



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Journal of Biological Curation

Title: Beetling down to the jungle: a drama for the rainforest

Author(s): Davis, P.

Source: Davis, P. (1989). Beetling down to the jungle: a drama for the rainforest. *Journal of Biological Curation*, Volume 1 Number 1, 21 - 26.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1032>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Beetling down to the jungle: a drama for the rainforest

Peter Davis

The Hancock Museum, The University, Newcastle upon Tyne. NE2 4PT

The idea

'What we need is a role playing exercise, a drama, a jungle drama!' I announced.

John looked out of the window, searching for stray bats. Julian began to develop an over-riding interest in his shoelaces. Glyn grumbled that we had no experience in such things; he didn't mind mask-making, or showing children live animals, but taking part in a play - well, that was quite another matter! Fortunately, there was some enthusiasm for the idea, and eventually we agreed that we'd try and seek some advice locally, and bring back some information to our next staff meeting.



Fig 1. Magnificent masks.

All this took place in late May, when we had decided to capitalise on the success of our current exhibition on the Rain Forest (borrowed from York - thanks to Paul Howard) by holding a 'Jungleweek' for children during the first week of the school summer holidays. This co-incided nicely with BCG's 'Beetle-down....' week, and publicity for it was guaranteed by persuading our local newspaper, the Newcastle Journal, to act as sponsors; we agreed to call our event 'Journal Jungledays', in return the paper gave us advanced coverage and printed the booking forms each Saturday for a month prior to the event.

The majority of the activities were relatively easy to organise; the 30 or so pre-booked children would be met in the entrance hall by a friendly gorilla who would extract their entrance fee (£1) and lead them on to be face-painted as jungle animals. The three hour session would then begin with a brief slide-show on the rain forest and its inhabitants, with a strong conservation message. Then, dividing the children into two groups, one would take part in a mask-making session using stencils of butterflies and lots of colourful, messy paint. Meanwhile the second group would meet live animals, including tarantulas, stick insects and an Indian python. They'd then swop activities, and afterwards come together to draw animals - both the live ones and mounted specimens from the collections. After a break for 'junglejuice' everyone would be encouraged to take part in the 'Jungledrama', following which they would receive a badge depicting a jungle animal on their way home, and we would collapse. This all sounds very easy. It wasn't.

Creating the environment

We had realised at the outset that for the week to be succesful we needed to create a jungle for the activities to take place in. Consequently our lecture theatre was stripped of its benches, and a small army of MSC staff and volunteers, guided by Dave Hall our Designer, began to prepare a giant rainforest mural around three sides of the room. The 'ends of roll' paper for this were again supplied by our Fairy Godmother, the Journal. A number of 'trees' (ie painted 4x2) quickly sprouted from the floor, and I mounted a raid on the local barracks of the Queens Own Yeomanry, coming away with sufficient camouflage netting to create a canopy. (It did cross my mind that if we went to war in the next few weeks some of our tanks could be a bit exposed, but that the Museum could be made a good bunker). More atmosphere was created by introducing a sound system with a continuous tape loop of jungle noises. The stage was set...well, almost...

The jungledrama evolves

Our quest for advice led us to the headquarters of the Drama Advisors for North Tyneside Education Authority. Far from being sceptical, which we had honestly expected, they were very helpful indeed, and even confessed that they had themselves wanted to create a drama based on the destruction of the rainforest, having been visitors to the museum, and realising the interest that had been shown by schools in the 'Jungle' exhibition. They explained the way they approached role play with large classes of children, and pointed out the need to keep control by careful scripting, and always to be prepared for the unexpected. We then outlined our ideas for the plot, essentially taking 'an expedition' to the jungle, where the children would meet and interact with 'an expert', and a 'developer' in the form of an official from the Forests Department. This we felt would enable us to explain the scientific importance of the forest, the fact that it is home to millions of people who make wise use of it for food, shelter and medicine, and give the opportunity to expand on the issues of rainforest destruction which we had touched on in our slide show. There was one major problem with this idea, the fact that our expedition could not be thirty strong - the jungle we were exploring was very small. So how could we involve all the children in the drama? One of the advisors came up with the idea of making the expedition relatively small, about eight children, chosen for their outgoing personalities; the remainder (those who might have been relegated to the role of audience) would observe the activities in the jungle from space in the role of aliens - it would be their judgement which would decide the fate of the rainforest. This seemed a sound suggestion, this way every child would have a role to play, and the fact that the youngsters had to make a decision about rainforests at the end added spice; the presence



Fig 2. The expedition finds Henri in the jungle.



Fig 3. The starship lands.

of aliens also meant that we could create something which would appeal to the children, through costume and face-masks, and creating sound effects using a synthesiser, for their space-ship.

Armed with these ideas, I began to develop the characters and the plot. The limiting factors of space, time and manpower, coupled with my total inexperience of things thespian, made this no easy task. My first efforts were fully dissected and criticised at our staff meetings, and many of the more radical lines posed by the developer (I'd originally wanted to make him a real baddy) erased, and many other useful amendments made. Achieving the right balance in the plot was considered very important, and there was a need to introduce matters of economy, debt and renewable resources. Deciding if children could be expected to play lead roles was discussed; obviously much was going to depend on the children within each group, but we knew that we would have an opportunity to get to know them before we started the drama session. We decided to take the risk and give some of the children major roles.

