



A Journey into the Uncharted

A Theatrical Collaboration
Between Punchdrunk and
the National Maritime Museum

Stuart Frost



PAUL COCHRANE

left

Arthur Ambrose, one of the “museum curators” in *Against Captain’s Orders*. Here, he explains to the children how “Big Bertha”—the machine that controls collection storage—works.



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fig. 1.

The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

Introduction

In the summer of 2015, the National Maritime Museum (NMM), London ([fig. 1](#)) mounted *Against Captain’s Orders: A Journey into the Uncharted*.¹ This special exhibition was created by Punchdrunk, an immersive theater company based in London that works internationally. They are known for site-specific shows, promenade productions in unusual buildings filled with vast immersive sets; each audience member creates their own unique experience as they follow performers over a show’s duration. In this instance the show was developed by Punchdrunk Enrichment, a team that specializes in working with communities and schools, creating performances for children and young people.

Unlike many traditional exhibitions at the NMM and elsewhere, which place museum objects center stage, this show relied on Punchdrunk’s actors, theatrical storytelling techniques, and immersive set designs to create a believable but fictitious museum world and a participatory experience. The 50-minute performance/exhibition hybrid was targeted not at a typical special exhibition target audience—adults—but at families with children aged 6 to 12 and schools. Adults without children were not

¹ For more information, see Royal Museums Greenwich, Past Exhibitions, *Against Captain’s Orders: A Journey into the Uncharted*, March 28–August 31, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.rmg.co.uk/see-do/exhibitions-events/past/against-captains-orders>. A short film about the exhibition is available online at Punchdrunk Enrichment, *Against Captain’s Orders*, accessed March 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YymSj...PB3g>.

allowed to visit.² By the time it completed its five-month run, *Against Captain's Orders* had compellingly illustrated that collaboration with an external creative partner is one way to drive innovation and to develop new audiences through rethinking conventional exhibition programming.

Special exhibitions have a long history, but they have been arguably quite a conservative medium, particularly in national museums in the United Kingdom. In recent years, object-centered exhibitions have become increasingly narrative driven, visitor focused and ambitious in design, but beneath the surface the basic elements often remain similar to shows from previous decades. Because *Against Captain's Orders* was a significant departure from the typical object-rich, curatorially driven exhibition, I wanted to find out more about how it originated, how it was developed, and the impact it had on staff and visitors. This article draws on interviews I conducted with key people from the collaborating organizations. At Punchdrunk, I spoke with Enrichment Director Peter Higgin and Producer Alex Rowse; at the National Maritime Museum, I spoke with Sarah Lockwood, Head of Learning & Interpretation, and Mike Sarna, Director of Collections & Public Engagement. These interviews explored the origins of the project, the challenges of the collaboration from both parties' perspectives, and the main lessons that the participants took away from the experience.

Museums and Theater Companies: Co-Creation and Collaboration

Collaborating with external creative partners has become increasingly common in British

2 Although adults were only allowed to visit if accompanied by a child, a limited number of adults-only evening sessions were run for National Maritime Museum members and Punchdrunk keyholders.

museums in recent years; in particular, the relationships between the worlds of museums and theater have become especially close, a trend that has been commented upon in professional museum journals and academic literature.³ Recently, a number of high-profile collaborations have taken the synergy to a new level.

For example, the 2012 British Museum exhibition *Shakespeare: Staging the World* was a collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).⁴ While the exhibition itself was in many ways a traditional research-driven, object-rich installation, its interpretive framework adopted imaginative interpretive strategies to integrate Shakespeare's spoken words and performance into the visitor experience. These intangible aspects were considered to be as important as the objects, and RSC's expertise played a crucial role in realizing the exhibition's vision. RSC designer Tom Piper was part of the team that developed the concept for the exhibition design. RSC actors were filmed performing short extracts from Shakespeare's plays to illustrate key themes in the exhibition's sections (fig. 2). And live performances of specially commissioned pieces also took place within the exhibition as part of public programming (fig. 3).

3 For example, see Nicola Sullivan, "Trendswatch: Acting Up," *Museums Journal*, May 1, 2015, 40–41. Rebecca Atkinson, "Theatrical Approaches," *Museum Practice*, March 17, 2013, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/theatrical-approaches-to-museums/15072013-theatrical-approaches>. Also, see Paul Bowers, "Stage Struck," *Museum Practice*, July 15, 2013, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/theatrical-approaches-to-museums/15072013-stage-struck>.

4 The exhibition was part of the World Shakespeare Festival, and was developed for the London 2012 Festival for the Olympic Games. See The British Museum website, Past Exhibitions, *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, July 19–November 25, 2012, accessed March 8, 2016, http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/shakespeare_staging_the_world.aspx. For further information, see Jonathan Bate and Dora Thornton, *Shakespeare: Staging the world* (London: British Museum Press, 2012).



fig. 2.

