

the actor

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IMTAL

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

*I have edited a number of issues for IMTAL Insights over the years, but none have touched me quite like the words put forth from the actor/authors who contributed to this particular issue. I started my career in education as an actor in a museum, and while I am now a Head of Education and Visitor Experience for a NYC art museum, I contribute much of my success in museums to my experiences working with visitors on the floors of exhibition halls, helping them meet a young Leonardo Da Vinci, a time traveling archaeologist, or even a ladybug. My work with visitors has propelled me to further my educational studies, and I am happy to think that many actor/interpreter/educators are doing the same. In few instances teachers in the formal educational system are even moving into the museum theatre world. The emotional world of an actor in a museum can be a roller coaster, and in this issue there are peaks and dips of which we may all be aware, but which haven't been voiced in one large publication. Perhaps because I work so close to Wall Street, I am happy to report that for this issue, actors are occupying Insights!*

**Marcos Stafne**

***The International Museum Theatre Alliance is a nonprofit, professional membership organization and an affiliate to the American Association of Museums.***

***The mission of the International Museum Theatre Alliance is to inspire and support the use of theatre and theatrical technique to cultivate emotional connections, provoke action, and add public value to the museum experience.***

# report from the 2011 imtal mini-conference

**JILLIAN FINKLE**

Where can someone meet two mathematicians, about twenty scientists, a teenager from 1990, four frogs, an orangutan, an eagle, a raccoon, a talking tree, and fifty-seven practitioners of museum theatre all in one day? Why, at the IMTAL 2011 Mini-Conference of course!

IMTAL-ers descended on the Children's Museum of Indianapolis on September 25th for a day jam-packed full of performances, panel-led discussions, networking, and idea-sharing. Intentionally scheduled the day before the start of the Theater in Museums Workshop, also held at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, many of the participants took advantage of the opportunity to attend both events.

The Mini-Conference began with a high-energy performance from the Science Museum of Minnesota, *Lost in Science*, in which the cranky Professor Smartpants McGee learns about the many achievements of women in science, even though many of them have been left out of the textbooks.

The first session of the day explored the recruitment and training of presenters of museum theatre, with special attention paid to non-actors. Elizabeth Pickard, from the Missouri History Museum, led the session and described her work with the Teens Make History program. Heather Barnes, from the Museum of Science and Industry, discussed the systematic training process through which new staff members at her institution learn to present the many different programs they offer. David McDaniel, from the Indiana State Museum, shared how his program is changing to present outreach programs. And I shared the processes I have been using to quickly train actors to present programs for prototyping purposes.

The attendees were treated to two performances in the Children's Museum's galleries. *Don't Give Up*, a touching monologue portrayal of Ryan White's best friend, was performed in the *Power of Children* exhibition. *Hipper and Hopper: Two Toadally Awesome Frogs: A Chorus of Colors* exhibition and featured amphibious jokes and participatory creative dramatics.

The second session allowed for questions and answers about the physical space and technical issues faced by museums when presenting theatrical programs. Stephanie Long of the Science Museum of Minnesota led the session, joined by stage/lighting designer and professor Jonathan Hicks. They both shared photos, descriptions, and analyses of the spaces in which they work. Dave McLellan, from the Zoological

Society of Milwaukee, showcased the flexible set pieces and sound system his staff uses both at the zoo and for outreach. Carey Meier, Interpretation Programs Manager at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, described several examples of how her team makes space for performances in temporary and new permanent exhibitions.

After a short time to explore the museum itself, the third session tackled questions of institutional support, advocacy, funding, and partnerships. George Buss, from the Minnetrista Cultural Center, shared how he learned the importance of integrating a theatre program completely into its host organization, and led the panelists in trying to address the many questions the attendees raised concerning these important topics. Andy Park, from the Shedd Aquarium, reminded us how one must sometimes "spend money to make money" (in this case by creating a video representation of a possible performance to be used for fundraising purposes) and in doing so, the importance of "showing, not telling" (which as you may remember is Museum Theatre commandment #1). Greg Hardison, from the Kentucky Historical Society, discussed how museum theatre programming must adapt when institutional objectives change.

Simone Mortan, from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, served as the emcee for the Mini-Conference's Museum Theatre Showcase. The Zoological Society of Milwaukee presented *A Climb Through Time with Clues and Rhyme*, written by Jonathan Ellers, which challenges audiences to read labels on packaged foods and not buy items made with palm oil (because farms of palm oil trees destroy orangutan habitat.) The Science Museum of Minnesota presented a lively boxing match between Sir Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibnitz over who actually invented calculus (and both boxers were played by the same actor – imagine that!) The Museum of Science and Industry showcased a program that uses role-play to achieve its mission: putting the program participants in the role of doctors in order to think of themselves as scientists. The final performance of the evening included two excerpts from a longer play presented as an outreach program by Minnetrista. Entitled *Habitat-tat-tat*, the first story told of a tree that became mighty and majestic when he learned to become a home to others, and the second story told of an insect that discovered that through the chain of life, he was a part of the great, soaring eagle.

The day concluded with a reception in the lobby of the Children's Museum's Lilly Theater where

participants could continue the conversations of the day over drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Some of the adventurous (or less tired!) attendees also headed out for a post-conference dinner at Binkley's restaurant where they kindly put us in a private room and managed 26 separate checks!

In addition to the Mini-Conference, the IMTAL Board seized the opportunity to hold a meeting in person. The Indiana State Museum graciously hosted us for the meeting and also provided a much-needed afternoon break with a private performance of their musical outreach production, *Reptile Theater*. The entertaining performance (intended for PreK–3rd grade audiences) served as a reminder of why we all do what we do every day. The rest of the time was spent planning future events, sneaking a peek at the new website ([www.imal.org](http://www.imal.org)), and setting the timeline for the election of new board members.

