

Expanding the Skillset: Interpretive Training in Museum Theatre

by Todd D. Norris, Director of Interpretation, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis



Core Gallery Interpreters: BJ Bovin, Melissa Jenkins

When a museum commits to presenting professional museum theatre as a regularly programmed interpretive tool, several questions need to be asked and answered. Naturally, many of these questions concern the staff who will be performing. In a perfect world, we would just post a job description on the [IMTAL Jobs](#) page, and the perfect candidates would start to flood our email inbox. In the real world, there are a few more steps to consider.

As we contemplate the actual work to be performed, what are we actually going to call this position? Museums use many job titles for their museum theatre performers that reflect the department's or institution's focus. I've worked for two large museums that both use the same term for their museum theatre practitioners, Actor Interpreter.

As that job title suggests, there are both interpretive and performance components to the job, and that itself is a potential challenge in finding the right people. I have always said that so many staff performance issues can and should be prevented by smart, thoughtful auditions and interviews. Know what you want, then interview and audition accordingly. I am always amazed when institutions want a staff hired for one skill set (education, public speaking, food service) to be trained quickly for a different skill set (acting, singing) without taking the obvious disparities into consideration. This works in reverse, as well. If there is any doubt that being an actor does not automatically make one a skilled public speaker, just consider how many highly paid performers subject TV viewers to painfully bad awards-show presentations year after year.

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Editor's Corner

I didn't say "yes" right away.

I said, "Let me think about it until tomorrow."

During the next 24 hours, I mulled over the reasons I should say, "No," the reasons I knew I wasn't right for the job, even though part of me knew I'd already made my decision. I've been a writer and editor for a lot of years, and I know how much time and effort go into creating a quality publication. I knew the moment I said "Yes" (and I was tempted, right from the moment Simone Mortan of Monterey Bay Aquarium asked), I knew my near-obsession with "getting it right" would kick in. Some of that is fine and appropriate; some of it can be crazy-making, and I didn't want to make myself or anyone else crazy.

In addition, I didn't—and don't—work for a museum; I never have. I've never worked as a front-line interpreter or an actor-interpreter. I have my own company, Greenfire Creative, which grew out of a long and convoluted career that has wandered through many fields, though they always included writing of some sort. Even now, only about a third of my work, on average, involves interpretive writing; most of the rest is writing coaching, freelance editing, and facilitating writing retreats and workshops for interpreters and others.

I'd been a fan of, and avid consumer of, living history and museum theatre programming for years, long before I knew that's what we called it and that there were entire organizations dedicated to improving it, to "doing it right"—but I'd written less than a handful of plays, not counting voice-over narrations, none of which had anything to do with interp or museum education. I had even less acting experience.

What I knew about Museum Theatre wouldn't reach the halfway mark in a thimble. I was definitely not qualified to edit a quarterly professional publication dedicated to the topic. And yet—

And yet.

I'd been fascinated by Museum Theatre and its possibilities ever since Simone's presentation at the national NAI conference about the aquarium's summer plays. Because of her session, I attended my first IMTAL conference two years later, in St. Louis, hosted by the Missouri History Museum, where I was gently nudged out of my comfort zone, delighted by the performances, and utterly blown away by Greg Hardison and Adam Luckey's "Theater of War"—so much so that I asked Greg for permission to include the script and notes in my book

on interpretive writing. He said "Yes," and when the book is finally released (later this year, if all goes as planned¹), the entire script, all the notes, and more (plus an excerpt of the Museum of Science and Industry's "Poop Happens," which was also presented at that conference) will be there as superb examples of what Museum Theatre can (and should) be.



T. L. Brenneman

Judy Fort Brenneman,
Publications Officer

And so I said "Yes." I wanted to learn more. I wanted to talk to everyone in Museum Theatre who was willing to talk, whether it was casual conversation or a formal interview. I wanted to know everything, as impossible as that was.

And in the four years since, during two terms as your Publications Officer, everyone I've asked has said, "Yes." Every interview, every article, every conference session and meeting, I've been amazed and inspired by the depth of knowledge, creativity, and generosity of the IMTAL community. Without hesitation, or trepidation, or expectation of personal benefit, they've answered questions, shared challenges and triumphs, talked about and written about this amazing art form we call Museum Theatre.