An example of the use of film in the exhibition *Shakespeare: Staging the World*. Here the Royal Shakespeare Company actor Paterson Joseph recites lines spoken by Brutus in the play *Julius Caesar*.



fig. 3.

Actors performing David Leddy's *Thin Air* in the *Shakespeare: Staging the World* exhibition as part of special, late-evening viewings for visitors.

Theater collaborations have also become more frequent and more ambitious in the wider heritage sector in the UK. Between 2010 and 2012, for example, Historic Royal Palaces (an independent charity that cares for six important sites) reinterpreted Kensington Palace—a royal residence from 1689 onwards—in conjunction with Wildworks. The British theater company, which specializes in site-specific performances, blended history, fashion, and

performance in *Enchanted Palace*, which offered a “mysterious and atmospheric world for visitors to explore...bringing...the historic royal residence dramatically to life.”⁵

5 For more information, see Wildworks, Past Projects, *The Enchanted Palace*, 2010–12, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://wildworks.biz/projects/the-enchanted-palace/>. Also, see Historic Royal Palaces, Past Exhibitions, *Princesses*, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.hrp.org.uk/exhibition-archive/princesses/>. For a fuller discussion, see Alexandra Kim, “The ‘Enchanted Palace’ at Kensington,” *Curator* 54, no. 4 (2011): 403–412; Joanna Marschner and Sue Hill, *Enchanted Palace* (London: Historic Royal Palaces, 2011).

The grand State Apartments were filled with “fantastical, fairy-tale-like interventions,” including a forest of birch trees and installations created by British fashion designers. Visitors navigated the historic interiors on a quest that was designed to be emotionally engaging and text light, eschewing graphic panels and traditional text-driven interpretation. Actors used performance and storytelling to interact with the public (fig. 4).⁶

***Against Captain’s Orders:* Creating a Deeply Immersive Experience**

Although *Shakespeare: Staging the World* had a high degree of theatricality, it was still primarily an object-driven experience for an established, adult, museum-going audience.⁷

6 Kim, “‘The Enchanted Palace’ at Kensington,” 408.

7 Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, “‘Thereby hangs a tale.’ Exploring visitor responses to Shakespeare: Staging the World at the British Museum” (unpublished report, 2013).

Enchanted Palace also adopted a more dramatic interpretive approach to create a visitor-led journey through authentic period rooms to find out about the real people who lived in them with the aim of reaching new audiences. *Against Captain’s Orders* took a more extreme approach, taking the theatrical elements to a new level altogether, creating a completely fictitious environment and a visitor experience that was actor-led from start to finish.

The National Maritime Museum’s target audiences for *Against Captain’s Orders* were families and schools; this is unusual for major admission-charging exhibitions at national museums, which typically target adults. Rather than offering a conventional, object-centered exhibition, the museum used immersive sets to divide its special exhibition space into smaller rooms. Free of museum objects, display cases, and label texts, the exhibition relied entirely

fig. 4.

“Detectors” in *Enchanted Palace*, Kensington Palace. Actor-led storytelling and performance were a central part of the visitor experience.



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fig. 5.

Here, the character Glan Owens talks to the children, who wear their team's life vest. From *Against Captain's Orders* at the National Maritime Museum.

on Punchdrunk's actors and set designs to create an inspiring experience in which the visitors were active participants. The focus was primarily on visitor outcomes and experience, rather than on the delivery of curatorial knowledge or research.

On arrival at the museum, before going downstairs to the exhibition space, staff handed each visitor a life vest. Its markings placed them in one of HMS *Adventure's* four teams: Ship's Watch, Navigation, Midshipmen, or Salvage.

Visitors then made their way to the exhibition entrance, where they were met by the first of two characters, a museum curator named Arthur Ambrose. Arthur's more impulsive colleague, Glan Owens, arrived shortly afterwards. The teams entered the special exhibition space, and were seated in one of four small boat-shaped installations in front of a wooden jetty. Each boat contained a tall, thin, circular case with a single "museum" object: a sextant, a glass bottle from a shipwreck, a telescope, or a pair of drumsticks. As each group explores their object through the sheet of notes provided about it, it becomes apparent that one object—the glass bottle—contains a note inside it that hadn't been noticed before by the curators. A discussion ensues, and

Glan and Arthur argue about whether they should open the case and take the note out of the bottle to investigate. Glan persuades the ship's crew to open the case. Alarms then sound, lights flash, and all of the teams' objects disappear in the ensuing confusion (intro image & fig. 5). Arthur tells the participants the objects have been recalled to the museum's central collection storage facility.