We're all already very excited about next year's IMTAL conference in Atlanta, GA, set for August 17-19, 2012. The Atlanta History Center and the Imagine-It! Children's Museum of Atlanta will be hosting, and it sounds like there are already some very unique ideas in the works – we hope you'll all be able to join us for that one!



# the life and challenges of a museum actor

**MATT ANDERSON**



**I**n my bright blue outfit and neon green cape, guests instantly recognize me as a superhero. Of course, because Captain Extraordinary is unique to our museum, they don't necessarily know which superhero I am. I often get: "Green Lantern!" or "Superman!" (or one time, inexplicably: "Wonder Woman!"). Either way, the kids are excited. We talk about dinosaurs and Transformers and how people can use porcupine quills to make art... but now it's 10:30 am, and I must bid my friends farewell. I head to the dressing room and replace the outfit with an understated gray suit, a vest, and a tie. I whiten my temples and paint spirit gum on my lip to affix a mustache. Finally, I make my way to *The Power of Children* exhibition where, as Anne Frank's father, I give a performance about the holocaust.

This is just my average day as an actor at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

For me, the fact that this is just an "average day" is precisely why I love the job so much. It's a ridiculous understatement, but performing as Captain Extraordinary is rather different from performing as Otto Frank. And performing as Otto Frank is rather different from — well, whatever I'll be performing next. Yet that's exactly what makes the job so great: the incredible and almost staggering variety of programs we do here.

As much as I do love it, I had no idea growing up that this is what I'd be doing for a living. While I'd been interested in acting for much of my life—from making videos with friends in middle school to obtaining a theatre major in college—I never thought I'd be able to do anything with it for a career. Following graduation, I found work at the fantastical City Museum in St. Louis, Missouri and later at the Betty Brinn Children's Museum in Milwaukee, Wis-

consin. I've always enjoyed working with children and families on these jobs, though not traditionally in the theatre, felt well suited to me. It wasn't until moving to Indianapolis in 2008 and seeing a listing for ACTOR on their children's museum's website that I realized that what I'd assumed were two entirely separate career tracks could actually merge.

My case is not an isolated one. There are nine full-time actors here at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and most have similar stories — a theatrical interest nurtured in high school, pursued into undergraduate studies, but with post-graduate jobs suddenly veering far from that path: brokerage assistant, coffee-shop barista, ballroom dance choreographer. Why weren't we all actively pursuing careers in theatre, when it was clearly something we all loved?

Unfortunately, work in that discipline can have something of a stigma around it — being an actor means being either absurdly rich or famous in Hollywood, or a starving artist on the streets. It's easy to see those extremes and not realize that there is a theatrical middle ground, such as in museums, especially if that type of specialized field is not yet in the public consciousness. Perhaps in the years to come, museum theatre will become a more mainstream profession. As it stands, my coming across this job may very well have been a fluke... and as such, I feel extremely lucky to have found it, and extremely lucky to once again be doing what I love.

It's 12:15 pm, and I've just finished three back-to-back performances as Otto Frank. The audiences were extremely engaged today; one child told me afterward that she was reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in her class. A man recounted tales of his own Jewish parents living in Germany at the time of the Holocaust. These

types of interactions are fantastic, and that's where this brand of theatre reaches another realm entirely—because while it is very much theatre in every sense of the word, it also inherently contains many unique characteristics that traditional theatre does not, the audience-interaction component being perhaps the most prominent.

Of course, museum theatre also contains its own unique wealth of challenges. The aforementioned variety of shows we perform may be one of the job's greatest joys, but it also presents some fundamental difficulties. Among the nine of us, there are between thirty and forty programs that could be performed at any given time, in just about any gallery of the museum (I myself know over twenty). Thus, we don't have the luxury of living and embodying a single role for a pre-set run of a show, as you would with a standard stage play. Getting out of bed in the morning, I have no idea what characters I'm going to have to pull out of my hat within the next few hours. I have to be ready for anything.

Furthermore, we switch gears quickly. Sometimes the window between programs is literally as long as it takes to leave one performance space, change into another costume, and travel to the next performance space. At times, there are mere minutes in which to mentally prepare yourself for walking into your late daughter's bedroom, her beloved diary in hand, to reminisce about her ambitions and ideals.

Despite the sliver of time to get into character, today my portrayal of Otto Frank was apparently a success, nonetheless, and I'm still engaged in a rewarding post-show discussion when I look at my watch to see that it's nearly 12:30 pm. Unfortunately, I have to cut the interaction short and get to my next program. I return to the dressing room, where I step out of my dapper attire and immediately into a jumpsuit with a dirty rag sticking out of the back pocket. Plunger in hand, I hurry to the first floor to discuss one of the museum's most memorable icons, a twenty-six-and-a-half foot tall water clock. My character, Vic the Plumber, has absolutely no idea how it works and is going to need the audience's help to figure it out.

This program takes place in an entirely different setting, and thus I am presented with another difficulty intrinsic to the job, that of performance space. Discussing the water clock, I stand in the middle of the museum's main atrium. In front of me, families are purchasing lunch in the food court. Overhead, the loudspeaker breaks in every now and then to call a guest to the concierge desk. Most of our programs take place smack dab in the middle of the exhibitions themselves, with nothing separating the performer and their spectators from the other families milling around the gallery, talking, laughing, and enjoying themselves as they should.

This may also in part contribute to audience members not always knowing exactly how to behave during a performance. How do you compose yourself in a setting that's simultaneously a stage and an active exhibition space? It's a tricky enough question for any of our guests to figure out, let alone someone who may not have been exposed to museum theatre before. As one visitor remarked: "We've never been to a museum where you've got acting right there in front of you."

