



FEATURE

'The Hidden'

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Introduction

“You know, it’s relatively easy to engage primary school children with our activities here. But teenagers, that’s so much harder. And I’ve got teenagers of my own. I know!”

She rolled her eyes.

“They certainly can be tough,” I replied.

“Look, I’ve seen other Visible Fictions shows in non-traditional spaces for young people and I’m wondering if this is something you’d be interested in helping us do here? To get teenagers excited about our library. Can you help?”

And so went part of a conversation I had with the Head Librarian of a major Glasgow library. Ah the thrill of a challenge I thought – to engage teenagers in public libraries through a theatre piece! After all, in the eyes of adolescents, libraries aren’t renowned for their abundance of cool, and no amount of lesson-giving about their importance is going to wash with a teenager’s innate and skilful ability for scepticism. The conversation with the Librarian had coincided fortunately with a previous meeting I’d had with an artist and interactive games maker - Cameron Hall. He and I were keen to explore making a theatre piece that had gaming at its heart - that had to be played rather than just watched. I knew that these ideas could be connected.

And so, I looked to the Librarian and gave an immediate, “yes.”

Thus began the journey of ‘The Hidden’, a theatrical experience Visible Fictions have presented in public libraries and at international book festivals in the UK and Canada. Aimed at those of 14 years and older, Cameron and I embarked upon a years’ long process of debate, research and play to create an experience that aimed to celebrate the very essence of libraries themselves - curiosity, investigation and research. In these times of misinformation, and internet-filled claims, somehow we knew we wanted to create an artistic work that also became useful for our intended audience; something that inspired and reminded them of the need to ask questions of materials, sources, and information.

‘The Hidden’ relies very much on the audience; nothing can or will unfold without their active participation and engagement. Everything they do, think and say shapes the experience. Perhaps even calling them an audience is a misnomer – they become the key protagonists in an unfolding story and without them the experience just won’t happen. In fact, actors when rehearsing the piece often express their challenge (and excitement) at the fact that they can’t rehearse fully until an audience is taking part – then they’ll know how to respond and how to drive things forward.

The ‘contract’ between audience and performers

‘The Hidden’ starts from the audiences’ arrival at their local library. They are met by a member of the Visible Fictions team who after welcoming them, then explains that shortly they will be taken to a space where an actor from ‘The Hidden’ will meet them - then the experience will start. This moment, a normal component of front of house behaviour, is quite crucial to the experience and how the audience engage with it. It clearly explains that the event they are to take part in isn’t real. A piece of theatre. This knowledge allows them to suspend their disbelief and prepare to engage with the drama that is soon to unfold.

Once led to the room, the participants meet our ‘librarian’ Alex. Played by an actor, Alex warmly greets them with banal chat and niceties. The audience are asked to take a seat at a large table that faces a computer terminal. On its large screen, the computer’s desktop and folders can be seen clearly. (The initial Visible Fictions team member takes no further part and sits discretely in the corner of the room— a visual reminder, that this is a theatrical experience. And audience members do indeed get swept along and seem to forget).

The status quo and disturbance

Alex thanks them all for coming to today’s tour of the library and explains that everyone will be shown around the library spaces and will have the chance to understand a little more about its place in the local community, its history, and how it functions. But to get things kicked off, there will be a short power point presentation.

“It’s not long so don’t worry – only 7 minutes or so”. Alex invariably sees a mix of dread and mild panic in the eyes of the teenagers. Their fake smiles glimmer as they pretend to want to be here (I’ll just say at this point that the piece has also been performed with purely adult audiences of varying ages and their responses are very similar). All settled, Alex ‘the librarian’ starts their presentation on the computer, using slides as a basis for their talk. However, after only a couple, the computer goes awry and the slide jams - some form of static-like interference obscures the picture. Suddenly the computer shuts itself down. Dismayed and embarrassed, Alex explains,

“We’ve been having trouble with the computers these past couple of weeks - I’m so sorry about this.” Embarrassed and flustered, Alex pushes some buttons on the computer keyboard. Nothing.

“Look, IT were in the building earlier on today, do you mind if I just nip off to speak with them. I’ll just be a minute. Is that ok?”

Permission is readily granted from the participants – they seem to feel bad for Alex and the predicament that’s being faced and so want to be as supportive as possible. Alex, exits the room, leaving the participants sat in front of the computer. Alone.

