

From Habitat to Stage:

Animal Training, Positive Reinforcement, and Becoming a Better Director

by Andy Park, Artistic Director, Shedd Aquarium

A thousand people lean forward in expectation. Angie waves to the audience, dives into the water and swims to the middle of the habitat. Suddenly, a 1300-pound beluga whale lifts her head out of the water and looks directly into Angie's eyes. The whale's name is Kayavak, a spunky 16-year-old beluga, who was born at Shedd Aquarium in August of 1999.

Kayavak opens her mouth, and Angie reaches in and gives her tongue an affectionate tickle. Angie spins in the water, and Kayavak joins her and spins. She playfully splashes water at Kayavak who promptly returns the gesture by spitting gallons of water right back into Angie's face. The playful session continues for several more minutes. Finally, Angie dives headfirst into the water and waves her feet in the air. Likewise, Kayavak dives in, extends her flukes out of the water and waves. The audience understands the session is over and vigorously applauds.

I've been watching trainer and animal interactions like Angie and Kayavak's for nearly nine years. The trainers call this particular type of training "water work" because they join the animals in the water rather than training from their usual platforms built into the habitat. Water work sessions are unique and only possible for experienced trainers who have developed a strong and trusting relationship with a specific animal. Most training depends in part on rewarding an animal's participation with their favorite food, but during water work, the trainer relies on the special relationship they've formed with the animal. Kayavak engages with Angie because she wants to.

"Committing exclusively to positive reinforcement is a long, patient road, but the reward is a rehearsal process that values the journey as much as the destination."



Andy Park, Shedd Aquarium

When I became artistic director in 2007, I was eager to work with the incredible animals and trainers at Shedd. I was excited to bring my theatre background to the aquatic show, and I wondered how Shedd's animal care experts would respond to performance feedback and show concepts from a theatre professional. I went into my first rehearsal process believing that I had a lot to share, and while I trust that I've made a difference over the years, the influence the trainers and animals have had on me is far greater.

The opportunity to direct marine mammal shows has informed my directing approach and process in more traditional theatrical settings as well.

At the top of the list of lessons learned is a complete and utter reliance on positive reinforcement. This approach requires great discipline and patience to maintain, but it has transformed my relationship with my closest collaborators as a director: the actors. I now carefully

continued on page 4

President's Welcome



Elizabeth Pickard, President

Happy Spring IMTAL! Whether you have just finished digging out from that last pesky snow or the azaleas are already gone by, or you are just waiting for the monsoon, I hope you are experiencing some renewed energy and creativity in your work this season. But if you, like me, are feeling more like your winter has crashed into your spring and your summer is bearing down on you with fall breathing down its neck—this issue of *Insights* will give us both some inspiration for managing challenges in our work.

We have a great selection of articles here. Michael Ritchie's how-to on conducting (pretend) murders at the museum, Kirk German's thoughtful examination of authenticity in museum theatre, and Andy Park's take on how working with animals taught him how to better manage people all give valuable ideas about how we can expand our work, push ourselves to be better, and keep that work consistent.

Speaking of new energy, the IMTAL board is thrilled to welcome back Todd D. Norris as our membership officer and to welcome Annie Johnson as our new treasurer. They both bring great experience and capabilities to our board, and I am grateful to them. I want to also thank Josh Blythe (nee Moore) for his three years as IMTAL's Treasurer—he has done a great job streamlining our budgeting and dragging us into a fiscal world where you can deposit a

check by taking a picture of it. His work has made us more efficient and better able to serve our members.

I always find the biggest boost I get in reinvigorating my work is through IMTAL conferences and events. In this issue you'll also find more information about our August conference August 26–30, 2016, to be held in and near Denver, CO. Our conference committee is already hard at work creating a conference to remember. The call for proposals is open, and you can register and reserve your hotel room, too (check the website for details) imtal-us.org. And don't miss our luncheon at IMTAL on May 28th at AAM, where we will honor this year's IMTY award winners for museum leaders who support museum theatre and Lipsky award for museum theatre playwriting excellence. We were thrilled to receive more outstanding submissions than ever for both awards this year. While it makes choosing a winner a tough job, it speaks to the strength and creativity in our field.

Thanks for reading IMTAL *Insights*. Happy Spring! We hope to see you at both AAM and IMTAL 2016.

Elizabeth



Editor's Corner

Miracles and the Practical Magic of Museum Theatre

"It's a miracle that anything actually gets produced."

That observation, from friend and theatre professor John Hill, has stayed with me from my first theatre course.

It was a basic intro course, though it wasn't the one I'd signed up for. I'd registered for "From Page to Stage," because as an avid theatre-goer and a writer, I wanted to understand how the words on a page morphed into a live performance. John emailed to let me know that "Page to Stage" hadn't met its minimum registration numbers and suggested that I switch to "Intro to Theatre," which covered a lot of the same material.

One of the course requirements was to attend two live shows and write reviews about them. My classmates shifted uneasily in their seats. I confess I just laughed and said, "Oh, twist my arm!" Any concerns I had about being the old crone in the classroom—I was a generation older than my classmates—vanished. I already had season tickets to pretty much everything you could get season tickets for in Fort Collins—two local theatre groups, touring shows, dance concerts. And now, as a student, I could get discounted tickets for shows I

continued...

usually didn't attend—university and college performances, for example. I could attend local dress rehearsal nights for free, too, if I wanted. I might even be able to swing a trip or two to some of the Denver companies.

