

## Audience Feedback and Testimonials:

### Oxnead Hall (June 12 and 19<sup>th</sup> 2018)

Audience Comments (feedback gathered from written feedback forms on the day, surveymonkey feedback, as well as audience members feedback provided in person with performers after every show, and a few emails were sent personally to Dr Holly Maples and responses gathered when emailing audience members about future events):

We so enjoyed Oxnead Hall (I think you had all the audience in the 'palm of your hands', especially at the church during the funeral service!). It made us go to the exhibition at Norwich Castle as well and also to Paston Church.

We will plan to spend the day at Mannington and immerse ourselves in your company!!  
Best wishes  
Sue

You and all your company are to be congratulated on last evenings performance at Oxnead ...it was absolutely wonderful ...magical.

I especially loved the attention to detail with the fruit and flowers representing the jewels and treasures, the handing out of petitions and the invites to the funeral made us feel part of the story.

You know how much I loved the costumes and feel inspired to sit at my sewing machine as soon as possible !

If any of the forthcoming audiences ask ....the heraldic flag shows the Paston arms ( gold /white with blue fleur de lys) quartered with the arms of Bedingfeld.( a much later Bedingfeld but nobody needs to know ! ) Loved the griffin seal on the invite...I would love to get one to use at Mannington...for letter writing, when you have a moment could you let me know where you bought it from ...thanks

Penny, [REDACTED]

I have just got home from this afternoon's performance and wanted to congratulate you and everyone concerned with the wonderfully creative and well presented story of Robert Paston's final years. It was brilliant.

This is just the kind of thing that the Norwich Society's 800 or so members would have been interested in and if you ever repeat the event or do anything similar in Norfolk and would like it to be promoted, please do let me know and we will include it in our fortnightly newsletter.

We did organise a tea at Oxnead Hall last year which proved very popular (despite being three times the price of your performance!). If it would be of any help in the future, I think it might be useful for us to consider organising a group visit to any future Norfolk performance.

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Paul [REDACTED]

"Congratulations on a wonderful performance last night. I thought the play was extremely well written, directed and performed and was thoroughly enjoyed by those who saw it."

Beverley [REDACTED]

## **Selection of Feedback Reports:**

**Q9** What did you like about the entertainment event? What did you dislike about the entertainment event?

We thought it was incredible, the use of the gardens and church was an inspired touch. Thoroughly enjoyed such great involvement and

everyone in the church seemed spellbound. Unbelievable experience. Well done

**Q10** Is there anything else you'd like to share about the entertainment event?

Going to Norwich Castle next week to see the exhibition, so thanks for informing and bringing history to life

**Q11** How did the movement around the grounds of Oxnead Hall effect your experience of the performance?

It enhanced it, especially seeing the actors moving in the garden. Surreal, as if we had stepped back in time

**Q9** What did you like about the entertainment event? What did you dislike about the entertainment event?

Nothing at all to dislike.

With reference to 8 above - not sure you can have degrees of unique!

**Q10** Is there anything else you'd like to share about the entertainment event?

The musicians were splendid, as were the actors.

**Q11** How did the movement around the grounds of Oxnead Hall effect your experience of the performance?

Moving round the grounds of the Hall added enormously to the performance and ending in the church with Robt's funeral was

extraordinary. Everyone in the audience behaved as though they really were attending a funeral.

**Q9** What did you like about the entertainment event? What did you dislike about the entertainment event?

I really liked the link to Oxnead Hall and progressing through the grounds. It took me a little time to get into it. I felt I got the gist of the

background when we were in the barn. The story became clearer as we moved outside.

**Q10** Is there anything else you'd like to share about the entertainment event?

I felt really involved especially with the actors mingling with us as we moved around.

**Q11** How did the movement around the grounds of Oxnead Hall effect your experience of the performance?

It really helped to provide a context for the performance. Sitting in the church was really emotional. The weather and the cows really helped!

**Q9** What did you like about the entertainment event? What did you dislike about the entertainment event?

unique is unique! can't have a qualifying word enjoyed the whole evening very much- liked it all

**Q10** Is there anything else you'd like to share about the entertainment event?

It was a very enjoyable evening, perfect setting and weather. (How did you manage that?) I think the white skirted dress needed a petticoat - there was a bit of bare leg (what a hussy!) and socks. A minor detail though.