In some instances this is not only a visitor's first exposure to museum theatre, but to any type of theatre at all. A good number of our guests, through no fault of their own, simply don't have a pre-enforced understanding of how to watch this type of performance. A

patron's previous experiences in other museums for children may have consisted of non-stop running and playing, so the concept of paying attention for twenty minutes within what they may very well view as an indoor playground can be rather foreign.

While today's Otto Frank crowd did happen to be involved and interested, this is by no means the standard. Frequently, any of the nine of us will return to our dressing room and recount tales of what just occurred: a teenager who texted throughout the entire show; a mom who answered her phone at the most dramatic part of the performance; a child, ignored by the parent, who kept getting up and walking right onto the stage. Granted, these are not issues that are unique to museum theatre; any actor who's been in more than two plays will surely have a story about an audience member answering their phone mid-show. However, in a standard theatrical setting, it is not the cast's problem; the house manager would make their way to the distracting party, asking them to please turn off their phone, and the actors just keep acting away.

If this occurs during one of our pieces, we do not have the same luxury. A museum theatre performer is not merely an actor; we juggle performance and crowd control simultaneously. As my co-worker Melissa Sokolski states, this "can be very jarring at first to an actor used to performing on a traditional stage." And the issue is never black-and-white. How long do I let a person continue their disruptive behavior before saying something? Do I break character or attempt to deal with the issue as, say, the 1850s paleo-artist that I'm portraying would? Will my interrupting the flow of the performance in order to deal with the issue end up being more distracting and detrimental than the issue itself?

In short, what is the balance between performer and educator?

Fellow actor Christa Grimmer, during a discussion about this struggle, made an astute observation: "The audience controls the performance, instead of the other way around." Museum theatre does not exist purely for theatre's sake, and it is not merely for the audience, it is about the audience. Each performance exists within the context of the surrounding gallery and its topical environment, and the audience will make of it what they will in order to get out of it what they want. As Melissa Sokolski also remarked, "I feel like the character I play is secondary to the facts/messages I'm imparting to the children."

There is no blanket answer to the question of performer vs. educator, no specific weight that you can put on one side of the scale in order to balance out the challenges on the other. It all hinges on the audience, and there are just too many variables; it is our responsibility to mold each individual performance to the given group, to make sure that they do get out of it what they want. I might be giving a presentation about the Reuben Wells, our museum's locomotive from 1868, and a child will raise his hand to tell me that he has Thomas the Tank Engine at home. I can't merely ignore this and move on with the program as scripted. Again, it's not about me; the program's success is not measured by how precisely I recite my memorized lines and how much applause I get afterward. It's about this boy's experience, and I need to cultivate that. I therefore acknowledge his comment, relate it to the topic at hand, and then find my way back onto my previous track.

Granted, finding a link between the museum's steam engine and Thomas the Tank Engine is pretty much a no-brainer, but not every comment someone makes is this clear-cut. Once, giving a performance as one of the federal marshals that escorted Ruby Bridges



Water clock presentation in the museum's busy atrium, a challenging setting in which to perform.  
Photo by Patricia Daily

to school in 1960, I was discussing the cross brandished by protestors to signify their belief that racial segregation was God's will. At that point, a young girl raised her hand and, with absolute sincerity, stated: "Sometimes, you have to share your socks."

This caught me completely off-guard. I'd never before received a comment that was so seemingly random, yet in that little girl's mind, there was some sort of meaningful connection between what I'd been talking about and what she had said. There's always a "nugget of truth" (as is the informal terminology) hidden somewhere in any comment—heck, even the kid who called me Wonder Woman had at least made the connection from one superhero to another, and that alone was enough to spark a conversation—and our job is to find it.

Somehow, I managed to weave together a response to the girl about how sharing certainly is important in order to show that you're someone's friend, which is what the protestors should have been doing for Ruby Bridges. It may have been a stretch, but the girl seemed satisfied. Her comment had been validated, and hopefully, in some way, it helped her take something away from the exhibit and the performance that she otherwise may not have.

After all, that's exactly why we do what we do. And when it works, it works. I once overheard a father after a program commenting to his wife, "It was just a play, but I feel like I learned something." Another time, a parent was complimenting a performance she'd just seen and said to me, "They learn a lot, and they didn't even realize you were teaching them." It's so incredibly fulfilling to hear quotes like that and realize that it did work. These people have seen something that they may have never seen before, and they're taking something amazing—and, we like to think, life-changing—away with them.



Rex the dinosaur bids visitors farewell after a successful end-of-the-day parade.  
Photo by Patricia Daily

It's 4:40 pm, and I am adjusting the helmet straps inside of a mascot head to make sure it fits securely onto mine. With the last snap fastened and last zipper zipped, I am finishing out the day as Rex, the Children's Museum dinosaur. The other actors and I head up to the top floor and begin gathering families from the surrounding galleries... and then, as energetic parade music begins, we all march down the ramp from fourth floor to first, bidding the museum a fond farewell.

This is the end-of-the-day parade, the way we finish every day at The Children's Museum. Instead of just making an announcement over the loudspeaker telling everyone that it's time to go home, we provide our guests with one final hurrah, one last exciting memory to end their visit.

And it serves the same purpose for us. We've all had a busy day, running from program to program and interacting with audiences that are different from any others we've had. We've all had to flex our on-the-spot ad-libbing skills with kids who've asked questions that we've never heard before. Have any of us discovered the universal balance between performer and educator? Nope. But at our parade, none of that matters. The actors get a chance to have one last bit of fun, and to let out a collective sigh at the shared experience of the hectic, exciting, challenging, strange, unexpected, extraordinary day we've all had.



From heroics to history: the author's roles as Captain Extraordinary (left) and Otto Frank (right).  
Photo by Ned Shaw

Which, after all, is just an average day at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. So we march down the ramp, cheering and waving, and get ready to come back and do it all again tomorrow.