And I'd been writing all kinds of things—pretty much every type of writing except scripts—for years. Writing reviews would be fun. I decided to write reviews for every show I saw, not just the two required.

Writing reviews changed the way I experienced performance. In retrospect, I ask myself: How could it not? But I didn't realize it had until halfway through the semester, a dozen reviews done and submitted to my instructor. I was standing in the parking lot after a show, expressing frustration with what I'd just watched.

“How do we create? Surely, the very act of inventing a story is a special kind of magic.”

Up until this time, I was probably a fairly ordinary audience member. I was aware of the components of a performance—sets, lighting, and sound, for example, as well as performers and costuming—but I didn't pay particular attention to them. I didn't think about how all these pieces fit together to make a cohesive story that resonates with audience members.

But to write a review, I had to pay attention to everything in the show. I had to at least recognize that all these components affected the outcome and, with a little luck, figure out *how* they affected the outcome, and what I thought and felt about that.

The problem with this specific performance was that I could see the potential of the play, and I could also see where that potential wasn't met. And if I could see it, why couldn't the director and the performers? Why didn't they fix it?

John listened patiently while I vented. He didn't disagree with my assessment. Instead, he said, “It's a miracle that anything actually gets produced.”

It shifted my thinking again. I didn't change my assessment of the performance, but I thought more about the challenges involved in creating and mounting a show, instead of focusing only on what happened on stage at this specific performance.

How do we create? Surely, the very act of inventing a story is a special kind of magic.

How do we come together to shape a story and transform the everyday world into one of time travel, adventure, discovery? The confluence of research, costuming, sets, lighting, sound, and actors is alchemy of the highest order.

How do we create community, build a better world, overcome our own foibles and faults, and celebrate our successes? How do we create real change, not just the illusion of change?

At the heart of Museum Theatre is a practical magic that makes the miracle possible.

This August, in Denver and Littleton, Colorado, IMTAL Americas will meet for four days at some of Colorado's top museums to share, play, and teach that practical magic.

The Call for Proposals has just opened <http://imtal-us.org> We have a block of rooms set aside just for IMTALers at the [Residence Inn](#) in downtown Denver, just a block from the Sixteenth Street Mall and Denver's famous LoDo <http://www.lodo.org/> and a short walk to the Denver Performing Arts Complex. Registration is open now, too. <http://imtal-us.org/event-2201970>

Turn to [page 12](#) for more details about the conference.

What magic brought you to Museum Theatre? What magic have you discovered? What magic do you wish for?

Judy



T. L. Brenneman

Judy Fort Brenneman, Publications Officer

manage my words when giving feedback so that the actors come to expect and even anticipate positive feedback.

Before explaining further, I want to be clear that I am not drawing a direct correlation between an actor and an animal or a trainer and a director. Positive reinforcement is a broad behavioral concept that has been applied across subjects ranging from parenting to international nuclear deals. In most contexts, positive and negative reinforcement are discussed together and viewed as reasonable methods to reinforce desired behavior.

In a traditional rehearsal process with actors, both positive and negative reinforcement are widely used. However, at Shedd, our training program relies on positive reinforcement exclusively. We never use negative reinforcement or punish the animals in our care. The animals will go their entire lives without ever being told that they're "bad" or hearing the word "no." If an animal gets confused or does something we don't want, we simply ignore the unwanted behavior and move on to something that the animal does know and understand so that we can reward the animal for a job well done.

In addition to the shows I create at Shedd, I'm also an active member of the Chicago theatre community. Several years ago, I was directing a large musical on the city's north side. I was giving notes to the actors after a run, and while I was going down the list on my clipboard, it occurred to me that most of my notes were detailing what had gone wrong, even though



©Shedd Aquarium/Heidi Zeiger

Angie and Kayavak



©Shedd Aquarium/Heidi Zeiger

Angie and Kayavak

rehearsal had mostly gone very well. I had always viewed Shedd and my outside theatre endeavors as two separate worlds, but suddenly, I was recognizing a very important overlap. Over the final weeks of the rehearsal process, I started to pay attention to myself very closely. I wish I could say that my approach changed immediately, but directing practices are habit forming, and it would take a careful and deliberate plan to change my approach.

Once the musical opened, I reflected on the entire rehearsal process from beginning to end, and I discovered that my approach was very inconsistent. Even though I started the process with a great deal of enthusiasm, as the process waned, I became so focused on the final product that I began to abandon my collaborative approach. I developed a cut-to-the-chase directness that made it clear to the actors that the time for collaboration had ended, and it was now up to me.

I decided to take steps to become more balanced in my approach. Trainers at Shedd have a consistent relationship with the animals in their care. The animals know what to expect from the trainers every single time they interact. A key to their consistency is their emphasis on the present training session. Even if a trainer is working on a complex behavior that could take several weeks to develop, they trust the process. They are looking for small steps in the right direction that they can positively reinforce.