In this, my last issue of *Insights* as editor, we're focusing on a topic near and dear to my heart: training. Here, you'll find four articles from four different corners of our Museum Theatre world: Todd Norris describes the Children's Museum of Indianapolis's approach; John Luzader makes a well-reasoned plea for improved training for volunteers; Angela Pfenninger describes her self-made international exchange training adventure; and Nick Turner, performing artist creative, reminds us that excellent acting blossoms with excellent scripts and a few fundamental concepts.

After today, it's someone else's turn. Ilana Gustafson of the Museum of Natural History in Los Angeles, said, "Yes." I leave you in her capable hands, and I look forward to reading every issue to come.

Judy

¹ Creating Stories that Make a Difference: Advice & Guidance for Interpretive Writing and Writers will be available in late 2017.

President's Welcome

So here we are IMTAL,

My last president's column for *Insights* and I find myself, you will be shocked to learn, at a loss for words. I have a few things I wish I'd done better. I have many, many fond memories. Mostly, I am overwhelmed with gratitude. I owe IMTAL so much. When I started at the Missouri History Museum as a research assistant, I was tasked with researching the use of museum theatre across the country and proposing a model to implement here. I talked with people—shatteringly busy people, IMTAL members all—who all somehow made time to talk to a grad student. They all seemed impossibly talented and thoughtful and capable and kind of like rock stars.

Finding myself at a loss for words, I pulled out those surveys today, just for the heck of it, hoping those long-ago responses would have better words than mine. They did, of course. Wendy Jones at the Minnesota History Center provided this essential list of evaluation questions: "How did museum theatre fit into the peculiar activity museum going represents? Did they get value and make meanings? Are people picking up on the themes of the pieces? Are they asking the kinds of questions we had hoped? What are visitors' feelings about a piece? Were people able to make personal connections?" George Buss, then in Pennsylvania, said many things, but apparently this struck a chord because I quoted and underlined it: "Dare to suck." He also introduced me to the name Catherine Hughes, which I am ashamed to admit, I misspelled. Thanks to IMTAL I met and continue to learn from Catherine, too.

Impossibly talented, thoughtful, capable, and rock stars, every one of them. Every one of you.

Stephanie Long at Science Museum of Minnesota, as I would find she always does, offered important, practical, and all too-often ignored advice: "15 minutes average length of play, 30 minutes too long."

From Larry Gard at Science Museum of Virginia: "[Plays have] science tie ins, but real emphasis is on human experiences."



Elizabeth Pickard, President

The inimitable Tessa Bridal said, "Be clear about what you're doing, clarifying what you mean by theatre." And, "the purpose of having live bodies (as opposed to recorded performances) in the museum is in the strength of personal interaction."

Greg Hardison from the Kentucky History Center, in addition to offering the simple but essential advice, "Greg writes the plays he knows he can write" [and contracts out the ones he can't] was also spinning gold out of straw with the comprehensiveness of his program and the tininess of his budget. That fact, more than almost any other, made me think I could actually start a museum theatre program from what started as a percentage of the museum's docent book budget. Impossibly talented, thoughtful, capable, and rock stars, every one of them. Every one of you. I steal from them, and the other generous and talented respondents to my long ago survey, and every IMTAL session and conference presenter in some way every day to this day. And even when I am no longer your president, I will continue to do that, and to do my level best to do work that I hope someone, somewhere will want to steal from, too.

That is really what it means to have a field—that you have a community of practice. A community that was then and still is IMTAL. I think I would be remiss if I didn't say a little something here about IMTAL itself, and its need for all of us to participate in our work. Almost exactly ten years ago, I finally found the IMTAL showcase in the cavernous and confusing exhibit hall at my first AAM in Chicago. I wandered up to some members of the board, and stumblingly and doubtfully offered that I had worked in an association at one time, and I would be happy to help IMTAL, you know, if they needed me. I now realize that the expressions on their

President's Welcome, cont'd from page 3

faces were of ill-concealed glee. Because the truth is IMTAL's board always needs you. Yes, you. We need you to run for the board, to write articles, to propose conference sessions, to be on committees. We need your IMTY and Lipsky nominations. We need you to vote, even in uncontested elections. We need you to ask us hard questions and demand more of us and come to the conferences and to bring your enthusiasm and ideas and talent and wit. You are IMTAL and IMTAL is you. And IMTAL helps us all get better at our jobs.