*Matt Anderson has worked as a full-time actor at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis since March of 2008. In addition to the acting itself, Matt's job also includes creating/developing new characters and scripts for his department, and sometimes even costumes, props, and puppets for the museum's theatre.*

# down in history

**DAWN BRODY**

When I graduated from high school, it was 1997... and everyone had a job. The Spice Girls and Hanson topped the charts – confirming to me (and my fellow youth) that this big ol’ world was an oyster, and it was all ours.

So under the tutelage of Disney, Oprah, and up-beat sitcoms – I followed a naive dream and moved to the big Twin Cities from my tiny Wisconsin town to study theatre. Four years later I had a great education from the University of Minnesota complete with a foreign language (French), a minor (history), the ability to “emote from my whale-spout” (figurative), and, of course, a daunting 5-figure debt.

But no problem! There were theatres on every block around here. Many of my professors at the U could hardly fit their teaching into a schedule littered with film shoots, voice-overs, and long-running theatre gigs.

Three months after my college graduation, and coinciding, to the day, with my first student loan payment, certain planes flew into certain buildings in New York. Along with several other million people around the world, I found that everything had changed.

Talent agencies were reluctant to represent new actors, several theatres went dark, and production companies largely evaporated. So... I was a receptionist, a waitress, and a customer service representative. Then, remarkably, the auditions came back – although as transformed as everything else.

Among the first was an audition not for a theatre or a film or a commercial, it was a museum — The Bakken Museum in Minneapolis — and they were looking for an actress (wha?) with experience in theatre and history (gasp!) to perform as Mary Shelley, weekly, for MONEY (yes!).

Working at the Bakken, I learned something vitally important about being an actor: that we are an unparalleled conduit for ideas. It was something that I understood from doing traditional theatre, but in a limited sense – functioning almost exclusively as conduit to fiction and fantasy. In the museum, when I was performing Mary Shelley, something else happened, something very surprising.

People would approach me, for example, and noting the accent and the period dress, they would shyly address me as “Mary” and then say something like:

*“I read your book in high-school and it scared the crap out of me.”*

*“Yes, well...” I’d reply, “when Byron first read his ghost stories to me I was terrified. Couldn’t sleep for a week!”*

*“Byron?” they would ask. “Like... Lord Byron?”*

*“The same. I spent the summer with him and some friends when I was 16. That’s when I got the idea for Frankenstein.”*

*“Really? I thought Percy came up with the idea.”*

*“Percy? Heavens no, he was far too busy seducing my sister!”*

And there they were. Learning. But more than that, they were feeling and reacting to facts from history that would have rolled off their consciousness had they merely read the bullet-points. As for me, I had memorized. I had taken on a character. I had dressed in a costume and improvised. I was doing my job and it felt so good.

Ten years later I am a fulltime, freelance actress/educator. Not only does this job feed my soul, but it manages to also feed my dog and pay my mortgage year after year. It is, however, a highly changeable, kaleidoscopic career, and the demands of each job can vary dramatically.

For example, I also work as a guide for Down in History Tours in Saint Paul. We offer two-hour gangster tours where a costumed gangster leads you to the sites of kidnappings, hideouts, and shoot-outs. While comparable in many ways to working in a museum, the demands of this job are entirely different.

The gangster tours are billed as an “experience.” Although all the history that we present is researched extensively and crosschecked, this is an audience that expects to have fun and be entertained. I play ‘Kitty Kelley,’ George Machine-Gun Kelley’s wildly manipulative wife. Dressed like a flapper and seeming at first to be a perfect airhead, this woman proves to be your key to the inside. She knows everything there is to know about making hooch, spotting a snitch and hiding from the feds. Ideally, visitors go home laughing and entertained, but find themselves at work the next day wowing their colleagues with their new knowledge of “history.”

Making history interesting and accessible is wonderfully satisfying, but there have been other performing opportunities that have proven to be even more rewarding.

Several years ago I became a member of Crisis Company. Originating in Denver, Colorado, they specialize in training law enforcement personnel, correctional officers, and hostage negotiators through highly realistic role-play. If I had ever thought a group of school kids might be resistant to “museum theatre,” it is nothing compared to what a group of veteran cops feel when they learn the actors are coming.

After we begin, however, a participant might find himself sitting outside a “trashed house” with his collar unbuttoned and sweat rolling down his temple. I’m inside the house and we’re on our second hour of a scenario in which I am portraying a female combat veteran suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I’ve been screaming, crying, and swearing and I refuse to open the door. As his instructor and classmates watch, the participant has to evaluate the situation, improvise, and de-escalate it without the use of force.

I have spent weeks researching not only the disease and its effects, but the medications and their effects. I know everything about the character: the unit she served in, to the gun she carried, people she served with. The participant may get defensive, or mistake the Army for the Marines, or get her name wrong. And if he does – just like in reality – she escalates. Depending on where we are, she may slam a door, take a drink, or call him a name that one ought never call a cop.

But he handles it well. He learned about this in a lecture earlier in the day and now he gets to test it out. He takes a breath; he apologizes and looks her in the eye, getting the name right this time. She smiles a little, maybe the fighting turns to sobbing, and he gets one step closer to resolving the situation and getting her to safety.

For me, it is roller coaster; it’s a fully improvised but highly structured performance that runs longer than your average play at the Guthrie, performed with a scene partner who doesn’t know what to do. It is also a rare opportunity to serve my community as an actor in a way that has nothing to do with entertaining or making ‘em laugh.

Indeed, what I have learned as an “actor/educator” is that the “/educator” is hardly necessary. Whether one is speaking the words of Juliet, Mary Shelley, or Sergeant Holly Balcolm, it is the same art that guides us. In each case we are conduits between the time we live in and the stories that got us there, and the people who need to hear them.