I now plan my rehearsals differently. Instead of powering through each rehearsal trying to accomplish as much as possible, I spend more time before rehearsals even begin laying out the process and dividing each rehearsal into manageable proportions. I set clear goals for the day, and I only focus on what must be done at present. Once I reach a specific goal, I stop, and remember that tomorrow will come; I don't need to aggressively push forward. It's easier to keep the process light and positive when each day is only responsible for a small, very achievable step forward.

continued...

I also borrowed a very specific tool from Shedd's trainers. They are diligent about ending every training session on a positive note. The trainers do this because they want the animals to enjoy each interaction. When an animal makes progress on a new behavior, the trainer positively reinforces the behavior and moves on to something else. They never end training if the animal appears to be frustrated or confused; they always end with success, no matter how small. When I'm running a rehearsal, I now keep this top of mind, and if I start to sense frustration, I figure out how to pivot to something else that I know is working. What I like about this tool is that it's something I can consciously do every step of the way whether I'm working a monologue, a scene, or a song.

I'm trying to remove negative reinforcement, which has a tendency to conceal itself as "constructive criticism," from my process entirely. I'm not perfect, and I still make mistakes, but providing positive feedback is becoming habitual and second nature for me. If something is not working in an actor's performance, I find it better to focus on what is. I can address developing aspects of a performance with small adjustments before we tackle the scene again. Committing exclusively to positive reinforcement is a long, patient road, but the reward is a rehearsal process that values the journey as much as the destination.

Read about Shedd Aquarium's new show here:
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-shedd-dolphins-ent-0331-20160330-story.html>

Veracity, Verbatim Text, and Viewer Response: A Personal Meditation on Authenticity in Museum Theatre

by Kirk German, Educator, Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and Graduate Student, NYU

QUESTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY

About a year ago, I met one of my museum heroes. Let's call this museum hero of mine "Sandra" (because Sandra is her actual name). Sandra doesn't know that she's one of my museum heroes. I myself didn't know that she was one of my museum heroes until I met her.

I met Sandra last spring when she gave a presentation at one of my graduate seminars. Sandra is the director of programming at a prominent American museum; she is dynamic, funny, insightful, experienced, and brilliant—all of the adjectives I like to imagine I'll become some day, once I finally grow up. (Note: I am nearly forty.) Sandra's presentation was revelatory to me for several reasons, but my biggest takeaway came when she shared that her chief goal was "to foster the creation of unforgettable, luscious, *you-had-to-be-there* moments for visitors."

Unforgettable.

Luscious.

"You *had* to be there!"

I love this quote. It's become a personal mantra. Unfortunately, "to foster the creation of unforgettable, luscious, you-had-to-be-there moments for visitors" is actually not a direct 100% verbatim quote.

During Sandra's presentation, I was writing notes by hand (again: nearly forty). So, unless I was extremely lucky or I wrote unusually quickly that evening, I am most likely paraphrasing. That said, I'm *pretty* sure that Sandra did use all of those modifiers at *some* point; and based on my memory of her highly memorable presentation, I'd like to think that this arrangement of words at least captures the *essence* of what she said. It certainly captures the essence of what inspired me.

Still, it raises some questions. Am I being irresponsible by paraphrasing Sandra, potentially even misquoting her? Or am I "close enough"? Am I covered by having acknowledged that the quote is assembled from my notes and recollections?



Kirk German

I share this anecdote as a way of framing the concept of *authenticity*, a concept with which I continually find myself wrestling. As museum professionals who are also theatre practitioners, we aspire daily to develop “authentic” experiences for visitors; indeed, questions of authenticity lie at the very core of what museums do, not only as relates to performance, but as relates to collections and exhibitions, to the many broader social narratives being enacted in the museum, to the fulfillment of the mission statement, etc. Authenticity is a deeply complicated issue—one that I consider both fascinating and important.

Among the big questions that I keep asking in relation to authenticity (as I’m sure many of us do) are: How meticulously or factually accurate does something need to be to create the kind of “unforgettable, luscious, you-had-to-be-there moment” that has an enduring impact on visitors? If a museum performance involves a historical figure or real person, how responsible should it be to attempt replicating that person’s exact words, gestures, or ways of being? Can’t we evoke a lasting, deeper emotional human truth without using exact words or facts? Doesn’t artistic re-interpretation often reflect even more powerful truths?

Or, as employees of a public trust, does our responsibility to factuality come first and foremost? How does the museum setting reframe such questions or alter the potential answers, in contrast to theatrical work staged in a non-museum setting? Does the perceived “authority” of the museum play an enhanced role of which we must be mindful?

“...her chief goal was “to foster the creation of unforgettable, luscious, you-had-to-be-there moments for visitors.”

Spoiler alert: in this essay, I will not answer any of these questions. (I’m not even going to try!) Instead, my goal is simply to contribute to the ongoing (and, I argue, *vital*) dialogue about authenticity. Specifically, I will share about two of my museum theatre experiences from last year from two very different New York institutions; ideally, these experiences might offer some lenses for how we think about the role that authenticity plays in our museum theatre practices.

