

## Using Natural History to Engage with Theatre History at the MSU Museum (THR 431)

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The origins of theatre tend to be traced to Ancient Greece, or (by some scholars) to the Abydos Passion Play in Egypt. The collections of the MSU Museum, especially the Hall of Evolution, Habitat Hall, and the Hall of Animal Diversity, encourage us to consider history in the *longue durée* (i.e., over a broad scope of time). How might questions raised by natural history and museum exhibition practices enhance our study of theatre history?

### Hall of Evolution (Ground Floor)

- Discuss: What might pre-historic theatre look like? What is the relationship between theatre and evolution?
- Based on Mark Damen's discussion of paleontology in relation to theatre history, do you see evidence of "lumpers" or "splitters" in this exhibit?
  
- The Hall of Evolution includes fossils arranged in chronological order from the Cambrian period to the Pleistocene Era. Think about periodization in theatre history; how would you arrange the history of theatre into historical periods? What would you call the time during which Shakespeare wrote plays? How about Ibsen and Chekhov? List your theatrical periods here:

### Hall of World Cultures (Ground Floor)

- How does theatre relate to culture? Find at least one object that could be used for a theatrical performance. What does that object tell us about the culture that created it?

- The Hall of World Cultures exhibit is organized according to four broad themes (“Culture is...”). List those four themes. How does this thematic organization affect your experience of the exhibit?

### **Hall of Animal Diversity (2nd Floor)**

- How would you describe diversity in forms and genres of theatre?

### **Habitat Hall (2nd Floor)**

- What is the natural habitat for theatre? (Indoors? Outdoors? Typically an urban environment?) Do digital media threaten the “natural habitat” of live theatre? If theatre is endangered, what are the predators threatening theatre? Does theatre have many natural habitats? List the optimal natural habitat and/or “predators” here:

### **Collections Connections (1st Floor)**

- Pull out some drawers and see what is in them. Many of the drawers will have objects related to ritual (see “Death and Life in Egypt,” for example). Have you saved symbolic objects of rituals from your own life? If you were to collect artifacts for a museum of theatre history, what would you collect?