*Born and raised in central Wisconsin, Dawn Brodey moved to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota. She has been a full-time, professional actress and writer in the Twin Cities for ten years; she currently lives aboard a houseboat on the Mississippi River in St. Paul.*





# but I was finally learning something

MELISSA FERLAND

“But I was finally learning something!” exclaimed an eight year old boy to his camp counselor who was leading him away from our interaction last July. This was a sentence that reflected to me the yearning that all children have for visceral, hands-on learning, a sentence that lingers with me still: “I was finally learning something.”

I worked as an actor-interpreter at the Canadian Museum of Civilization for eight years. I was still in my twenties when I started. I worked through three pregnancies (I was a few days from giving birth, having contractions in the wings, during one of our shows), turnover of colleagues, changes of government, and the rise of Facebook. How many online photos of strangers I am in, I will never know. There were afternoons in which I had the strong suspicion that between 3 and 4 o'clock, I was being photographed more than the Eiffel tower. There were times when I was so overwhelmed when I finished an hour on the museum floor that I was sure I couldn't go back for another hour, but of course I did, because it was my work, and because I felt I was of service. In the age of Facebook, I was a real person that one could touch and laugh with, and cry with, and learn with. A man said to me recently, after we had laughed and enjoyed a very philosophical exchange pertaining to 18th century religion, “well, after 20 years of therapy, I've never felt better than I have after 10 minutes with you.”

It turns out that my museum, the “mommy museum” as my kids call it, no longer needs my services. Dramamuse, our theatre company, was axed a few months ago. Four full-time actor positions were terminated, our artistic director and our production coordinator were also laid-off, and many contractors (like our costume designer, who worked for Dramamuse for twenty-some years) also lost parts of their livelihood.

Our partnership with the local university's theatre department has ended and there will be no more professional museum theatre internships for young actors (what a wonderful way to start one's theatre career, at a museum!) We were told that the museum

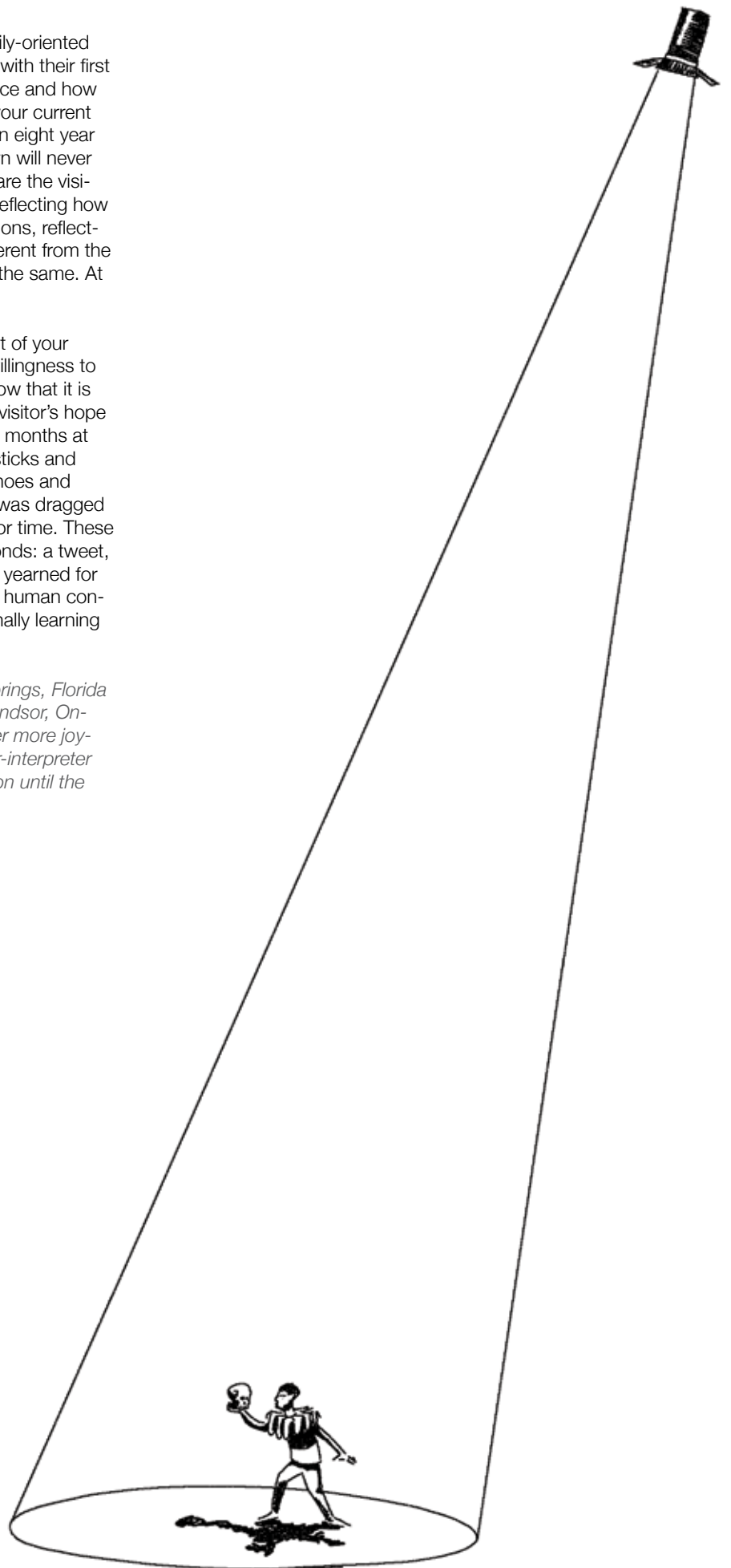
is going in another direction. A more technological direction, I suspect, with flashier tricks than those I could offer with my 1755 New France innkeeper character, who gossiped and whispered the town secrets, who knew the patron saints for all ailments (from St. Crispin for sore feet to St. Rita for headaches), who feared the English but was clever enough to know just a bit of their language in case she ever needed to sell them a drink. A more technological direction that will not, in all likelihood, display all the condescension and disdain that my 1885 southern Ontario temperance lady could hold from the height of her societal status and privilege for those whom she considered inferior, though she too whispered of lady doctors, of suffrage, of inequality, of nerves, of prisons, of alcohol. There will be a more fashionable way to represent the whaler, the fur trader, the shanty cook, the Irish maid, the prairie farmer, the female union leader, and the bush pilot. There will be a trendier way to “connect” with visitors than an actor answering questions with a question, drawing out the visitor and challenging her, making her laugh, engaging her, provoking her, soliciting empathy. All of those voices, ours and our ancestors', are silent for now, trumped by the museum's twitter feed and potential video projectors. Sometimes my mind wanders: where did they go, these characters? Do the schoolchildren who would come year after year, certain that I remembered them, wonder where my character is? And what and who, pray tell, does the 3 o'clock crowd photograph now that the actors are not there? Who will sit and listen, and tell the scandals and rejoice in the daily events of the town, and ask the visitor his story?