MEET VICTORIA

[The Lower East Side Tenement Museum](https://www.tenement.org/) [https://www.tenement.org/] is located in southern Manhattan, just a few blocks away from the Williamsburg Bridge. It’s unlike your usual historic house museums, most of which focus on a single figure or family of note. Rather, it is a five-story apartment building in which over 7,000 immigrants lived between 1863 and 1935. Through a series of fortuitous circumstances, most of the building was uninhabited after 1935, so when founders Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson discovered the building a half-century after its residential closure, they happened upon a genuine historical treasure: a time capsule that preserved elements from 19th and early 20th century New York. To this day, much of the interior of the building has not been updated since 1935—and in some cases, not since 1863. No other known residential building on the Lower East Side contains this much *in situ* physical history about the American immigrant experience.

What the Tenement Museum seeks to do is *animate* that history through its programming; the tours at the Tenement tell the real-life stories of actual, non-famous, working-class people who lived in this building over several different eras. A few tours feature costumed interpreters (“CI”s) playing the roles of former residents.

The Tenement Museum’s central CI program is “Meet Victoria,” [https://www.tenement.org/tours.php?tour=meet-residents] in which an actress/educator plays Victoria Confino, a Sephardic Jewish girl from Greece who lived at 97 Orchard Street in 1916. Each actress who plays Victoria goes through a rigorous and intensive training process; she is not given an official script (none exists), but instead studies a 700-page sourcebook. The sourcebook contains information about Victoria Confino, her family, their neighborhood, the historical period, etc. It’s all culled from various sources, some of them academic essays, some of them government documents, and some of them stories told by Victoria’s children, grandchildren, and other living family members. (Actresses must also learn several dozen words and phrases in Ladino.)

Still, there’s no set “script” or routine, and the actresses never say any actual verbatim words spoken or written by teenaged Victoria Confino, because no documentation of such text exists. Instead, Victoria responds to and interacts directly with the visitors, visitors who might say or do pretty much anything, and whose preparation before meeting Victoria is a short introductory session with another educator (sometimes called *second-person interpretation*) to help guests be “in role” as a family of recently arrived immigrants.

continued...

Rebeca Miller, the first actress I ever saw play Victoria, was indeed ready for “pretty much anything.” She truly inhabited the space. She knew every inch of the Confinos’ tenement flat, and she invested every prop with incredibly rich meaning, handling everything with great specificity and familiarity: the framed family pictures she passed to visitors, the hats she put on people’s heads, the flatiron she lifted from the stovetop, the handmade checkerboard she dumped on the floor. All of these are actions she performed *only* when they related to something a visitor had said or asked—something relevant had to emerge during the conversation for Rebeca/Victoria to do any of these things.

I admit that I can be a cynical theatregoer sometimes (okay, a lot of the time), but when I experienced “Meet Victoria,” I was surprised to find myself caught up in the magic, genuinely believing that I was meeting a 20th century immigrant in her home. After participating in the program, I left feeling that I understood something new about Victoria’s life, about turn-of-the-century New York, and about the challenges of immigrants at that time.

I would argue that there is incredible authenticity here, even though nobody working at the museum ever knew the actual Victoria Confino, and even though a heavily improvisational element is inherent to the program. And if I (and my fellow visitors) had a truly “unforgettable, luscious” experience while simultaneously considering public history in a new way, then isn’t that the entire point?

THE WAY THEY LIVE

Last year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (a storied New York institution whose place in both American culture and the art history field presumably preclude the need for further introduction) invited The Civilians to be the Met’s first ever theatre-company-in-residence. During that season of residency, The Civilians created and produced two original productions on site; in May, I attended their final performance, *The Way They Live*.

The Way They Live’s key devising methodology was *verbatim text*, the practice of assembling a script from the actual words of people directly or thematically related to the events and issues that the play explores. Most often, these words are gathered through interviews conducted as part of the development process. *The Way They Live* scrutinized selected works from the Met’s American Wing, incorporating verbatim text into the script from two sources: Met curators (and other staff members), and visitors interviewed in the galleries.

“How meticulously or factually accurate does something need to be?”

Before attending, I was most interested to see how the writers would incorporate the visitors’ comments; as it turned out, though, the spoken lines of the performance were heavily drawn from the staff. As a result, a significant portion of the show felt less like a dramatic enterprise and more like an art history lecture, albeit an art history lecture beautifully rendered by talented actors.

The way that visitors’ remarks were more frequently incorporated was through music, with text repurposed as lyrics for original songs (by several different composers) and performed live. Of course, the use of music has the potential to foreground text in an especially compelling way and in a few striking instances, *The Way They Live* achieved that potential. Yet by The Civilians’ own admission, the words were altered and rearranged to suit the lyric-writing process and the demands of melody and rhythm. Such a process eschews established key tenets around verbatim text usage, because the text is no longer syntactically identical to what somebody actually said. Furthermore, it doesn’t reflect the way somebody actually said it; as much as I might have wished for it when I was younger, people don’t typically communicate via impromptu song, accompanied by a band.

Nonetheless, one song stood out as an especially authentic and memorable “you-had-to-be-there” moment.

That song, written by Michael Friedman and performed by the incredibly versatile young actor Kyle Beltran, was inspired by a visitor’s comments in response to Thomas Hovendon’s painting *The Last Moments of John Brown*. In addition to the music itself having a sensibility rooted skillfully in contemporary musical theatre idioms, the song had a real point of view, a narrative and melodic structure, and a vivid sense of voice (not in the sense of a singing voice, but in terms of distinctive personality). The lyrics explored complex issues around race in our country, both past and present, all centered around a haunting refrain about “the bulls**t of America.” It wasn’t an easy nor a comfortable song, but it was beautiful and it was genuine. It was also, without doubt, one of the most transcendent and electrifying moments I’ve had during any live performance.

continued...