I would have liked it if each character had introduced themselves at the beginning.

**Q11** How did the movement around the grounds of Oxnead Hall effect your experience of the performance?

Definitely enhanced it. I liked the occasional asides to the audience. Brilliant to have the funeral in the church, and not to have Robert with the final 'line up'. I wish I had known about wine in the Orangery before the play, but found it afterwards!

**Q9** What did you like about the entertainment event? What did you dislike about the entertainment event?

I enjoyed the in-character asides, the distribution of letters and how much work had gone into tying or sealing them up, the costumes, the instrumental music and singing, the setting and the subject matter. I didn't dislike anything.

**Q10** Is there anything else you'd like to share about the entertainment event?

The company were very impressive and conveyed ownership of the story.

**Q11** How did the movement around the grounds of Oxnead Hall effect your experience of the performance?

It was fun!

### **Norwich Castle Museum (July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018)**

**Note:** It was harder to get audience members to fill out feedback forms at the Norwich Castle Museum, we had around 10 feedback forms with 60 attendees on the day to the event. One surprise was how many audience members in discussion and on feedback forms mentioned how much they liked the fact that the show concentrated on women. This was slightly accidental, as it was performing the story of the Norwich Castle exhibition, but due to casting, we decided to not include Robert Paston, but instead have his wife, Elizabeth Paston and her daughter and son be the main characters in the story (alongside alchemists and Royal Society members and other ensemble characters). The fact that so many audience members mentioned the fact that we were women led, shows perhaps that they are not expecting female stories in heritage dramas.

40year old audience member "It was great to see the powerful women featured. The alchemy section was great fun as well, we loved the use of the herbs and tools that we could hold and look at!"

70+ year old female audience member "I don't know why I'm giggling. I guess it feels like I had a mini roll in the show because the actresses spoke directly to me in the show. You know I'm giggling because at my age, let's just say I've been an OAP for a long time, I don't know get to do new things too often. I've never had a role before!"

"This was the first time I had experienced this theatre style. Loved it. Feel you are on a journey of discovery, rather than just witnessing and suspending disbelief. You are up close and personnel (can see props so much better, and actually touch them - it makes them more real, and your experience is tactile as well as visual. You feel included in the action. The movement involved is also key I think, helps you feel you are witnessing different episodes, and seems to be a cross between theatre and film - as you get different stage locations!"  
Karen Smyth, UEA

Feedback observer:

A key highlight for the immersive experience of the performance was that moving around the space, it really gave the sense of going on a journey, with the different vignette settings. Great with the two entrances/exits in the 'theatre in the round' part – helped convey the sense of coming and going. The 2 performances felt different. The 1<sup>st</sup> one we could hear the other part of the group on the other side. At first felt a little distracted, but that quickly

passed. It gave the sense that we were back in time, with us having a glimpse into life as other activities took part around us. The 2<sup>nd</sup> performance when we were all one group, felt a more kind of dip in and out. Both interesting experiences.

Acoustics excellent in the space. And having dual awareness of past and present, it felt 'naughty' for so much activity and noise and music to be happening in the Museum. But it also felt a kind of VIP experience, that we were stepping back in time in this much larger space that tries to take us there with objects, but we were getting a real live performance! Past and present boundaries effectively blurring.

The singing was outstanding. Though I nearly fell off my chair and jumped out of my wits when you started singing just behind my chair. I had been so engrossed in the other actors had no idea you were just behind me!

I also wonder if the musical interludes need a little more setting up. Many won't be familiar with this kind of music (especially at Mannington). I chatted to the musicians afterwards. Was fascinated to learn that the first piece was a new kind of music at the time, deliberately for group dancing rather than couples' dancing. And that the function of the closing piece was to encourage us to reflect on the loneliness and passing of time, some kind of narrative voice to explain how the music is functioning might help people to understand how to relate. Maybe you don't agree – the musical tone is universal after all!

What the musicians said to me afterwards I think is key – they are delighted to work with such a professional as yourself. That often groups don't do the performances that well and certainly don't integrate the music so successfully. I agree, the two performances I've seen have been superbly done – you walk away feeling that you've experienced a bit of Paston family life. It touches my heart so much to see the dusty manuscripts that I've been reading for so long being brought to life and seeing diverse audiences interact with the story.

