David Dean*

Public History and Performance: A Conversation with David Dean and Thorsten Logge, with Contributions from Kira Smith and Esther Wilson, Facilitated by Jimena Perry

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Abstract: In his latest book, *Performing Public History*: *Case Studies in Historical Storytelling* (Routledge, 2025), David Dean argues that bringing the past to life through non-traditional media invites us to re-think how we do history work. In lieu of a traditional book review, IPH offers an edited transcript of an International Federation for Public History Explorer's event held on April 2, 2026.

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In *Performing Public History*: *Case Studies in Historical Storytelling* (Routledge, 2025), David Dean argues that bringing the past to life through non-traditional media such as theatre, film, living history performances, operas, and video games, invites us to re-evaluate how and why we do history work, and encourages historians to engage students in "writing" the past through performance. On April 2, 2026, he spoke with another public historian with experience of working in theater, Thorsten Logge, about the themes of the book in an International Federation for Public History's Explorer's event facilitated by Jimena Perry. In lieu of a traditional book review, *IPH* offers this edited and modestly embellished transcript of the event, which includes contributions from Kira Smith and Esther Wilson, two public historians engaged in non-traditional ways who were present.

Jimena: Welcome to this session to the IFPH Explorers. My name is Jimena Perry. Today we're going to have an event on performing and public history. We're going to have a conversation with David Dean and Thorsten Logge.

David, why did you feel compelled to write *Performing Public History*?

David: Well, I wanted to share a journey that began some twenty years ago when I became a historian embedded in a national theater company here in Ottawa. I worked for six years on various productions, and have continued on and off working with actors, directors, playwrights ever since. As a public historian, I had always been open to non-traditional forms of "writing" history – in film, video games, graphic novels and so on – but now I was an insider participating in the production process. There were three things in particular that struck me.

First, that the historian's habit of judging such productions using criteria we use to assess monographs was just wrong, rather we need to evaluate these forms of producing history on their own terms and with their own criteria as well as assessing their validity and legitimacy as history. And second, the whole experience problematized the assumption that the best way of doing history was to practice distanced objectivity. Performing history evokes emotions, draws on the senses, the imagination, and it values creativity. To put this another way, this experience reinforced an already present thought of mine: that the project of doing history is not a matter of neutral retrieval, but also a creative process. There were a lot of synergies between what was happening in the theater and what I was doing as a historian, but we had been trained to hide our subjectivities, rather than be open about them. I started to see the value in doing just that.

And then thirdly, being interested in non-traditional forms of history and seeing them as having greater value than historians traditionally place on them, led me on a journey to explore other forms of history "writing" in dance, drumming, and puppetry and so on across a range of cultures which challenge the notion of what history is, why we do it, how we do it, what we value when we do it.

Jimena: You both share a history of working with theater professionals. How did this influence your work as a historian?

Thorsten: I started working on topics like theater and cultural performances during my doctoral thesis on the Schiller Centennial Celebrations of 1859 – the public festivities that took place on the occasion of Friedrich Schiller's 100th birthday in November 1859 and which are known today as national celebrations for the German national poet. This work changed my way of thinking and brought me to

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the field of public history without even knowing in the first place. My initial idea was to research and understand how the middle class in Germany expressed their own ideas and concepts of the German nation in the diverse celebrations. I found out that there is no such thing as a representation of a pre-existing concept of the nation, put on display in the Schiller Centennial celebrations, but that the nation as a collective identity also emerged from such festivity practices and communications. So the people kind of manufactured the nation by celebrating it. By celebrating Schiller and the German nation, people did something they could – and would – later refer to as joint or common action and proof of the national community *in actu*.

In 2017 we organized a conference with the Bremen project "Staging Sources" (Aus den Akten auf die Bühne) and published a book based on that conference. Staging Sources is a joint venture of the University of Bremen and the Bremen Shakespeare Company, combining academic research and source related staged readings on different topics. In the conference volume we explore the idea that if we take performativity seriously – not only as a research approach to understand events in the past, but as a research perspective to understand what we actually do as historians – then historiography can be understood as a performative practice that has much in common with what people do on theater stages. I am convinced that doing history and doing theater have very much in common. Academic history as a profession follows certain rules and regulations, to produce safe and sound knowledge of the past. It takes place on specific stages like lecture halls, seminar rooms, or conferences, all of which are located in academic buildings – theaters of knowledge production. From this perspective, by doing history, we are all performers, staging history in different media formats. And we are also staging ourselves, as historians. We are doing history – and are also "doing" the historian we represent.