And so my colleagues, because it is all hindsight for me now, I bid you to allow yourselves to fall in love with your work, to remember to serve the public with your talent, and to know that you are doing tremendously important work. You are bringing to life the voices of the past and the stories of the people who went before us, drawing out the stories of your audience, and most importantly making connections, human connections, to a society (and particularly young people) infatuated with the speed and convenience of a computer

screen. You are providing families with affordable, family-oriented and often custom-tailored theatre, and some children with their first theatre experience. Think of your first theatre experience and how it changed and propelled you, for surely it influenced your current vocation, and be sure that you are providing that for an eight year old whose name you will not remember but who in turn will never forget you. Your work has tremendous meaning. You are the visitor's mirror into the past, and his mirror onto himself: reflecting how we are alike and different through centuries and situations, reflecting the image of the past and how it is similar and different from the present, reflecting how we have changed and stayed the same. At best, you inspire social change.

Actor-interpreters, your greatness lies in the enjoyment of your work, in your enjoyment of your visitors, and in your willingness to transcend the past into the present, and to always know that it is your duty to learn from the visitor as much as it is the visitor's hope to learn from you. I figured that one out during my last months at the museum. As I packed up eight years' worth of lipsticks and makeup sponges, as I folded my corsets and tidied shoes and bonnets, I thought of that eight year old camper who was dragged away by his counselor for the sake of being pressed for time. These days, a perfectly good interaction lasts but a few seconds: a tweet, or the ping of a chat message. But this young boy, he yearned for what I had to offer, and what you have to give: time, a human connection, a human touch, and a bit of theatre. "I was finally learning something."

*Melissa has been an actor since her youth in Coral Springs, Florida and has performed on stages from Quebec City to Windsor, Ontario. She has taught theatre at high schools and never more joyfully than at a Maine summer camp. She was an actor-interpreter for Dramamuse, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization until the termination of the company.*



# climate change, penguins and theatre?

CAT CHIAPPA



## a day in the life of the coordinator of theatrical interpretation at the monterey bay aquarium

10:30-Actor Morning Meeting

11:00-Whales to Windmills Auditorium Program

12:15-Think Big

2:15-Think Big

3:00-Penguin Feeding Presentation

3:45-Think Big

4:15-Actor Debrief Meeting

Meet with the actors and then deliver the "Whales to Windmills" auditorium program. After that it's time to eat lunch and change before stepping in to act in "Think Big," our newest musical. Then, work on the actors schedules for the following week, before it's time to sing with the actors again at the 2:15 show. Next it's time to change into boots and talk about penguins before performing in the last show of the day. Then a final debrief with the actors at the end of the day before they go home.

As Coordinator of Theatrical Interpretation at the Monterey Bay Aquarium these are the thoughts I might have on any given day as I sit at my desk in the morning and plot out a daily schedule. In addition to carrying a small program load for our Programs team, which can on any given day involve working with live animals as well as delivering a diverse group of presentations in the auditorium, I am also responsible for our theatre programs. This means working with a team to develop anything from historic interpretation, exhibit improv, and children's activities to short, full-scale musicals. It also means that I am responsible for auditioning a staff of actors, supervising, directing, music directing, and occasionally stepping in as one of the actors from time to time.



Our programs are designed around the Aquarium's mission of inspiring ocean conservation. During the summer we hire a talented group of actors from around the country as part-time staff who work with us to perform a variety of programs each day from early June through Labor Day weekend. The primary focus is on our two musicals, funded largely due to a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). These shows use both music and singing as a vehicle to teach family audiences important information about climate change. *Enough Stuff* is a more traditional musical in which a few different animals including a flamingo, a penguin, and a sea turtle move into a child's home as a result of the problems they are facing in the wild due to climate change. They inform the child that they are not leaving until she/he agrees to make some changes- specifically to use less and think more smartly about the items that he/she buys. *Think Big* is our newest show and centers on the theme of community action as a means to make a difference. This show uses larger than life animal puppets made from recycled and repurposed materials to get the message across. The four puppets (a sardine, a sea turtle, an albatross, and a school of sardines) are required to work together to solve a problem.

In addition to the two main musicals, actors also learn a few smaller programs. *Seahorse Magic* teaches about seahorse conservation and includes an opportunity for an adult male volunteer to dress up like a seahorse and "give birth" to a number of seahorse babies. *Real Coast Café*, an exhibit about the importance of consuming sustainable seafood, allows the actor to sharpen his/her improvisation skills as a waiter or chef. This year we also debuted a program where actors dress in period clothing and deliver first person interpretation about what it was like to be a cannery worker during the height of the sardine canning period in Monterey.