My overall perspective on the full production of *The Way They Live* is that, except for that song and perhaps two other moments, The Civilians played it safe. However, after the performance, I spoke with an older woman sitting behind me, a lifelong New Yorker, who was incredibly moved by the show; she told me that she had never seen anything like it before, that she found it “very brave” and that it really got her thinking about “issues in a new way.”

This was an important reminder. Just because a performance didn’t completely work for me, it can still be deeply resonant for others. It’s a lesson about perspective and range of experience that I very much hope to carry forward in my own work.

So in the end, though it may not be earth-shattering for those of us who have experienced more courageous work in museum theatre happening in smaller venues all around the world, I think it was a step forward for the Met; since it happened at an institution that wields such great influence, I hope that it will help further the conversation about the role of theatre in museums.

Ultimately, I’m encouraged when any institution furthers such conversations, using performance in any capacity to experiment and try new interdisciplinary approaches at their institution, no matter the scale. Let’s hope the momentum continues to build; and as it does, let’s keep debating what “authenticity” means for each of us.

Disclosure: the author of this article now works as a part-time educator at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, although he was not employed there when he first visited, nor is he involved with the “Meet Victoria” program. This article is written from his perspective as a graduate student at NYU, and not as a representative of any of the museums where he has worked.

**This essay is adapted from a presentation given by the author at the IMTAL conference at the Missouri History Museum in St. Louis on September 24, 2015.*

Murder at the Museum

Our Approach to an Interactive Mystery Night



SMM

Michael Ritchie,
Science Museum of Minnesota

*by Michael Ritchie, Actor, Science Live Theatre,
Science Museum of Minnesota*

In 2013 the Science Museum of Minnesota presented *Murder at the Museum*, an interactive murder mystery, as part of Social Science, SMM’s occasional adults-only night. While this project was lead by Julia Halpern, the museum’s former Project Manager for Programs and Special Events in Community Engagement and Science Learning, it also involved several other departments, including SMM’s Science Live Theatre. This event, as well as the mystery nights for our children and family camp-ins, was so successful that the museum has recently started offering a similar program to corporate and private parties as part our facilities rentals programs. In this article I will talk about the creation of the event, and also focus on Science Live’s involvement so you can form some ideas of how to put on your own mystery event.

Upon arrival at SMM on the night of *Murder at the Museum* the visitors were given a packet containing a description of the crime committed, a dossier of the suspects the actors were portraying, a museum map showing the location of the actors and activities that would lead to the mystery’s solution, a 5x6 grid with the names of the suspects and forensic experiments to run so the visitors could mark which experiments

continued...

implicated which characters, and finally a sealed envelope containing a set of “cheat cards” describing each experiment and the character implicated by them, should they not want to interact with the actors and/or run the experiments.

By running the forensic experiments and cross-referencing the characters implicated by them, the visitors could either solve the mystery on their own by finding which was the only character implicated by all of the forensic evidence, or wait for the solution to be revealed at a performance/questioning of the characters at the event’s conclusion which ultimately lead to one of the suspects confessing and being dragged off by another to be handed over to the authorities.

- THE DOSSIER -

PATTY HIGHSMITH
The Conservator



Gender: Female
Hair Color: Reddish Brown
Eye Color: Blue
Shoe Size: 9.5
Height: 5'7"
Pets: Dog—West Highland Terrier

A bit of a curmudgeon, Highsmith prefers restoring and preserving collections to people. The exception being Agatha Marple—they were last friends. That is, until they stopped talking to each other suddenly a week ago.

Eddie Poe
The Curatorial Assistant



Gender: Male
Hair Color: Black
Eye Color: Brown
Shoe Size: 12
Height: 6'2"
Pets: Cat—domestic calico

Normally a gregarious guy, nerves often caused Poe to bumble and blunder around Agatha Marple. In turn he often suffered the quick anger of the head curator. Was it enough to break him?

Dr. Artie Doyle
The Director of Anthropology



Gender: Male
Hair Color: Light Brown
Eye Color: Hazel
Shoe Size: 10
Height: 6'0"
Pets: Cat—domestic white

The floor space normally used to display the artifacts from Doyle's archaeological dig now is dedicated to the Burmese Falcon. He had been heard often arguing with Marple about "real artifacts vs. tinkers."

Dr. Walt Mesley
The Visiting Researcher



Gender: Male
Hair Color: Brown
Eye Color: Brown
Shoe Size: 12
Height: 5'10"
Pets: Bird—Cockatoo

Visiting from his east coast university, Mesley was drawn to the museum with the recovery of the Burmese Falcon. It has been the subject of his research for over a decade, and a growing obsession.

Ray Chandler
The Security Guard



Gender: Male
Hair Color: Brown
Eye Color: Blue
Shoe Size: 11.5 Mens
Height: 6'2"
Pets: Dog—Doberman

Chandler was hoping for a quieter beat at the museum. Hours alone with the exhibits and artifacts meant he had ample opportunity to learn more about them—and what their market value might be.