The rest of the visit required the participants to save Arthur and Glan's jobs by working together to recover the objects before the museum authorities notice that they are missing. Glan and Arthur lead the participants through sets that represent the museum's collection storage area in a race against time. As part of the drama, Arthur becomes separated from the group and is locked in a room in the storage facility without any apparent hope of rescue. In the end, the teams successfully recover the objects, the participants find themselves back where their adventure started and they are reunited with Arthur.

An announcement over a loudspeaker reveals that the message in the bottle was a test—and one that the group has passed. The main message is this: understanding the past requires us to actively interrogate

fig. 6.

The Flotsam and Jetsam Room contains the museum's collection of messages in bottles, reflecting the lost hopes and dreams of the people who made them.



artifacts, not just passively preserve them. And sometimes, it is necessary to take risks and to challenge perceived wisdom to do so—in other words, to go against captain's orders. The show ended with a rousing conclusion spoken by one of the actors, one that was designed to inspire participants to go back into the museum proper and explore its collections in the permanent galleries with new eyes.

How the Concept Developed

NMM developed *Against Captain's Orders* as part of a three-year strategic plan for exhibitions, which allocated the museum's special exhibitions summer slot to family-focused shows, and the winter slot to adult-oriented ones.⁸ The idea of collaborating with Punchdrunk came from NMM's Learning & Interpretation Department rather than the curatorial department, and arose from a series of brainstorming meetings to generate ideas for exhibitions. Traditionally, it has been the case in many national museums and art galleries that it is the curatorial departments that develop and put forward exhibition proposals, but *Against Captain's Orders* demonstrates

the value in adopting an inclusive, cross-departmental approach. Punchdrunk Enrichment responded positively to the NMM's initial approach and further meetings took place with the museum's Mike Sarna and Sarah Lockwood. The NMM wanted to develop an approach that generated enthusiasm for museums, and that privileged emotional outcomes over intellectual messages focused on specific subject matter. And, since primary schools (grades 5 to 11) were a core audience, it was essential that the experience supported teachers delivering the National Curriculum. The exhibition experience was, therefore, developed to facilitate cross-curricular work, rather than being focused too tightly on any particular subject or part of the collection.

Punchdrunk's creative team was inspired by a visit to the museum's off-site collections storage area, filled with countless objects that lacked interpretation but "oozed stories."⁹ From this visit, they generated the idea of taking the audience behind the scenes to explore the museum's "secrets." Although the NMM was open to Punchdrunk using any part of the museum site, the theater company preferred the rectangular, special

8 Rebecca Atkinson, "National Maritime Museum enlists Punchdrunk to create theatrical experience," *Museum Practice*, February 10, 2015, accessed July 27, 2016, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/new-practice/10022015-nmm-creates-immersive-experience-with-punchdrunk>.

9 Claire Allfree, "All aboard the National Maritime Museum's new interactive kids' show," *Telegraph*, April 2, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/11505877/Punchdrunk-childrens-show-at-National-Maritime-Museum.html>.

exhibition gallery usually used for object-driven shows. This black box gave them greater freedom to create the spectacular sets for which they are renowned, and to plan and tightly choreograph an experience that had to accommodate two groups in different parts of the space at the same time (figs. 6 & 7). Once the broad concept and space were agreed upon by the NMM and the Punchdrunk Enrichment team, work on developing the final script and the detailed set design progressed.

Project Challenges and Institutional Benefits

The distinct working practices of Punchdrunk and the NMM inevitably created challenges and tensions, and required a give and take. Punchdrunk, for example, generally works to shorter lead-in times, and usually has complete control over a performance space. The museum's longer schedule and planning time for its exhibitions, and its multi-stakeholder sign-off processes required Punchdrunk to adapt. Likewise, the museum also had to think differently.

The NMM's project manager had to create back-of-house spaces for the actors adjacent to the exhibition space, in a building that was not designed with this function in mind. And, while most special exhibition project teams relax once installation is complete and a show opens to the public, maintaining a vast, complex theater set for five months required a different mindset. This culture clash was much like the one at Kensington Palace, where the process of working on *Enchanted Palace* with Wildworks was described by Michael Day (the chief executive of Historic Royal Palaces) as "artistically exhilarating but organizationally challenging."¹⁰

¹⁰ Kim, "The Enchanted Palace' at Kensington," 406.

Designing an immersive, believable experience that worked for families was also demanding. The different age ranges and the diversity of children's backgrounds meant that inevitably, their response to the exhibition varied. A small proportion of children became so engrossed in the performance that they became distressed at emotionally heightened moments, and the staff had to put in place arrangements to extract upset youngsters. Some older children displayed an unhelpful degree of cynicism. These factors meant that the actors had to be exceptionally flexible and adaptable in dealing with a myriad of variables to ensure that each show kept to schedule and time.



STEPHEN DOBBIE

fig. 7.