Invariably, everyone looks to each other and laughs nervously. They do indeed feel bad for Alex and express it privately, “what a shame”, and “I’m embarrassed for them” are frequent comments. Of course, teenagers often can be scornful and find it hilarious that things have gone wrong and helped them escape the awfulness of a power point lecture on their local library. No matter their response, it’s clear

at this moment that our audience believe that the predicament for the 'librarian' is a real one. Have they forgotten that this is a piece of theatre of which they are part? No one looks to the Visible Fictions' staff member sat in the corner of the room for clarity.

Then the computer screen flickers to life with a message seemingly typed 'live' on it.

"Is someone there? Please, hit the space bar".

The audience laugh nervously. Their focus shifts. The message repeats, "Please, hit the space bar". They laugh more, talk about the message and soon someone chooses/is chosen to act. The space bar is tapped.

"Please help. Three weeks ago, Daisy Sinclair went missing... She was researching something very important and has hidden it in the library... Please find it. When the Librarian returns tell them this code word – 'Orchid'. You can trust them. Tell no one else. Tell them there isn't much time - this gateway isn't open for long. Let us make contact again in one hour when you can share what you have found out."

The computer screen goes back to its pre 'broken down' state when 'the librarian' left the participants alone. The excitement in the room is palpable. The experience is no longer what they thought it was going to be and a new game has clearly started.

Building context and the rules of the game

'The librarian' returns explaining that contact has been made with the IT department who'll be in touch soon to come and fix the computer. It's clear from how the audience behave that they have experienced something unusual, and their facial expressions stop Alex in their tracks. Almost every time during the experience, the participants tell Alex what they have just experienced. They take our lure. Alex then colludes with everyone in the room,

"I got a similar message too – a few days ago, I have no idea what it's about."

Alex whispers surreptitiously. They go on,

"Daisy used to work here at the library – and no one knows what happened to her. I know she was always here late, after hours, and I wonder if whatever she was researching has something to do with why she went missing."

Alex shares some other pieces of paper received from Daisy– three strips of the alphabet written in order identical to each other. Three other strip have some strange, unintelligible words, followed by a series of numbers and letters. Written next to these unintelligible words and number/letter series is, what the participants soon realise, a de-cyphering system. Each paper strip is different from the other.

These are shared with the group and studied. Alex isn't sure what the odd words signify but they might be "a code or something". There are some other bits of paper too which Alex does recognise – these are the Dewey Decimal Classification system and connect to shelves in particular areas of the library. Alex doesn't know what to do and the participants are asked if they might be able to solve the problem.

The participants quickly and confidently state that the strips of paper are in fact cyphers, and so Alex splits the participants into three groups, one with each strip of paper and an alphabet strip. They solve the puzzles mostly unaided and when they do, new information is unlocked – they have de-cyphered the names of books that appear to be stored on the library's shelves. However, they are not where Alex would expect them to be placed.

Together they realise that these books are some, or all, of Daisy's research. In small groups, the participants enter the lending area of the library tasked with finding these hidden books (which they discover lead to more cyphers, and more books and more information). As the game/experience progresses, the participants in their small groups, solve various puzzles that help them find and uncover Daisy's secret research, and piece together what might have happened to her and how her research might be connected to disappearance.

Taking on a role

From the moment the experience starts, the audience are asked to take on a role – a role which comes sharper into focus as the event progresses. We don't give them any formal instructions about their role, instead the role is allocated from within the drama. Initially, they play the part of someone who has arrived for a library tour - not someone coming to see a theatre show. Then of course, once the computer communicates with them directly, the participants are framed differently and they become detectives/researchers – and like the hero's journey, they are given the call to adventure and guided by some strange other worldly/supernatural guide (the computer) to take a step forward.

The 'librarian' demonstrates both here and throughout the experience, that they are as ignorant as the participants. Alex doesn't know any real details of Daisy's mystery disappearance, and since the books aren't in their usual places on the shelves and the information inside them is new to Alex as well, he and the participants have the same knowledge. This is important. They can't get any 'answers' from Alex even if they tried and Alex always passes any questions about Daisy's disappearance back to the group to speculate upon themselves. The young people own their experience and drive forward their own choices/thoughts and reflections within the dramatic experience. By giving the participants as much knowledge as the 'librarian', they are encouraged to assume the mantle of an expert, albeit one who doesn't have any real answers! (Referring to the Hero's Journey again, the 'Librarian' is perhaps the Mentor - supporting, guiding, and questioning thoughts and discoveries made by the participants).

