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## The Ghost of Courtney Puckey: the use of theatre and history to enhance visitor experience at Wollongong Botanic Garden

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### Abstract

This paper explores the use of theatre at Wollongong Botanic Garden as an education technique, with particular reference to the latest project 'The Ghost of Courtney Puckey'. The paper helps to explain the philosophy and methodology behind the performance at the conference.

### Keywords

Theatre, heritage, botanic gardens, interactive, experience, humor, character

The education team at Wollongong Botanic Garden has used theatre as a powerful tool to teach and to entertain visitors to the Garden for many years. Characters such as *Captain Compost*, *The Tree Musketeers*, *The Talking Tree* and many other creations from the team can be seen roaming the Botanic Garden, interacting with young visitors. Now the general community and older students are getting a taste of this wonderful visitor experience in one of the Garden annexes, through the *Ghost of Courtney Puckey* tours. The main component of the *Puckey* tour is the appearance of Mr. Puckey himself. The ghost of this remarkable man interacts with the visitors sharing his views on the history, culture and ecology of this coastal Garden annex.

What are the successful ingredients of theatre/education in botanic gardens? Why do shows like *Captain Compost* or the *Talking Tree* appear to be so successful in engaging our young visitors and their families? The evidence supports the notion that theatre works well as a teaching method in botanic gardens. The customer surveys that we have run over many years consistently indicate a very high satisfaction rate from children and their parents and teachers. Our follow-up questionnaires also show that participants remember the lesson and issues explored in the plays for many months and years after they experience the shows.

The ingredients are...

*Humor and Exaggerated characters:* Larger-than-life theatrical characters, such as the *Giant Water Bugs* and the *Animals in Pajamas*, with their bright and exaggerated costumes, use fun and laughter to help the audience absorb and remember the issues of the play.

*Audience Participation:* Participants are invited on stage to dress up and to sing. Recent audiences joined the animal characters in 'It's a Long Way to hop so Stop, Drop and Roll' during *Bush Fire Madness* shows. There is a constant dialogue between actors and audience in this type of show.

*Demonstrations:* An in-built demonstration to focus on the issues explored in the action of the play. In *The Tree Musketeers* volunteer conservation people from the audience build a scaled-down rain forest. Pollution Police Trainees clean up the creek in *Clean Up your Act*. In *No more Dodos* volunteers explore the contents of a secret parcel to work out the fate of a host of endangered plants and animals. In *Captain Compost* the children help the Captain to build a compost heap that is balanced, healthy and rodent free.

So how have we applied these important features in *The Ghost of Courtney Puckey*? First of all Courtney Puckey was a larger-than-life character himself. He was an obsessive, eccentric chemist/optician from England who dabbled in salt making. He settled in Wollongong in 1887, and later purchased an area of land close to the city that has since become an annex of Wollongong

Botanic Garden. Puckey with his long grey beard, strong Cornish accent and dressed immaculately in a bowler hat and waistcoat, is a wonderful character for theatre.

There is also plenty of opportunity for audience participation in *The Ghost of Courtney Puckey Tour*. To begin with Puckey invites the audience to ask the questions like 'Can you tell us something of your family?' Members of the audience are also invited to take part in a reenactment of the Council meeting of 1957 to decide the fate of his grand home 'Seafield'.

There is also a planned demonstration component for the Puckey tour. This will be used with school students; they will build a model of the evaporative tea tree salt towers used by Puckey to extract salt from the sea. Puckey also demonstrates the use of folk medicine and its similarities to Australian Aboriginal bush medicine.

The use of local history is an additional ingredient in this project: the life of Courtney Puckey is like a time-line for the Estate. By meeting Puckey in the flesh, visitors are gaining a first-hand experience of the environmental issues related to the Estate at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elderly local participants in the tours also share their own experiences of the Estate in the past. This provides invaluable insight into the life of Courtney Puckey for the actor/creator of the project. One elderly lady remembers as a child being chased away from the Estate by Puckey. Another gentleman remembers how messy Puckey's chemist shop in Crown Street was.

The Puckey project was launched in March 2012 to celebrate Senior Citizens Week, and is booked in for Seniors Week 2014. We have conducted a dozen tours of the Estate since that time, including a twilight tour, and we have presented the tour off-site to a number of community groups, including the Wollongong Historical Society, the Heritage and Conservation Society, the Society of the First Fleeters and The University of the Third Age. The project has been presented at a number of BGCI conferences in Australia and overseas. A tour through the Estate was also used to help launch the New South Wales Eco Arts Conference in May 2013. In 2014 we aim to target high school students. This will include visits to the schools and tours of the Estate. We will also include family tours and presentations during school holiday periods.

Can heritage-based theatre succeed at other botanic gardens? The possibilities are endless: for example the Royal Botanic Garden Melbourne could develop a tour around one of the original directors, Baron Von Muller. This amazing Austrian botanist was known as 'Baron Von Blue Gum' because of his obsession with the Tasmanian Blue Gum. If your botanic garden doesn't have a famous individual, use a stock character to represent the period, for example a 19<sup>th</sup> century gardener. Various old-time horticultural practices could be demonstrated as part of a tour. The aim is to lead a modern audience down memory lane, to entice them into the experience, and to show the relevance to the present. We recently used two important female historical figures from different decades in the twentieth century at Wollongong Botanic Garden to celebrate international Women's Day: Edna Walling, prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, and Ester Dean in the 1970s. These two wonderful characters made significant contributions to the development of gardening in Australia and they made wonderful tour guides for the day. It is also important to provide opportunities for audience participation, perhaps a re-enactment or a demonstration to reinforce the presentation. On the International Women's Day, Ester demonstrated her famous 'no-dig' gardening technique.

In summary I can only encourage you to embrace the past through theatre in your botanic gardens. I can guarantee that you won't be disappointed and, more importantly, your audience will be completely involved in the experience. Participants in *The Ghost of Courtney Puckey* tours revel in the experience, continuing to ask 'Mr. Puckey' questions and provide him with useful treasures of information about his Estate, even after the actor's identity has been revealed.