SHOW THE DATE
TINKERER'S BALL
DECEMBER 5, 2013 • 6-11 P.M.

To provide a framework upon which the museum could build the story behind the mystery, Julia Halpern both utilized aspects of our family camp-in mysteries and purchased a commercially available classroom forensic science curriculum, *The Mystery of Lyle and Louise*, from a company called Crosscutting Concepts. While the former ultimately provided most of the inspiration behind the event, some of the forensic experiments that would lead the visitor to the solution were used from the latter. Rather than transforming the museum into another setting, the Science Museum of Minnesota itself was the scene of the crime. To alter the story to be specific to SMM, Ms. Halpern involved a volunteer advisory committee which came up with a timeline for the crime and basic character descriptions to be fleshed out by the Science Live actors.

The mystery’s story involved the theft of an artifact and the murder of a museum curator. We Science Live actors involved in the event were given our characters’ names, jobs, a description of our pets (important for a hair analysis experiment), and were told which one of us was the murderer. The rest was up to us.

We quickly realized to make the mystery—and our characters—more interesting, every character had to have a plausible motive for both stealing the artifact and killing the curator. We decided to make the murder victim a highly unlikable person, each of us having had negative, if not traumatic, experiences with her at some point over our years working at the museum. Not only did this make answering visitor questions about her more enjoyable by showing the depth of our individual fear and distaste towards her, it also made her less sympathetic and therefore a victim, but not a “victim.”

We also needed a reason why we would have been near the scene of the crime around the time of theft and murder. Over a couple of rehearsals, we had to flesh out our characters, give them and the timeline more detail and nuance, establish relationships between our characters, and write a monologue to be performed at the evening’s conclusion.

Throughout the event, we actors were each posted at a predetermined location apart from the other actors, but at the end of the night we all gathered for our final performance. This was hosted by director of Science Live Theatre Stephanie Long.

Shoepprint Analysis

Clue:
The footprint matches the shoe owned by Ray Chandler.

Clue implicates:

- The Security Guard, Ray Chandler

In their defense:
Ray Chandler: "I was the one who discovered the body—almost tripped over her, so I must have gotten blood on my shoe."

Trichology - Hair Analysis

Clue:
The white animal hair found on the victim's clothes most closely matches the calico cat and white cat.

Clue implicates:

- The Curatorial Assistant, Eddie Poe (calico)
- The Director of Anthropology, Artie Doyle (white cat)

In their defense:
Eddie Poe: "We shared an office—our pets' hairs are probably embedded in our chairs at this point."
Artie Doyle: "I'm sure we brush past each other in the hallway a half-dozen times a day."

Fingerprinting

Clue:
The fingerprints lifted from the case of the stolen artifact implicate two suspects:

- The Visiting Researcher, Walt Mesley
- The Director of Anthropology, Artie Doyle

In their defense:
Walt Mesley: "I had come across new research on artifacts from this time. With Artie's presence and permission, I opened the case and examined the artifact."
Artie Doyle: "Walt had found some interesting information on the Burmese Falcon—if it holds up, it could place this artifact as the missing piece in our understanding of history in this region."

Recreating the Murder: Blood Spatter Analysis

Clue:
The blood spatter indicates that the victim received blunt force trauma to the head while standing, then again upon falling to her knees. It also shows that the murder weapon was taken from the scene of the crime.

Clue implicates:

- No one person in particular, but we now know how the murder took place.

Presumptive Blood Test

Clue:
The shirt recovered from Artie Doyle's office tests positive for blood, the carpet sample from the security office was negative.

Clue implicates:

- The Director of Anthropology, Artie Doyle

What does it mean?
Artie Doyle: "My coffee mug slipped and broke—I cut myself picking up the pieces. It destroyed my shirt." He is conspicuously wearing a bandage on his hand.
Ray Chandler: "It's barbecue sauce from the sandwich I had earlier for dinner—didn't have time to clean it up after all the chaos started."

Questionable Document Analysis

Clue:
Two different types of pen ink appear on the receipts.

Clue implicates the partners at ArtIFACTual Consulting:

- The Director of Anthropology, Artie Doyle
- The Conservator, Patty Highsmith

What does it mean?
Someone was adding money into ArtIFACTual Consulting's account—most likely to cover up the shady origins of the money. If they were selling artifacts on the black market and needed to conceal large amount of money gained through illegitimate means, using a business is one way to launder money.
Two types of ink points to someone in ArtIFACTual Consulting hiding their money-laundering and their illegitimate side business from the other partners.

| Who'dunnit? | Questionable Document Analysis | Presumptive Blood Test | Fingerprinting | Trichology Hair Analysis | Shoepprint Analysis |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Eddie Poe Curatorial Assistant | | | | | |
| Walt Mesley Visiting Researcher | | | | | |
| Ray Chandler Security Guard | | | | | |
| Artie Doyle Director of Anthropology | | | | | |
| Patty Highsmith Conservator | | | | | |

continued...

It began with each of us performing a prepared monologue that gave a detailed explanation of how and why we could not have committed the crime. After pleading our innocence, the audience was allowed to ask questions of our characters to clear up any final details before the solution was revealed. After the audience voted on which character they thought was guilty, we each took the microphone one last time and eventually one character, in the middle of proclaiming his innocence, cracked and admitted to the theft and murder. This speech gave more detail and additional motive before he was dragged off by the other characters, thus ending the performance.