Before the participants leave the initial room to embark on the search for Daisy's books, a new person/role enters the space. This is the Library Manager who lets everyone know that the IT Department have made contact, and that the IT issue will be solved as soon as possible – according to IT, in about an hour – when the whole system will have to be shut down. The Library Manager at this moment, and later on in the experience, acts as another control mechanism within the drama. A time element has been introduced - a regulator on their search which can be used to increase pressure on their activities as they run out of time.

Rising action

As books are found, sections of the printed pages have been highlighted. Daisy's research explores a wide-range of topics that all seem to be unsettlingly connected: destroyed libraries throughout history; book burnings; ancient mystical knowledge; neural networks in the brain, in computers, in nature and how they are being used and understood; how networks of power exist with the world – politics, media, and secret services; how technological networks are being harnessed for positive and insidious reasons. Text in the books is highlighted. There are marginalia too, in what appears to be Daisy's handwriting where she reveals her thoughts and feelings, and she suggests that sinister forces may be at work. Other objects can be found too in the books - photocopies of documents, photographs, other puzzles, all of which deepen and darken the tale that seems to be unfolding.

Alex regularly finds and chats with the groups as they search - helping them to make meaning for themselves out of the material. Alex hears the 'evidence' that is being found and although this is a fiction and Daisy doesn't really exist, things feel coherent and authentic. The participants think their way through Daisy's dilemma and problem. It feels real to them; it bothers them what she has uncovered, the hidden information makes them want to understand and assist her. Armed with these story clues, the participants are encouraged to theorize and create their own narrative of what Daisy was researching and might have happened to her. Everything that is uncovered reveals information about Daisy, context-building her possible life and world for the participants, enabling their understanding of what may have happened to her. Since the participants read 'factual' information published in edited and 'established' books, the world is built for them through ostensible 'facts'. It helps build the world's credibility for the participants.

Elements of creative choice are important – how they work as a team to research, which direction they choose to investigate, and how they interrogate and respond to the material they find. The cypher trails that the participants follow get more complex as the game unfolds, increasing their challenge.

Alex also gives a 'countdown' to their search – the library's IT department will, after all, be shutting down the computing system and so they'll lose the link to whoever, or whatever, initially asked for this search to happen. This external time pressure is added to raise stakes as the search happens. Often we'll see audiences upping their walking pace in the library to a safe 'acceptable dash'. It's wonderful to see such excitement and engagement – and not just in the targeted teenage participant but also, as happened on one particular day, when two 70 year-old women took part and behaved like schoolchildren. "It's like being in a Dan Brown novel" an older participant said. "I don't know who or what to trust" is another common response from those who take part. As the intrigue builds, the mystery darkens and the time available is running out, a real sense of peril/drama in the action rises.

Collective meaning making

Before participants know it, Alex is ushering them back to the initial meeting room, where they are asked to bring back everything that has been found. After a moment of gathering their thoughts, each group reports back what they have uncovered. Alex now takes on a different function. They listen. They provoke. They mirror. They point out connections that the groups may have missed. They encourage

the quiet person to speak and the louder one to listen. They ensure every offer from a participant, based on found evidence, is accepted and discussed, and like a teacher-in-role, the actor playing Alex manages the conversations and speculations. The temptation is for the actor to give 'an answer' to the groups as to what has happened. Instead, they force the participants to articulate their own understanding and help each group make their own connections between each other's discoveries.

There is a lot of information found and many possible reasons as to what Daisy was researching and why she may have disappeared, and the experience has been deliberately designed so that a definitive answer is pretty impossible to articulate. Hearing the wide range of subjects, themes and ideas, Alex wonders if it's possible for the group to be able to come up with some way to articulate what they collectively have understood from their discussion – can their thoughts be distilled into a simple sentence that encapsulates their findings. This Statement of Belief helps the participants to process and articulate the key findings of their research and make choices about what feels most important to them. This Statement of Belief(s), and their general discussion about their findings, are all recorded on Alex's mobile phone – a simple way to share information with the computer.

The experience has a very clear structured outline. The 'Librarian' is very much the manager of what happens to the audience and their experience - always giving the sense that the participants are in control and that the piece could go in any direction. It doesn't but those who take part feel that it does.

The climax

The computer suddenly sparks into life. A message flashes across its screen.

"Are you there? There isn't much time. Please share what you have found."