The Main Dispatch Room in *Against Captain's Orders*. This is the room to which the museum's collection is recalled when the alarm is triggered at the start of the show.

The show's uniqueness meant that it was a challenging proposition to market it to the public and to present to the media; giving away too much of the plot would have diminished the impact.¹¹ While the show attracted significant national press coverage, many of the reviews were by theater critics rather than museum correspondents. Some theater reviewers seem to have failed to appreciate that *Against Captain's Orders* required a substantially different approach to Punchdrunk's usual, adult-oriented shows where the audience wears masks and is free to wander through the sets.¹²

While these were all significant challenges, there were many gains. *Against Captain's Orders* was conceived as part of a strategic vision to develop the National Maritime Museum's audience with younger visitors and encourage greater awareness of the museum as venue for creative programming. The collaboration seems to have been successful on both counts; Punchdrunk's reputation played a significant role in encouraging visits from families who might not otherwise have considered the NMM as a destination. The exhibition did achieve the break-even targets set for it, a significant achievement given the pioneering nature of the project and the relatively high ticket price—although in any case, any exhibition's success needs to be judged on wider criteria than visitor numbers and income generation.

11 The evaluation for *Shakespeare: Staging the World* reveals similar challenges for this atypical exhibition.

12 For example, see Michael Billington, "Against Captain's Orders Review—Punchdrunk's voyage runs aground," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/15/against-captains-orders-national-maritime-museum-review>. Also, see Fiona Mountford, "Punchdrunk's Against Captain's Orders Theatre Review: a confused 50 minutes," *Evening Standard*, April 16, 2015, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/punchdrunks-against-captains-orders-theatre-review-10180960.html>.

The project seems to have had some significant institutional impacts. The NMM's Sarah Lockwood and Mike Sarna both described the liberating and stimulating effect of collaborating with Punchdrunk, and both feel the level of creativity in thinking about programming has increased internally as a result. They also feel it has encouraged a more critical approach to the more traditional use of actor-led interpretation across the NMM site, just as working with Wildworks on *Enchanted Palace* seems to have had a transformative impact at Kensington Palace, where Historic Royal Palace staff resolved not to "go back to the quiet, didactic interpretation" that was there before.¹³

Conclusions

Against Captain's Orders was a dramatic, highly immersive experience that differed radically from NMM's usual exhibitions, and most traditional museum exhibitions at object-rich institutions. It was unusual, and arguably farsighted, in that it prioritized both emotional outcomes and young people. Schools and families—with some exceptions—are not always prioritized in exhibition programming in the UK's national museums, an oversight with potentially damaging long-term implications for audiences where this is the case. As existing audiences age, museums and galleries need to attract and inspire younger audiences to support them in future decades.¹⁴

13 Kim, "'The Enchanted Palace' at Kensington," 411.

14 This is certainly the case at the British Museum, where visitors aged 55 and above form a substantial part of the special exhibitions audience. For *Shakespeare: Staging the World*, for example, 48% of visitors fell into this age bracket, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, "'Thereby hangs a tale': Exploring visitor responses to *Shakespeare: Staging the World* at the British Museum" (unpublished report, 2013), 16.

Although special exhibitions are evolving in the UK, becoming more immersive, more narrative driven, and more experiential in response to audience expectations, intellectual motivations and outcomes are still typically privileged over those that are more social, emotional, or attitudinal.¹⁵ The long-term impact of museum visiting is under researched, but studies show that emotional experiences tend to linger longer in the memory.¹⁶ The full impact and legacy of *Against Captain's Orders* may only become apparent years from now, as the children who experienced it, and carry with them vivid emotional memories of their visit, grow older.

Special exhibitions in large, established museums, and object-driven permanent displays, arguably tend to be characterized by gradual evolution rather than major paradigm shifts, and much current practice is shaped by models that were developed decades ago. However, if the boundaries of what a special exhibition is—and who it is for—are not challenged, then surely exhibitions risk becoming less relevant and of interest only to a small proportion of a potential audience. *Against Captain's Orders* illustrates the potential for collaboration with an external creative partner to drive innovation, enabling a museum to think differently, to overcome institutional inertia, and to reach out and enthuse new audiences. ■

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Stuart Frost is Head of Interpretation & Volunteers at the British Museum in London, England.
sfrost@britishmuseum.org

¹⁵ For a summary of recent thinking about motivations for museum visiting, see John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009). Pine and Gilmore have argued that we are now in an experience-dominated economy where consumers demand and value emotional experiences, not just services or commodities. See B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard School Press, 1999).

¹⁶ For a summary of long-term impact studies see David Anderson, Martin Storksdieck, Michael Spock, "Understanding the Long-Term Impacts of Museum Experiences" in *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions*, ed. John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, Susan Foutz (Plymouth: Altamira Press, 2007), 197–216.