David: This is a perfect segue into my thoughts, because the first thing that struck me in working with theater professionals was just how much synergy there is and how much similarity there was in the work that people were doing in theater with the work we do as historians. Even when you take the form of theater Thorsten is talking about – documentary theater – its practitioners use documents and often quote them verbatim, and while some say this is different from traditional scripted, staged theater, in fact they too have arranged texts, added narratives, even gestures, movement, and voice tones and so on. It's a creation, an invention (in the good sense of the word), offering possibilities. And it struck me that this is exactly what I do as a historian when I work in archives, write articles and books. But where in theater the creativity is up front, open, transparent, I was trained to hide my creativity. So theater helped me realize that I need to put myself front and center in my own work, asking myself why I did it this way and not that way, why did I privilege this story and not another? And once you get to that point, accepting the use of your imagination and laying those choices open, then you free yourself from the straitjacket of the archive, the need to only offer certainties, that it's okay to offer possibilities. For many historians this isn't the proper way to do history, but my experience of theater has led me to think otherwise. Another thing I learned was that audiences are not passive, they are participants in the performances of the past, not spectators but "specactors" as Augusto Boal put it. And when you work with audiences in mind then sometimes you need to free yourself from being bound strictly to citation because you might then capture something authentic about what you're trying to say about the past for an audience, and so your writing becomes much more audience centered.

Thorsten: Audiences are crucial. Taking the idea of making history as addressee-related communication, as Joma Kalela said, we always need to take the addressees into account. All media formats we serve by doing history are different – and so are the rules and regulations for successful and effective history communication. Public history as "past-related identity discourse" (Marko Demantowsky) always relates to audiences. Doing history is not only about the content, the past-related narrative, that is being told – it is about acquiring membership, it is about being recognized, it is about individual and collective identity.

The painters of the late 19th century US battle cycloramas can be seen as producers of entertainment history. They acted like professional historians in many ways: They went on research, visited archives or museums, interviewed contemporary witnesses of the battles, conducted field research on battle sites to learn about the topography – and then they presented their work to the public, hoping to get their work acknowledged as proper history. Their presentation had to strike a balance between the eyewitness accounts and historical accuracy to succeed at the box office – it had to match the authenticity of the remembered. They strived to be historically correct and to match the expectations of the spectators at the same time. The question always is: How far can you go as a historian in making adjustments or accommodations to your narrative to serve an audience? How flexible can you be before resorting to pure fiction?

Jimena: This is very helpful because I often get asked: these non-traditional forms are fine and great, but how can you evaluate them? And I was thinking that the issue is that the person asking the question is still thinking in terms of the monograph. You've both given me other ways of answering

that question, but I still think we need to know more about how to do this, how to evaluate performances.

Thorsten: Academic texts in forms of articles and monographs are still dominant in academic historiography. To produce this form of history is what we as scholars have to teach and our students have to learn. The monograph and the academic article were the cutting-edge media formats being used at the time when our profession evolved in the 19th century. Shouldn't we also use the cutting-edge media of our time for getting our messages out as our predecessors like Leopold von Ranke, Heinrich von Sybel, and others did 200 years ago?

David: Yes, absolutely. We are straitjacketed by the notion that there is only one proper way of doing history. I'm thinking about history painting, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle, Jules Michelet – emotional, sensual, sentimental histories that were considered to be not only legitimate, but the whole point of writing history. The then new media – history painting, pageants, even opera – and now our new social media and AI and so on – why should we not be embracing these ways of doing history? I think we are making steps forward in valuing such productions. I've witnessed tenure and promotion committees find equivalences between exhibits, digital platforms, compositions etc. on the one hand and the more traditional forms like articles and books on the other. Assessing and evaluating is a challenge. We're fine with evaluating written essays for example, but not dance or music performances or films or graphic comics. But we can learn. I've often learned from the students who do have this expertise – which is why they want to "write" history in these ways – and from colleagues in other departments like music or film or engineering where student submit original compositions, short films, or useful things. Most importantly though, it's not all about the final product, it's about the journey. We ask students to keep diaries, to write a reflection paper at the end, exploring their choices and decisions, the whys and wherefores. It is the process that's key. So in the end it might not work out well, but that's not what you are judging, it's the journey they took, the critical thinking that happened.