The audience response to *Murder at the Museum* was very positive. In my own interactions with the audience throughout the night I was sometimes surrounded by dozens of people all asking questions at once—so many in fact that in order to get a bathroom break, Stephanie Long had to shout over and interrupt some guests to tell them I was temporarily needed elsewhere.

While the mystery itself was a non-linear and completely optional activity, that night the level of visitor involvement was very high. Of the 1,200 museum visitors that evening, hundreds gathered at the final performance, and thanks to a lack of visibility due to the sheer numbers gathered, people were watching from all three levels of SMM's main atrium. Julia Halpern noted that throughout the night she saw people gathered in groups poring over the documents, while others were trying to decode a simple typo on one of the signs near the crime scene.

While successful, there were some things about the event that could be altered to make future mysteries more

engaging. In a 2015 interview, Ms. Halpern indicated that her main regret was not making the mystery more difficult to solve. She said her initial fear of making visitors feel frustrated or inadequate kept her from making it more intricate. She says she later realized that visitors won't mind getting it wrong as long as they eventually find out the solution (I would add, and if they can see the logic behind the method of solving it). One of the things she said she would do to increase the complexity would be to find ways to make the finding of clues involve examination of artifacts displayed on the museum floor—a strategy that would open this kind of event to museums of all different types. Also, she said that having the actors responsible for dispersing clues would have helped in this goal.

From the actor's perspective, I agree with this last sentiment. While we certainly added a great deal of nuance, detail, misdirection, and entertainment value to the evening, we were in the end completely unnecessary to the solving of the mystery. By making engagement with the actors integral to the solution, the event would be made more complex and ultimately more satisfying to the visitor who has put effort into the solving of this mystery. This could involve each individual actor being the only source of information to the solving of a certain clue, or at least one necessary step in finding the solution to one or more clues. Also, rather than simply having an individual actor statically assigned to a single location for the duration of the event, having more than one location where the various characters can overlap and meet up throughout the night would add another aspect to the performance and dispersal of clues seen through how the characters interact with each other.



Michael Ritchie

The culprit is revealed to the packed house.

In the end *Murder at the Museum* proved to be a very successful event. Visitors still approach me on the museum floor (and once at the grocery store) to say how much they enjoyed the night and ask when we will do it again. We have already had our first private mystery event as the centerpiece of a bank's holiday party. Hopefully this will lead to not just more satisfying pieces of museum theatre but also a possible revenue stream for the museum as a whole, and for Science Live Theatre in particular.

Feel free to email me with any questions: mritchie@smm.org

Board Member Election Results

Congratulations to newly elected Treasurer Annie Johnson. Annie is Interpretive Programs Manager at The Minnesota History Center. This is her first time serving on the board.

And congratulations to Todd D. Norris, re-elected to serve another two-year term as Membership Officer.



Annie Johnson, Treasurer



Todd D. Norris, Membership Officer

Their terms officially begin at the May, 2016 board meeting.

Visit IMTAL On-line: imtal-us.org

Drop us a note—board member email addresses are listed on the last page of the newsletter.

Want to write for *Insights*?

Short, long, article, essay, opinion piece, announcement, photo
—if it has to do with Museum Theatre, we're interested!
Submission guidelines and the 2016 editorial schedule are now online: <http://imtal-us.org/publications>

Be Included on a Map of Conservation Theatres

Bricken Sparacino is creating a map of Conservation Theatres to share with teachers, community leaders, and others who bring groups on field trips or have tours visit their facilities. Conservation Theatre uses theatre as a teaching tool to inspire young people and their families to love wild things and wild places, helping to create the next generation of conservationists. Here is what the map looks like so far.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zYPI9ZckjnWc.k7YnqoF4Gjgk>

If you feel that your work fits under the Conservation Theatre umbrella, please fill out this survey and she will add you to the map:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1zDJ8t1tN2Aduo6xBaTO_QL0u5eyYUG5X3KIwcUyVSxI/viewform?usp=send_form

Once it is finished, it will be searchable on a blog and Facebook.



View of Denver from DMNS

2016 IMTAL Americas Conference is Coming Soon!
The Practical Magic of Museum Theatre
We Share, We Play, We Teach

2016 IMTAL Americas Conference
Denver, Colorado
August 26–30, 2016
opening reception Friday evening, Aug. 26

CALL FOR PROPOSALS NOW OPEN—DEADLINE MAY 6! <http://imtal-us.org/>

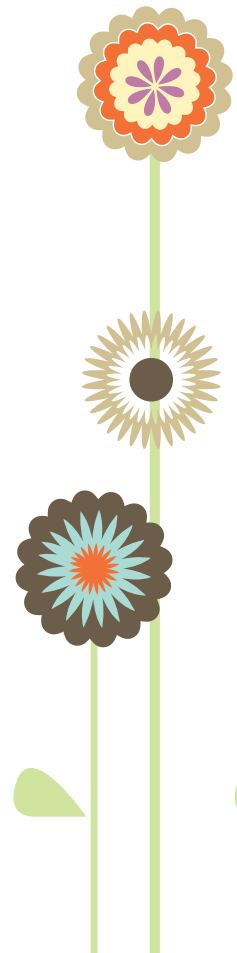
REGISTRATION NOW OPEN <http://imtal-us.org/event-2201970>
Only \$250 for members, \$305 for nonmembers, discounts for students.