### **Mannington Hall (August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018)**

Mannington Feedback 46 audience members of around 250 audience attendees

Voting Tubes (asked which did they enjoy the most)

Sight – 41 tokens

Sound – 28 tokens

Touch – 7 tokens

Emotions – 18 tokens

46 individual feedback sessions:

Sight:

Costumes - people remarked on how fascinated they were with the costumes, felt a real privilege to get up so close to them, unlike a stage you could be close enough to see the

detail. Other remarks about costumes included 'top quality', 'movie set like', like and RSC production'.

Setting – the visual landscape attracted 2<sup>nd</sup> most remarks. That it was great to move round the garden, that the actors coming through the crowd and acting in front and behind gave a real sense of moving plot twists. Other remarks 'beautiful stage props, ie the house and gardens! Felt like a period drama what with the setting. Felt special that it was taking place where a Paston would have been, even if its been modernised. A few people did remark some of it was hard to hear, as they had to sit down and therefore couldn't be close to the action – extreme heat weather affected some too much.

Action – seeing the women brandish the swords was great fun. Another remarked, when we say the ladies all dolled up like that, we thought we were going to get a namby pamby Pride and Prejudice, weak women men-smitten performance. Thrilled to see how active the women were. I wouldn't mind my kids growing up like that!

### **Sound:**

Many remarked on the 3D sound effects. Ie, with actors and actresses appearing from all sides. Felt enclosed (another said circled, another said enveloped) in the performance. They were ralking kind of funny, like old people, but not too much so we could still understand them. Liked that.

Music was great both as backdrop and as main part of the action. Very talented musicians. Old music I thought would be hotiy toity or chants, or something like that. It was actually quite a surprise, really suited the drama, worked very well.

The music was an unexpected bonus. Even if we couldn't always follow all of the dialogue, it set the tone and mood.

I liked the instrument players – having seen them talk about the musical instruments in the house and then see them at use in the performance, it was like the education bit brought to life.

Music helped us feel like we were stepping back in time. Helped us believe we were really looking at the Pastons!

### **Touch**

One 8-year-old girl excitedly said she got to touch a sleeve, and it was soft and squishy and she wanted to wear a dress like that, mother remarked she wouldn't mind too.

Having been round the stalls, touching the quills, the wood stuff, the dyed wools, the medieval letter, it set up expectations for the performance. It was like we were being lulled back into the period.

I was one of the lucky ones! I got the roses! These are going home and will take pride of place, I'll tell everyone I was given them by a medieval Paston!

I love my pilgrim badge. Never knew anything like this before. I feel like a child getting a reward, I have a little bit of history to take home.

### **Emotions**

Most remarked how sad they felt for the plague victim.

One person – “Seeing her lying on the ground really brought home not just the physical suffering, but how much fear there must have been as they didn’t know all the science bit. No wonder they turned to prayers and herbs, I would have had! I never had really thought about what I would do in the situation before, even though I’ve read many years ago about the plague.”

Number of people who remarked on how moved they were by hearing the story of the women Pastons.

“It’s not often you hear about so many things women did.”

“This was a real eye opener. I knew a bit about the Pastons, we did a bit at school and I’ve read some local history. All I knew about the women was that Agnes was rather violent and Margaret loved John, and the whole Valentine letter. But hey, there are many more women in the story and even if a bit of dramatic licence has been used, you get the sense these were the characters, as they say behind every great man is an even greater woman (and I am saying that in my wife’s earshot deliberately)”

Multiple people requested could we have a family tree that focuses on the women please?

I had a ‘draw your Paston’ activity for young children. They drew Margaret the most!

Numerous comments about the high quality of the production, how privileged people felt they had got to see the drama, that it had really made their day, that they felt sorry for all the people who had missed out today. Many asked for their praises to be passed on to the actors.

Undoubtedly the heat affected turnout, (there were about 250 people across the day). It also affected ability for people to stay the whole performance, that’s how I caught them in my slightly cooler tent afterwards for this feedback!