Esther: One thing that I would like to know more about is whether these are students who are solely focused on history or public history in their studies? Are they usually focused purely on "traditional" history work, or are they used to interdisciplinary approaches? From my own more limited work with students, I've found that some can find it more challenging to engage and think creatively and performatively. This is in some contrast to theater students for whom it seems common sense to work both with history and to practice the sorts of creative media and tasks you have been discussing.

Thorsten: Our public history program has an option to include a creative format into the master's thesis. On an administrative level, this is not an easy thing to have, because you would want to keep the option alive to build up on your master's degree with a PhD. In Hamburg, you have two options: A classical master's thesis, or you can hand in a creative history type of any kind, accompanied by a critical description and academic reflection on your creative work. The reflection is being graded, while the history type is not. To grade a creative production is complicated – this is why we grade the academic reflection as a text type we know and understand in academia. My experience is that students are generally creative, but they are also heavily rooted in their disciplines by the BA system. It is not easy to reconnect with creativity and embrace it in master's programs which typically last only two years.

David: The PhD program in public history at Carleton allows a performance element, and one of our students, Rick Duthie, was an actor turned historian who did oral history interviews in a northern Ontario town called Sudbury, where there had been three major strikes. He captured those stories, scripted them, reworked them with the interviewees, and eventually wrote a script and directed a play with audiences of those whose stories these were. And then he did more of what he calls "assemblage". The thesis had the traditional elements – historiography, methodology, sources etc. – but also a reflective analysis and critical engagement with the script, the performance, the whole process. Students here in Canada come to graduate work having studied other subjects in addition to history, and many also bring experience in working in different media, so yes, they do embrace the opportunity to be creative.

Jimena: I think one of the key words you mentioned, David, is enjoyment. And when you shift to non-traditional ways of evaluating or creating or writing history, the students have more fun. Why do you think it is important for historians to embrace their subjectivities, imaginations, emotions, senses, and experiences?

Thorsten: Because we are all humans, we should act as such. And we cannot easily escape our subjectivities. We cannot escape our imaginations. We cannot escape the bags that we're carrying with us like our socialization and our personal biographies. The way we see the world and make it meaningful to us, has something to do with our subjectivity. Historiographic rules and regulations can help to acknowledge and reflect one's subjectivities and make them transparent – but you can't escape them. The way we learn to downplay our own role in doing academic history raises questions about whether we might not be losing something in the process.

I learned a lot from theater performances by René Pollesch and others associated with the Institute for Applied Theater Studies in Giessen. Through their work, I realized that my own subjectivity – my own view of the world – enables me to connect with and speak to specific target audiences in a very particular way. As has been mentioned, it's important to examine our subjectivities, imaginations, and emotions, to understand why they have the effects they do, and to incorporate them in our scientific reasoning while still adhering to all the rules and regulations that give our work its scientific character.

David: Agreed. Historians rarely explicitly acknowledge who we are, where we're coming from, and how this informs our history work. This, in my view, makes for better history.

Thorsten: This encourages us also to rethink what we mean by an archive and what we derive from it. People draw information, knowledge, emotions, and experiences from a wide variety of archives, and the nature of these archives encourages us to recount and convey the past in diverse ways. As we engage with this, more opportunities open up for us to tell our stories.

David: Seeing public history as performance often involves drawing on, and being inspired by, histories told through memory, song, movement etc., and exploring hidden histories. Perhaps I could invite Kira to jump in here and talk about her work which I think puts this into practice through her blended writing, something she wrote about recently in *Rethinking History*.

