

Going Live

Live events are often regarded as the most effective form of interpretation. In this article, Past Pleasures share their experience of how clients might commission a live interpretation company.

Live interpretation is a young profession. We have been going for the better part of fifteen years and as a result are considered a veteran in the business. Our experience suggests how you might work with companies delivering live interpretation - but do be aware that others in the sector may have a different approach.

All clients have a time and a place...

It is important to have enough lead-time. Most live interpreters plan their summer season the winter before. Luckily, so does the heritage industry. A bespoke event, tailored for a specific client at a specific venue, should be commissioned at least a month in advance (but longer is better!). The larger the event, the deeper the research and the more lead-time will be required. Conversely, an off-the-peg performance (a Punch and Judy show, for example) might be dropped in at a week's notice.

A preliminary meeting should include a site visit. An interpreter sees and hears things (hazards, opportunities) with an interpreter's eyes and ears. Perfect backdrops, natural amphitheatres, period-shoe trip hazards, acoustic nightmares and the like will all affect the event.

Most clients have an idea...

A good brief should be sufficiently defined to provide a structure, but without being so rigidly detailed as to preclude creative input. Clarity of purpose coupled with open-mindedness should be the goal in producing the brief.

No client ever has enough money...

Live interpretation can be expensive, and a two-handed weekend event can cost £1,500. However, that would include management, organisation, costume hire expenses, and character/period research and development. A highly specialised event may require an additional research budget, and bespoke performances will require rehearsal and development fees. Management overheads do not need to rise in proportion to the scale of an event, and long-running or serial events will eventually defray set-up costs, particularly if a local 'team' is recruited and trained. The advantage of working in this way is that the client owns a product that is tailor-made.

In terms of performers, more is usually better. One interpreter can lead a guided tour or tell stories, but not continuously for more than a couple of hours. For presentations, 'scenes' and theatre, dialogue and contention (between sexes, ranks, periods) are better

than monologue. Two interpreters can cover a day between them and ensure a consistent visual presence. But three interpreters can create dramatic opportunities out of all proportion to their number. Moreover, historically and dramatically, status is created by coterie. A lady of quality should not go without a maid. A king, to seem a king, must have his court (or some of them, at least). The nature of live interpretation is such that the visitors will be given, or will adopt roles in relation to the interpreter. But character attendants speak volumes about class and power without so much as opening their mouths.

And then...

Assuming that the date, venue, nature, scale and budget for the event have been settled, what next? To encourage improvisation and interaction, and to avoid sterility, we work from storyboards based around the research and in-house workshops, themed in accordance with whatever learning targets have been agreed. The degree to which the client is involved in the development of those storyboards is up to them. Although we are happy to research independently, curatorial expertise is eagerly sought. If the client has a script already, that is our template. We are, after all, the medium, not the message.

The choice of characters may well be defined by the nature of the event, but where the choice is less obvious, we encourage a range of dramatic 'points of view' that are between them as characteristic and typical of their time as possible. Again the degree to which the client determines the characters is up to them.

An example...

In 2003, the National Army Museum commissioned us to provide a weekend Christmas event supporting a new exhibition about the Crimean War. Amongst other entertainments, we were asked to provide a play. In a meeting with the museum's education officer, a farce described in Florence Nightingale's correspondence as "suitable reading material for convalescent soldiers" was mentioned. Partly funded by the museum, we then sourced, assessed, edited, rehearsed, produced and performed a unique piece of bespoke Victoriana.

Working with live interpretation in this way can take you and your audience to unexpected and creative places.

Tristan Langlois, Past Pleasures Ltd.

"Overacting. It is so much more real than life."

Oscar Wilde, playwright (1854 - 1900)