All museum theatre professionals face challenges in terms of space and staffing, but working at the Aquarium is always an adventure because in our world, the health and safety of the animals comes first, even if it isn't an animal in our collection. For example, our musicals

are performed outside in a beautiful amphitheater setting overlooking a manmade tide pool in the ocean, an area where we run dive programs for children ages 8-13. When the children are in the water, we are unable to run our shows, but we are also unable to do our shows if a wild otter with a pup drifts into that space. The Monterey Bay is a protected marine sanctuary and the marine mammals get first priority. Imagine having to cancel a show because there is a live otter right behind your stage! Strange as it sounds, it can and does happen.

As actors, we are required to be flexible, and in my position I have had to take that flexibility to the next level. While my job is more about making sure the acting staff has all of the tools and training they need to be successful rather than acting onstage myself, I have learned the value of knowing the roles as well, because you never know what might happen. There were several days this past summer where I had to fill in, but I found that in doing so the actors respected me more because I was willing and able to do the same job that they did. It also kept them on their toes and helped things stay fresh and interesting.

Museum theatre professionals all have stories to tell. Sometimes we tell them through song and dance or illustrate them through puppets. We might dress up as characters from days gone by to share history or an important conservation message; or weave a tale to an auditorium full of people who hang on our every word. Sometimes you might even see us pulling on our boots to go talk about a live animal. These are things we do every day because they matter and because we are confident that theatre is an effective method of informal education. Speaking of informal education, I think it is almost time to talk about the penguins again! Thanks for reading and break a leg!

*Cat Chiappa has been with the Monterey Bay Aquarium for two years and is in charge of the Aquarium's theatrical programming. She holds a Bachelor's in music with theatre, Masters in Museum Education, and has extensive experience as a performer, a music director and an educator.*

# becoming the spaceship

JULIE MAURO LEHNER



Julie Mauro Lehner and Matt Anderson bemoan frogs' shrinking habitats in *Hipper and Hopper: Two Toadally Awesome Frogs* by Margo Andrews  
Photo Credit: Patricia Daily

I walked around *Treasures of the Earth*, the new gallery at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, with my mouth open. It features three immersive exhibits showcasing archaeological finds from around the world. *The Captain Kidd* exhibit has a floor that sinks under you like sand. Replica pieces of Chinese terra cotta warriors wait for you (and your archaeological tools) to discover them. Pharaoh Seti I's tomb animates with stunning sound and light shows, revealing videos of ancient hieroglyphs while silhouettes cascade across the walls.

As I explored this latest technological accomplishment by our Exhibits Department, I found myself wondering how much longer I'd still have a job at the museum. I don't do pyrotechnics; I only do myself, costumes, and accents. I felt the old paranoia of being a freelance actress, looking for a new job about every two months. When I became a full-time museum actor-interpreter two years ago, I was captivated by the potential for creating transformative experiences for a wide, diverse audience of kids and their families. As ambitious or highbrow as that may sound, it doesn't mean we're embedded in Greek tragedy — and in fact, the very ordinariness and immediacy of theatrical interpretative programs is exactly what makes it seem so magical to me. When a goofy chef elicits the help of children and their families to make a healthy snack for Rex the Dinosaur, the kids' identification of what foods are good for Rex's lunch box is not the only thing that happens. Their eyes light up when they realize they were the ones who saved the museum dinosaur by keeping him from eating a terrible snack.

A few years ago, I taught theatre to children in South Korea. I struggled greatly at first. A South Korean native described her culture as "socio-centric." All I knew was that I could not get any of my students to act. They were happy to fill out worksheets, read out of a book, or play "hangman" — they loved "hangman" — but no amount of convincing, rationalizing, bribery, or threats could get a single volunteer to stand up and perform. They were paralyzed by a fear of standing out in the group, of being noticed — for positive or negative reasons. As teachers, we were cautioned not to make favorites out of students, because too much recognition, even for a positive accomplishment, could result in social assassination. Whole classrooms could shun one child mercilessly. So we soldiered through, and one of my classes even wrote a short script about an alien who came to earth to learn about humans. I was proud of their creativity, but simultaneously filled with dread. What use was an endearing new script if no actors were willing to give it life?

I discovered the solution purely by mistake. With no set and very few props for any sort of theatrical piece, I used the kids themselves as the spaceship that our alien drove to planet Earth. In the moment, I simply thought it was a clever way to get them out of their seats. I directed the kids to stand in a circle, facing out, holding brightly colored construction paper as the decoration on the ship. Suddenly, the spaceship took off. The kids simultaneously moved around the room, keeping their spinning circle intact with their peripheral vision and emitting otherworldly sounds. Eventually the spaceship stopped



Jay Schwandt and Julie Mauro Lehner as Schroeder and Lucy in TCM's 2011 production of Snoopy  
Photo Credit: Lilly Theatre

and the doors to the spaceship (created by the arms and legs of four students) opened. Out stepped our alien hero, a strange creature with three mouths, six eyes, and a shape-shifting quality. These young South Korean children, who all owned the latest in advanced and entertaining hand-held devices, were fully immersed in their imaginary theatrical creation.

I had been so fixated on the individualist approach to the theatre that I neglected to see my classes as a great ensemble cast. Provided that no one person had the full attention, they relaxed and worked together beautifully. Getting to the point where they could release their creativity and imagination required my direct interaction.

Being able to gauge and react to a crowd, and engaging them with the energy of live performance, are unique strengths the actor should possess. I feel that the museum actor's single greatest asset is his or her unique ability to stimulate creative thinking and invite imagination. Museum theatre is at its best when audiences aren't simply watching, but imagining.