Four full days of sharing, playing, and teaching at some of Colorado's top museums:

Littleton Museum (conference host) <http://www.littletongov.org/?page=129>
Denver Museum of Nature and Science <http://dmns.org/>
Denver Art Museum <http://denverartmuseum.org/>
History Colorado Center <http://historycoloradocenter.org/>

Guest artists, including Susan Marie Frontczek, Chautauqua performer
Workshops, performances, presentations, and expert panels
Great food and plenty of places to play and explore in Denver

Conference hotel: [Residence Inn, Downtown Denver](#)
Or call 303-396-3444 or 800-593-2809 and ask for IMTAL group room reservation.
Just a block from 16th Street Mall and Lo-Do! <http://www.lodo.org/>



Auditions, Calls for Submissions & Announcements

Auditions and Cool Events for Museum Theatre; Calls for Submissions

Calls for Submissions

May 6, 2016

Deadline for 2016 IMTAL Conference

Presentation Proposals

Download the proposal form here :

<http://imtal-us.org/>

Questions? Contact Josh Blythe,

jblythe@minnetrista.net, 765-287-3529

Scripts on a science-related topic or person,

20–45 minutes in length, no more than 2 actors, for Carpenter Science Theatre Company's quarterly staged readings of "science theatre" scripts at Science Museum of Virginia's Lunch Box Science events. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis; royalty payment of \$50.00 for single staged reading performance of accepted scripts.

Email copy of your script to lgard@smv.org OR submit hard copy to:

Larry Gard
4716 Scouters Pl
Chesterfield, VA 23832

OR to

Larry Gard
Science Museum of Virginia
2500 West Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23220



Conferences, Workshops, and Events

May 25, 2016

IMTAL board meeting in Washington DC

May 26-29, 2016

AAM Conference, Washington DC

<http://annualmeeting.aam-us.org/>

Including:

May 28, 2016, 11:00am-12:15pm

IMTAL Theatre Showcase (incl. with AAM registration)

continued next column...



AAM, continued



May 28, 2016, 12:30-1:45pm

IMTAL Annual Luncheon (\$50)

May 29, 2016, 8:45am

Panel, "Handing Over the Reins," including panelist (and IMTAL President) Elizabeth Pickard presenting on Missouri History Museum's Teens Make History program

July 18, 2016

Deadline to reserve your hotel room for the IMTAL conference

(Rooms in the IMTAL block are available on first-come, first-served basis.)

[Residence Inn, Downtown Denver](#)

Or call 303-396-3444 or 800-593-2809 and ask for IMTAL group room reservation.

August 26, 2016

IMTAL board meeting, Denver, CO

August 26-30, 2016

IMTAL-Americas annual conference

Denver and Littleton, CO

REGISTRATION <http://imtal-us.org/event-2201970>

CALL FOR PROPOSALS <http://imtal-us.org>

NOW OPEN

Submit articles, news, and ideas for *Insights!*

Send us your article, opinion, or news to publications@imtal-us.org **no later than June 15, 2016** for the Summer 2015 issue.

(It doesn't have to be perfect; it just needs to be reasonably coherent. If we have questions, we'll contact you.)

Summer 2016 issue: Award winners, AAM report, and more!

Fall 2016 issue: Practical Magic of Museum Theatre and 2016 IMTAL Conference report

IMTAL Board of Directors

Elizabeth Pickard, *President*

Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, MO
president@imtal-us.org

Douglas Coler,* *Vice President*

Discovery Place, Inc., Charlotte, NC
vicepresident@imtal-us.org

Josh Blythe, *Treasurer*

Minnetrista, Muncie, IN
treasurer@imtal-us.org

Amber Davis Parham, *Secretary*

Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Denver, CO
secretary@imtal-us.org

Todd D. Norris, *Membership Officer*

Indianapolis Children's Museum, Indianapolis, IN
membership@imtal-us.org

Judy Fort Brenneman, *Publications Officer*

Greenfire Creative, LLC, Fort Collins, CO
publications@imtal-us.org

Stephanie Long, *Past President*

Science Museum of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN

Members at Large

Dave McLellan, *Liaison to AZA*

Zoological Society of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI
Animals@imtal-us.org

Cat Chiappa

Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey, CA

Harriet Lynn, *Member Relations*

Heritage Theatre Artists Consortium, Baltimore, MD

Advisory Board

Catherine Hughes, PhD, *Director of Interpretation*,

Conner Prairie, Fishers, IN

Tessa Bridal, *Independent Consultant*

IMTAL *INSIGHTS* staff

Editor Judy Fort Brenneman

Graphic Design Shawna Turner

**Doug also continues as IMTAL Website and Social Media guru. Please send questions about such things to him at web@imtal-us.org.*

The International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) is a nonprofit, professional membership organization and an affiliate to the American Alliance of Museums. IMTAL's mission 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. For more information, to become a member, or to volunteer, please visit our website, <http://imtal-us.org/home>, or contact a board member via email.

Copyright 2016 International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL). Request reprint permission through publications@imtal-us.org.