Alex is surprised. The participants giggle nervously. Now perhaps a moment of truth will be revealed, and all will make sense. Together the group must decide whether to share their findings with the faceless entity behind the computer or not. Of course, this isn't a straightforward choice – especially considering much of what they uncovered through Daisy's research. There has been information uncovered that leads to some distrust about technology. Alex doesn't help either - equivocating then advocating for each possibility at different times. This, after all, is the decision that the participants must make, and it is theirs alone. They ask themselves if they can trust who or what is behind the computer? Is this the only way to save Daisy? Or will this put her in more danger? Are they all safe? The discussion can get passionate as individuals start to position themselves within the imagined reality that they are part of and have ultimately helped to create. They will argue for and against action depending on what material they have uncovered. The stakes rise and emotions can run quite high. In nearly every performance, this moment is taken very seriously by the participants.

And then, to raise the stakes once more, Alex receives a text from the library's IT department – they are ready to fix the computer system, and it will be shut off in one minute. A clock appears on the screen counting down the seconds to switch off. The link will be lost, and Daisy may be forever in trouble. The computer itself flashes messages to build pressure on the participants – it seems to respond to their indecision, playing on their weakness, and demanding that information be shared. Panic seems to set

in - the stakes are real for the participants. While under pressure to decide, Alex only responds to any decision the participants make by encouraging them to consider the opposite choice, arguing against any choice they seem to settle on. In classic 'Mission Impossible-esque' style, the counter on the clock gets perilously close to running out and Alex makes sure the debate goes on until the very last moment. Just before the counter reaches zero, the participants are forced to decide. Alex acts out their choice and the information is either uploaded or not. And like all dramas – and real life - there are consequences to the choice.

Silence in the room – the participants are poised, laden with expectation. And then the computer responds to what everyone decided with a message that unsettles the participants even more. The computer switches off. More silence. The participants are invariably left in a state of shock – unsure that they have made the right choice. Both they and Alex are unsure what is going on. The computer reboots.

The Library Manager enters again, surprising the participants and Alex, and new information is passed on. Needless to say, I shan't share that here – sorry but you'll have to experience the piece for yourself - but it's enough to leave everyone in the room feeling even more uneasy about what they have just decided. The Library Manager then reminds Alex that they have other work to do today and not just look after this tour, and so must leave the group very soon. But still there is no conclusive answer as to what has happened to Daisy, and how her research might link to her disappearance? And then comes what proved to be the hardest part of 'The Hidden' experience for the creators – how to conclude the piece meaningfully.

The denouement

We started our artistic enquiry wondering if we could create a game-like experience which set about trying to celebrate investigation and questioning. We wanted to celebrate that learning and enquiry should never stop – that answers should always be triggers for more questions; an investigative mindset is one that doesn't stop when it's got it 'right' - that the world is full of mystery, and this should be celebrated. For us to give a concrete answer about what happened to Daisy felt like it would have undermined our very own endeavours. The ending needed to be left open to more possibilities. But we also had to end it in a way that ensured the participants felt like they'd 'won' the game. Not all games need to be won of course - participating can be the game's intention. However, it became clear during our test performances that our participants weren't satisfied by 'just taking part' – they needed to know that they were victorious. And to be honest that's understandable – especially when you see what the participants go through: excitement, intrigue, distrust, mystery, laughter, concern and even horror when the story possibilities collectively unfold. In our early versions of the show, we hadn't looked after Daisy enough with a satisfactory ending - it was clear that the audiences had built up real concern for Daisy's welfare. They needed to know she was alright. The participants needed the satisfaction that they had helped Daisy and solved the mystery.

Alex knows there must be something that they all have missed, and so encourages new thinking in the participants to look afresh at some information they have. And there, hidden in plain sight, is the key to

giving the 'solution' to the participants. Well, as much of an answer as can be given. It's a final twist in the tale that needs to be experienced rather than explained here. It's gone through different versions in the years we've been presenting the piece – always trying to find the best way to ultimately frame the experience and to conclude it meaningfully as a drama. And of course, to maintain our initial exploration to create a piece of theatre that encourages audiences to keep asking questions, keep investigating and always interrogate information we find.

The response to the piece from teenagers has been overwhelmingly positive:

"It was an amazing experience."

"Lots of fun, thought-provoking, intriguing!"

"Just so much fun - thank you! WOW!"

"It was extremely interesting and entertaining, and I loved it using the books and clues were amazing and the code was so much fun."

"I loved it. Very creepy."

Visible Fictions' task from the outset was to find a way to engage and enthuse teenagers in their local public library. Looking at the responses to *The Hidden*, I'd like to think we might just be doing that.