Theatre, by its very nature, challenges the audience to creatively engage in the telling of the story. An actor telling a story with limited props gives the audience the luxury of imagining the story with the richness of detail that only imagination can provide. The specificity heralded in machines or video screens can also limit creativity by providing a finite experience, whose success rides more on the designer's imagination than the audience's.

Recently I was in the Treasures of the Earth gallery, performing a program as an underwater archaeologist. As part of the program, I saw a child exploring and crawling on the replica cannons from the *Captain Kidd* shipwreck.

I asked the girl, who was about seven, "How do you think they got this way?" She looked at them and then came up with a number of possibilities: maybe the water pushed them all together; maybe the pirates put them this way to find them later; maybe the fish tried eating on them.

The Exhibits department had done a stunning job recreating these ancient cannons, but I knew I still had a place and a paying job as a museum actress when I heard that little girl become an underwater archaeologist by engaging her imagination during my program. Bring it on, Exhibits! You can bring the 'wow' factor, you can make amazing things, and I'm sure you could even design and build a wonderful space ship.

But I can make 14 fifth-grade students from another country become one.

*Julie Mauro Lehner is an actor-interpreter at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. She has taught and performed children's theatre throughout the Midwest including the Children's Theatre Institute, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Northwestern University, and in Pohang, South Korea. Her play "Moment of Impact" premiered at the 2010 Indianapolis DivaFest Playwriting Festival.*

# inspired teaching

MARIAH FRY



Museum theatre is the fun part of teaching. Entering that world after eight years as a middle school theatre teacher rather than an actor felt like sneaking into a party through the side door. It's a way to use art to help people connect to important information, but there are no discipline plans to enforce, tests to administer and grade, or calls home to make.

As a theatre teacher, many people think I am insulated from the challenges of education, but all the parts of a school work together. I know theatre is a valuable teaching tool and that's why I chose it. I am amazed by the power of drama to present challenging or controversial information, because the audience is more likely to listen to a story, while a speech often make them put up their defenses. I love teaching students to create performances connected to their learning, but in the era of high-stakes tests, that isn't enough. A student who doesn't pass a state-mandated test usually has to take a remedial class. Like many schools, we have multiple teachers for these intervention classes, and just one drama teacher. Sometimes the isolation of being the only teacher in my department overwhelms me and I'm anxious at the end of each year, hoping that enough students passed the test (and want to take drama) to keep me employed.

I was getting to the edge of teacher burnout when I learned about museum theatre. It was like having a teenage crush on the cool kid who is out of your league. I so badly wanted to be involved, but wasn't sure how to ask. Luckily, I have a friend who encouraged me to apply for a summer internship at the Accokeek Foundation's National Colonial Farm. I thought I might be too old or inexperienced, so I was shaking before my audition, but I was accepted. It was over ninety degrees and humid most days at the farm, and every morning I was excited to go to work.

Each Friday we focused on rehearsal and script development for shows on the summer's theme: Crime and Punishment. On the weekends, interns were responsible for farm work and performance. I could chop wood, tend the garden, get locked in the pillory, stand trial, and through it all be guide visitors into a different world that in so many ways is no different from their own. I had never written a show with audience involvement, and so helping to write an adaptation of the children's story for our partnership with the National Children's Museum was a fantastic learning experience that I'm hoping to share with my students this fall.

I love writing and performing in the shows, but my favorite part is interacting with visitors in character. It's familiar since it's just like teaching. I think that it is the hardest part for many actors because it's not only about memorizing a script, as you also have to be a dramaturg. Most of the actors I talked to agreed that as they learn more about the characters they play, their performance becomes

richer. A museum show has to go up fast, though, so I think the best advice I received on interacting with visitors was to "answer the question you know, not necessarily the one that was asked." This is very useful at the start of a process because in one show you might be a farmer, and in the next you might be a scientist or an artist from any time period.

As a teacher, museum theatre is a great way to indulge in my love of performance and learning. I get to research people in depth that I might otherwise never have even known about. Right now I'm working with the National Museum of Women in the Arts on a piece about Maria Sybilla Merian, who has such an amazing history. Her work in research and art would have been groundbreaking in any era, but were even more so for a woman living in the 17th and 18th centuries. It's exciting to deeply explore the world through a single person's story rather than the broad overview of many stories required in the classroom. That complexity is what museums illustrate best. A museum performance is a unique experience for people of all ages in which they can explore a topic from a specific perspective. Each person comes away having learned something they didn't know before. Dealing with broader themes in a classroom filled with teenagers who see me every day requires me to create a wide range of experiences to keep students engaged. Each day I create lessons for four different courses and that quantity makes it difficult to consistently achieve the level of depth and interest that seems to come so naturally in a museum setting.

Being able to work with other adults who value theatre and its place in education reminds me how important storytelling is to learning, and that my role as a teacher is worth the effort. I'm even learning to enjoy auditions. As the amount of information that people need in order to understand the world increases, schools can't do it all. As teachers, we give students the outline and, hopefully, the skills to expand their knowledge. Museums are an increasingly important partner in the process as they provide opportunities to explore the details in a variety of learning styles. It's truly an honor to be in both worlds because I know that the joy I have in museum performance is the result of the hard work and preparation by artists and educators on the museum side. Their work inspires me to pass that joy and excitement on to my own students.

*Mariah Fry received her degree in theatre education from Arizona State University. She is a middle school theatre teacher in Fairfax County, Virginia. When she isn't performing in a museum show or working with her students, she can often be found giving tours at Carlyle House near her home in Alexandria, Virginia. She is grateful for the support from school colleagues, museum staff, and her husband.*

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International Museum Alliance  
c/o Museum of Science and Industry  
57th Street and Lake Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL 60637  
ATTN:Heather Barnes