Kira: It's an interesting question, because it relates to my new project which is going to be a speculative biography of a girl, Lily, who lived her childhood across several institutions. I've been thinking a lot about Lee Edelman's *No Future*, Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* and José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia.* Inspired by Alison Kafer's presence in her own writing, I begin my new project by situating my own girlhood as a girl born to a teen-aged, unwed mother and as someone who had no future. Then I talk about why I was drawn to Lily, based on being two girls at different times with no futures. While we lived very different lives at very different times, there's something about our experiences across time that I think are worth highlighting. For me, this preface brings to life that subjectivity that David spoke of and why I want to talk about Lily and why I'm writing this speculative history to talk about girlhood and to challenge the erasure of certain people, like Lily, who are absent from the archive. To address this, I take all her institutional records alongside other primary sources and secondary literature to connect the dots and speculate on her experience. At the end of the day, history is never going to be exactly what "truly" happened. So, it becomes about the method that we're using and our subjectivities. In my current project I use speculation explicitly. In the past, I have also written fiction what I call blended writing – the combination of academic and fiction writing. David in his prompt was referencing my article in *Rethinking History* that talks about writing this fictional novella for my master's about a woman who spends decades at the Brockville Asylum in Ontario, Canada. In my work, I think a lot about how imagination, speculation, and art can help us navigate limited archival materials, and how emotions are a valid place of knowledge.

Jimena: David, there is a chapter in the book that shares your student's work and an appendix which offers teachers some classroom exercises. Why did you want to include these?

David: Well, I see research and teaching as complementary activities, so it seemed natural to share what I offered in the classroom and how students took it on board, or questioned it, and ran with it pushing boundaries. What we have been discussing today is challenging for some. Take, for example, the argument that part of our task as historians is to give the past its own present, but also to acknowledge the pastness of our own present. We can use the work of people like Freddie Rokem and Richard Schechner who talk about performativity, about witnessing history brought to life on stage, and about doubleness, that there are many originals, not just one referential original. But reading is one thing, doing is another. And so I borrowed exercises from, and often co-taught them with, theater and performance practitioners. One exercise, for example, involves everyone reading the same text, identify some key words that can function like a script, and then perform it. From doing this, they experience how some classmates saw different things in the same source. Then they have to ask: Why did this happen? What lies behind these different readings of the same text? What explains the varied interpretations?

*Jimen*a: The book ends with the phrase "Historians are, after all, the dramaturges of the past." This resonates with anyone who has worked in theater and other forms of performance like reenactments, but for those who haven't, can you say more about what you mean by this?

David: Dramaturges do period research and offer it as helpful background to the work of the theater company, but they also pull everything together, sorting out what will work for the script, the director, the actors, the audience. Around 2012, I was doing a keynote conversation for a graduate theater conference with a dramaturge, Paula Dankert, who I'd worked with a lot. And we were realizing that our roles were not all that different because we historians also ask ourselves, whether we are in the archive and or at our desks as we write, questions like What works for me? for the source? for the period? for those who we are writing about? for other historians? for potential readers?

And so we came up with the notion that I was a sort of dramaturge. I believe we historians are curating the past, not retrieving it, and that this is something we need to embrace. I know you've been thinking this too Thorsten.

Thorsten: Indeed – we often combine curatorial and dramaturgical work in our work as historians. We can learn about this from Bertolt Brecht's "street scene," by which he thinks through his concept of epic theater. We are staging our histories – the audience always on our minds.

Jimena: David, are there things you wished you had done, or done differently in your book?

David: Well, yes. To make room for the classroom exercises I had to lose something, and so I took out a section about site-specific performance. I'd shared with readers the work of one of my MA students, Emily Keyes, who had researched into a murder story, wrote a script, and worked with a site-specific theater company to stage it in our old jail building. So what happens when you perform history on stage and what happens when you perform on the site is something that I had covered a little when writing about living history performances, but I wish I had kept that in now and said more. I also wish I had expanded my discussion of the concept of Brecht's epic theater as well as Rokem's suggestion that actors performing history are hypers-historians, and Diana Taylor's notion of scenario into a fuller discussion about performativity and how that is useful for public historians.

On something that doesn't quite work? Well, I wrote about Indonesian puppetry where contemporary histories are often inserted in comic ways into a pre-determined traditional story – which is why they are on the cover of the book and I worry that perhaps really what is happening here is more about doing history in public rather than doing public history, and what, or if, there is a difference between these two. This is something I'm still wrestling with, but it's an invitation to have a conversation about it which is why, in the end, you write, and why you perform.

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