The number of characters was limited to seven in the first instance; only five members of staff felt willing to make fools of themselves, and we decided that two children might be successfully guided through the event with our help. The two roles allocated to them were the President of the Royal Rainforest Society, who would address the expedition before it set off for the jungle, and the Expedition Leader, Erik (or Ethel) Baker-Colobus, who would be helped with dialogue by one of us planted amongst the expedition members. One staff member would be aboard the spacecraft, to encourage the aliens on board, and to operate the sound and lighting effects in the cockpit. This left three roles to play, the leader of the Vogon (apologies to Douglas Adams) Expedition, Captain Purest-Green, The French anthropologist and Zoologist, Henri Pamplémousse, and the Government Forest Development Officer, Rodrigo Leach.

The basic plot was as follows. With the Vogons (complete with vagon masks and looking quite terrifying) aboard their starship, the scene is set as Herr Kutt, President, RRS, addresses the expedition members. Their leader, having talked to the children, leads them off to the 'stores' to obtain their equipment. Meanwhile, Capt. Purest-Green talks to the Intergalactic Planning Committee about their task ahead. As the starship comes in to land, the expedition then enters the jungle, and begins 'exploring'. Suddenly (!), Erik the leader falls to the ground, having been bitten by the deadly red backed furry spider. There is no antidote in the medical kit, the only hope of keeping Erik alive is to find Henri Pamplémousse; the expedition members begin the search. Henri is found, and of course knows immediately (*Zese cleclair leetle Frergs*) that the cure is leaves of the Yoruba tree. Search and find leaves, return to Erik and administer cure, miraculous recovery (*'Eat eez nurthing mon ami'*), discussion of medicines from the forest. Enter Rodrigo Leech, (*'What are you lot doing in my forest?'*) who announces he is going to cut down the trees to aid his country's economy; expedition tries to convince him this is not a good idea, and takes him off into the forest to prove it. The Vogons receive the advice of their manic and deranged Captain, (*'Shall I activate the lazerpodules and blast 'em now eh?'*) and decide the fate of the rainforest on a show of tentacles. Starship noises, fin.

But would it work?!



Fig 4. The cast!

The trial run

We had approached a school at an early stage to act as guinea-pigs for a jungle session; we felt all along that this would be vital to assess timing, the success of the various activities, the reaction to live animals, and most importantly, to test out the drama session. A week beforehand, a nervous class of eight year olds met an even more worried Hancock staff, as we launched into our trial jungleday. Most of the three hour session went like a dream, the masks were a success, no-one collapsed as the live python made its appearance, the logistics seemed OK. Yes, the slide show was a bit too long, and we hadn't catered too well for sheepdogs to guide nippers back and forth from the toilet, but everything else went smoothly. Except the drama.

It wasn't a complete disaster, although one might consider the childrens' decision to zap planet Earth a retrograde step. We obviously hadn't got the message across. The decision to give children major roles was a mistake - their little voices just couldn't be heard by the Vogons. There was also a crying need to get the Vogons more involved, by giving them more dialogue. Some prompt cards were needed too, to get all the kids saying things. Most importantly, we had to either change the character of Purest-Green, which was aggressive, persuasive and dominant, or add a new character to counteract his Reagan-like stance. So it was back to the drawing board.

The greatest advantage of the trial run proved to be that those members of staff who had originally been content to sit in the wings, having seen the fun that the rest had had doing it, suddenly wanted to be involved. Would-be Vogons crept from the woodwork. Consequently, in the revised and final version, two new characters appeared, and more staff became either Vogons or members of the expedition, so helping the children to

experience the play by prompting them, talking to them, encouraging them. The two new characters were a native guide and healer, Tamandua, to accompany and help Henri, and the counter to Purest-Green, Lord Tharg, Leader of the Intergalactic Planning Committee. We retained the idea of giving children speaking parts, but reduced the number of words dramatically, and always made sure that individual youngsters were shadowed by someone who could help them if necessary. Vogonic involvement was increased by beaming Henri up to the starship for interrogation. Add to this minor variations in movement and dialogue, and we were ready for The West End. Well, the west end of Newcastle anyway.

The real thing

It worked! The revised version did the trick, the rainforest was saved, and we all had a wonderful time acting our socks off. By the end of the week the add-libs were flying thick and fast, and new and unexpected props kept appearing. I remember the realistic plastic vomit which suddenly appeared as Erik received the bite of 'Ze deadly spidur', and Tamandua's unsolicited comments about the skinny white legs of the expedition leader - 'He has legs of stick insect'. The children also kept us on our toes, the liveliest groups bringing home the warning about being prepared for anything. This isn't the place to give an account of all the funny or unexpected things that were said or done, but relish the thought of the Forestry Officer being verbally abused by small children because of his treatment of the rainforest, as one small but determined individual set about him with a pond net. Passions ran high!

Learning lessons

The first lesson - drama is a very powerful weapon to enable us to put across messages, even complex ones such as habitat conservation. Children are now used to taking part in such exercises, so perhaps we should be doing it more frequently, to good effect, within the field of Natural Sciences.

Second, you don't have to be a member of RADA to make it happen. Enthusiasm and a willingness to drop those inhibitions are more important.

Third, in terms of time, it can be expensive. Our Jungleday experience involved 13 people, in our case primarily volunteers and MSC staff. Add to this the time involved in making props, and creating the set, and the end result may not appear cost-effective. The children involved in Jungledays certainly got their £1 worth! It is impossible to consider events such as this in purely monetary terms; there can be no doubt that it was an important lesson for everyone involved, and in terms of creating team spirit it is highly recommended!

Finally, I suspect that the drama was successful because it came at the end of a series of events which had set the scene for the children. Although it might have stood alone, the background information the children had received earlier, and the level of excitement reached, all helped to break down barriers and inhibitions, essential for its success.

PS. If anyone would like a copy of the script, please let me know! Any references to individual persons mentioned above, alive or dead or merely resting, are of course entirely true.