## **Performer Feedback**

### **Professional Actors**

#### **Kenneth Jay “Robert Paston” in Oxnead Hall show**

Hi Holly

I would be delighted to comment. Doing this type of theatre has been a tremendous experience for me personally and I must say I was surprised and delighted by audience reactions. One often finds when visiting heritage buildings and sites, that historical dramas or recreations, whilst usually educational on at least some level, tend to have limited entertainment or engagement value, so what you learn is not so well retained. In contrast to this, our presentation about Robert Paston’s unfortunate series of misadventures drew a visibly and consistently enthusiastic response from all three of our audiences on this occasion, and I was proud to be part of it.

At least one couple told me that it had not felt at all “touristy”, but they rather felt able to indulge in a genuine sense of being transported through time to another era.

Another young man said he had hugely enjoyed the interactive quality of the experience, as audience members were communicated with directly and ably and swiftly guided from place to place throughout by the characters, sometimes being encouraged (without any obligation whatsoever) to join in the action like extras in a film. I believe that the correct balance was achieved through the use of skilled and experienced theatre professionals rather than simply historians and people wearing funny clothes using dumbed down scripts.

After seeing these effects firsthand, I am absolutely convinced that this kind of razor-sharp site-specific theatre, when as well researched and professionally presented as this, can really raise the game for important sites and has enormous potential for enhancing visitor enjoyment and education in ways rarely seen across the spectrum of heritage-oriented experiences. It really raises the bar.

Having said all this, I would point out that budgets must be found and made available to allow for decent rehearsal periods; an extra week of preparation is actually a small investment in return for significant enhancements in the quality of the final product, and would encourage attraction of the highest calibre of producers directors and performers.

In equal measure, vigorous publicity efforts must be invested in and carried out. Noteworthy about our audiences was that a significant portion were not in fact tourists, but interested locals! That to me really says something about the quality of what we were offering. If you go to an Italian restaurant, and it's full of Italians, you know you are on to something real! Same principle here. So it's important to target local sectors as well as potential visitors from further afield.

Thanks Holly for this opportunity to express some feedback and I sincerely hope this helps.

Cheers

Kenneth

### **Eugenia Low played Margaret Paston in Mannington Hall Show**

Hi Holly,

#### **ACTING STYLE**

With the audience present, the acting style required felt more like oratory. In contrast with stage acting, where the focus (for me) is usually about developing and deepening the relationships with the other characters for the audience to observe, here the central relationship to be developed was with the audience. The aim/motivation/intention for me often fell to persuading the audience of my point of view, to being on my side, to recruit them. This required a clear and expressed point of view/opinion about what you were speaking about, and understanding/depth to the relationships that you were speaking about - all useful things for developing one's acting skills - but the active task put the audience centre-stage in a way that encourages the performer to adapt and take risks. I enjoyed this aspect immensely and audience feedback was most rewarding when they accepted the call to be a part of the action and responded imaginatively (and sometimes unexpectedly) to offers. I enjoyed being kept on my toes about how to incorporate these into the performance.

Audience feedback received included appreciation for the keepsakes that were handed out, and admiration for our stamina and energy in the heat, but that was specific to the particular weather situation on the day.

## DEVELOPMENT

What I would be interested in developing further is the pulling out of parallels between the historical issues and present day politics and social issues and to use these to broaden perspectives and encourage compassion and empathy. For example, what struck me part-way through the project was how some of the themes from the

Mannington show (eg being seized and taken away from home, being removed from property, having belongings taken away, being deemed 'unworthy' to own certain properties or to be in a particular place, being 'upstarts', etc) were relatable to issues such as immigration and deportation, of choosing where one lives, of being told one does not have the right to remain, etc. The juxtaposition, at a purely human level, of the impact that such situations have on one's emotions and frame of mind could be an interesting and socially useful entry point into developing tolerance and broadening outlooks. It would also be interesting to develop the feminist aspects of the narrative as a means of challenging prevalent expectations of women's stories.

## WHAT I GOT FROM WORKING ON THE PROJECT

Personally, as a British East Asian actor with a love for British history, it was a very rare and treasured opportunity to play an English historical character in period setting. I had been worried about how it might be received, particularly in regions where communities are somewhat less multicultural than London, but it was a huge testament to the possibility of openness and acceptance for diverse representation that my inclusion passed without comment and that filled me with much hope for the future.

