for storytelling beyond literacy. The cloths effectively became a platform on which the artists found a

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Figure 6. The five Drama student actors standing beneath the story cloths. Author's personal collection.

way "to leave 'written' traces of themselves" on cloth, and thus share aspects of their stories.[11]

During this performed vignette around the story cloths, a prompt was given to the audience by the student-performers asking them to attach part of their own personal stories to the memory board through their piece of cloth, which too was acting as a form of archive. The following is a short poem, followed by the prompt, taken from *Unwrapped*:

> This [the story cloths] is a form of archive.
>
> > Please, leave your mark here
> > an eternal memory
> > Proof of you and me.[12]
>
> Would you like to contribute [parts of your own story] to the board adding some words, using the paper and pens, and/or bits of cloth to our tapestry—to our story cloth.

The audience was then encouraged to take cloth pieces and sticky notes and pin cloth shapes that stood for personal memories onto the board. An example of two of the responses pinned to the board read: "Remember your heritage" sticking out of a cloth envelope and "Heuwels & Berge" which translates to hills and mountains, with a pictorial depiction of an escarpment (see Figure 7). While these stories and cloth creations are personal to those who pinned them there, thus the wider context may be absent for us now as the readers, the audience tapestry nevertheless acted as a place for these contributions to be held alongside others, to collectively and artistically share in what was being experienced in the gallery. These contributions became part of the storytelling process in which the various cloth creations

[11] Van der Merwe 2015, 794.

[12] An example of a short poem included in the script. "Archive" by UP Drama student Bianca Janse van Vuuren.

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Figure 7. A close up of the cloth envelope containing the written contribution "Remember your heritage" and "Heuwels and Berge" (bottom left).

—by artist, student-performer, and audience—were all in conversation in some respect with one another. While photos were taken of the memory board, the audience responses were not collected for data purpose. Rather the memory board was used as a means to encourage opportunities for activity, with a particular emphasis on connecting the personal memories of the audience members back to the artworks. Thus, continuing the conversation set up by the personal engagement of the student-performers with the artworks, allowing the audience to also engage with cloth and memory during the performance by leaving parts of their own stories in the space as well.

The memory board's contents grew as more performances were staged, showing the audience's contribution to their own "tapestry" as the days passed. Pieces of each audience member who chose to participate, evoking the personal, were left in the gallery alongside the pieces made by the artists displayed in the gallery. The three-dimensionality of the gallery, the notion of the space between the works, and those experiencing them, is emphasised in the performance as people shared the space with other attendants and the student-performers, rather than only viewing the work through a screen. The presence of the body in the space, among the exhibited items, becomes central to the embodied experience. By participating through a creative process, the artworks were seen through a possible new light as the attendants connected their own lives to the stories of the artworks that were touched on through the performance.

4. The "live-now" in conversation with the "then-past"

The museum, thus, is a space alive with stories that affect us now in the present and thus should not be viewed by potential museum visitors, such as Karabo and Amelia, as simply a

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space of "dead things" as mentioned by Karabo in the opening dialogue. Instead the "liveness" of the museum is one of its greatest assets and, therefore, performance works well in exploring what has already happened in the past to address the present consequences of these events. Live performance unfolds in the present and is ephemeral (passing by, never to be repeated exactly the same again), just like history, and so the live moment is utilised in museum theatre as a way to bridge the time space continuum by effectively merging the past and the present for a short moment.

While this idea of "time travelling" is not literal, the notion of conversing with the past in the present, through experiential engagement, allows the body to be immersed in the action of the narratives. Space is treated in all its dimensions rather than just through a screen in which what is viewed may be "separate" from the action in the room. Performance, through the idea of the attendant, tries to connect the room and exhibitions to the production and thus back to the attendants. While this article is advocating for in-person, experience-based museum opportunities, the digital still has a role in playing with our interactions with the past and museum spaces and may be integrated into live theatrical experiences too, but it should not take away from the live, communal aspect of cultural and artistic experience. Being with others and in contact with the exhibits is an important part of a museum visit. Therefore, the act of communing with others in the present, through experiential museum theatre, is one way to encourage the body to engage with the space and the historical narratives in a manner that encourages memory making and active learning. The body is, thus, a critical element of active participation which can be utilised to offer an opportunity for alternative museum experiences which the digital cannot fully provide. Therefore, embodiment becomes a critical factor that offers museums the opportunity to connect the exhibitions to those who visit in an interesting learning experience.

Stephanie Jenkins is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Pretoria who is interested in how performance can be used in museum and historical spaces, specifically around historical and artistic objects, to generate personal and present connections and memories to the past.

Author contribution. Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing: S.J.

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