All best,

Eugenia

## **Professional Musicians:**

### **William Summers performed for Oxnead and Norwich Castle**

I very much enjoyed working as a musician - alongside Arngeir Hauksson - with the project in Oxnead and Norwich Castle Museum. We performed songs by Henry Purcell along with cast members, and played dance tunes from the 17th. century as a prelude to the first speeches and to welcome the audience. The use of music within the play successfully changed the mood and dramatised the narrative of the production, and drew many appreciative comments from the audience after the performance. The dance tunes helped to set the social mood of the play, and attracted the audience's attention to the different cast members - who each reacted differently to the music - as well as to the space and the music itself. The changes of instrument between our musical 'prelude' and the plays themselves seemed to match the change in musical role.

The use of space within each production was dramatically interesting, but coordination between actors and musicians was sometimes a little challenging when the distance was greater, particularly when the script or visual cues changed at the last minute. The songs were well chosen, but for future occasions some rehearsal before the day would make them easier to perform - and we musicians can do a great deal to assist in learning them by providing practice versions in advance and by coaching. Advance rehearsal would also enable us to establish the best keys and registers for singing.

This was an enjoyable and interesting project which helped to develop my musical skills by playing in unusual keys, coordinating with actors and improvising. Working with the cast and the script expanded my experience in working in theatre, and my knowledge of history within East Anglia.

Will Summers

### **Arngeir Hauksson performed for Oxnead, Norwich Castle and Mannington**

I, Arngeir Hauksson, have had the pleasure of working with Holly Maples on theatre projects based on the history and letters of the Paston family, performed in venues in Norfolk with relation to the Paston family history in the 15th - 17th century; Oxnead Hall, Mannington Hall and the Castle Museum in Norwich, in connection with their exhibition "The Paston Treasure".

I found Holly's writing delightful and astonishing how well she captured the spirit of the Paston family members and their contemporaries by creating a beautiful living theatre work from only the source of surviving letters and historic facts.

Holly's writing and directing is very engaging for the audience. She used the grounds and gardens of the venues to enhance the storytelling by asking the audience members to follow the actors to different locations of the grounds and inside the chapel of Oxnead Hall and got the audience even more engaged asking them to become part of the story telling; the gathering 15th century crowd, the fighting armies, the 17th century courtiers and more.

She asked me and my colleagues, William Summers and Emily Baines to provide music for the plays. She already had done her research on finding the appropriate music for the periods involved, including songs by Purcell, which she and the actors sang beautifully, but also was very open for further suggestions what music and instruments to include in the performances.

I think she managed to find the right balance of the music and spoken text, both as a dramatic feature and as underscore in the plays, and that the music helped the storytelling by being played on appropriate instruments of the periods and asking the musicians to be in period costume and hence being part of the theatre company and the performance, with the added but enjoyable challenge of playing outdoors and moving instruments to different locations, following the actors and the audience.

Arngeir

## **Student Actor:**

### **Camryn Williams performed at Oxnead, Norwich Castle and Mannington Hall**

Conversations with audience members at the Oxnead Hall performances seemed to reveal several things about the impact of our nature of performing. Firstly, that the immersive and travelling style of the performance helped the audience become a part of the story we were telling so that they could live it almost as much as we did. Secondly, that because majority of the audience came from the Norfolk area, the verbatim dialogue gave them a better understanding of the history of an important local landmark and sense of pride for the county. This is true also of the performances at the Castle Museum and Mannington Hall. I particularly found that for children, sometimes the content became too advanced for them and so improvising with them, especially interacting with available props became a useful way to keep them engaged with the characters and theme of the piece. For example, at the Castle Museum, during the Royal Adventurers survey, I instead brought the children over to the maps and asked if they had travelled to any distant lands, which they found easier to interact with than the survey.

What I found most interesting about this project was getting to work with a diverse group of people on such a unique set of projects. The challenges of this project were intense, having short rehearsal periods and having to adjust to 17th century syntax. These projects kept me on my toes, having to concentrate on improving my acting skills as well as working with the ensemble to make some of the props. This was the first time I had performed publicly for about two years so I was really nervous and acutely aware that I didn't have professional training. By the last performances at Mannington, I finally felt confident about my level of performances, but it had taken sometime. I particularly enjoyed the high level of interaction required in these performances, helping build the world and atmosphere for each performance and giving the audience their own part in the performance so they could be part of the journey with us.

Best,  
Camryn Williams