If there is any legacy I can leave behind me, I hope it is that you know that we want and need your involvement. I thank you for it and for the chance to serve as your president from the bottom of my heart.

I thank the folks who have served with me on the board over these years. I know how hard you have worked to make sure IMTAL is thriving.

I especially thank the folks who are taking our organization forward into its next phase. I cannot wait to see what you come up with. You can count on me to cheer you on from the member rolls.

Yours very truly,

Elizabeth

P.S. See you at AAM!

Here's Your Chance to Change the World!

- ◆ **Become an IMTAL Board Member-at-Large.**

Interested in helping keep IMTAL's website up-to-date, gorgeous, and useful? How about being a liaison between IMTAL and one of your other favorite organizations? All these and more are areas where you can get involved and have an impressive credit on your bio and resume, too! Contact a current board member for more info and plenty of opportunities (board member emails are on the last page).

- ◆ **Volunteer for One Specific Cool Thing.**

Help with next year's conference planning; write an article for *Insights*; share IMTAL with friends and colleagues; send a photo to post on the IMTAL website or *Insights*; dash off a blog post for the IMTAL blog or a quick note for the Facebook page. . .

Expanding the Skillset, cont'd from page 1

But, budgets are tight. Reliability of funding is more uncertain these days than ever before. Staffs everywhere are expected to pick up additional responsibilities. Very few of us have the luxury of only having one primary responsibility. So, how do we get the best bang for our buck? How do we produce the most well-rounded, multifaceted floor staff, knowing that they will need to be proficient, and indeed, extraordinary, while interpreting in multiple modes?

Know what you want, then interview and audition accordingly.

At the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, we address this through both hiring and training. I have spoken before at IMTAL conferences about the importance of hiring experienced professionals whenever possible. Unfortunately, most museums are unable to always provide the salaries, the hours, or both to attract the very best, but for the sake of argument, we will assume that we can pay our actors enough that they are interested in the work.

When we hire for our gallery facilitators (who can assume "personas," e.g., Ringmaster, Agricultural Scientist, etc. but not specific "characters" with dialogue) and actor interpreters (who portray characters and have scripted dialogue), we usually employ a four-tiered process. First, we do the standard review of applications and resumes, followed by a phone screen, which helps us to better explain the position, and to get an early feel for the candidates. Then we bring them in for a group interview. This can be a half-day process where we evaluate their answers to questions, their innate public speaking abilities, their flexibility, how they interact with each other, and their ability to think on their feet and to complete group tasks. Then the successful finalists return for individual interviews and on-the-floor interpretive test runs. By the end of this process, we have a good idea as to whether or not each candidate will be a good fit for the gallery facilitator position. We will also know if any of them also possess the talent or the potential to be successful actor interpreters at some point in their TCM careers.

In this training, we explore strategies to use particular behaviors as indicators that family learning is happening in an exhibit or program.

For actor interpreters, the later steps in the process are somewhat altered. After the phone screening, the actors come in for a group audition. They do a standard 2-piece audition with optional song, and they also are instructed to present an "interactive presentation." We provide basic guidelines



Dave Rust, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Lilly Theatre Actors: Ben Schuetz, Erin Walton, Chelsea Leis, Noah Winston, Pat Mullen

(time limit, beginning, middle, and end, etc.), and the other candidates serve as the audience participants for that presentation. This allows us to gauge not only the interpretive potential of the actors, but also their group interaction styles without expecting them to understand museum jargon. Successful candidates then come in for an individual interview, and call-back readings, if needed. We will often find that some of the actor interpreter candidates may not meet our need for that job, but they may have demonstrated a clear skill for our gallery facilitator positions. We can then encourage those individuals to apply for those job postings when they come around.

All right. We have our new hires, both actor interpreters and gallery facilitators. What next? In a typical cycle, the Interpretation department delivers the following training within the staff's first year:

1. In addition to the museum-wide new staff orientation and training, both categories of staff start off with our "Interpretation 101" training. This introduces them to how we approach both our formal and informal interactions with the public, and the whys behind the techniques. It is crucial that all interpretation staff attend the same introductory training, because inevitably, not only is there is crossover, but this allows the staff to be deployed where they are most needed on short-staffed days.
2. Within the first quarter, gallery facilitators receive "Creating Extraordinary Characters." This is a class where we train staff to make strong, clear physical and vocal choices to bring the goals and objectives of the gallery programs to life. This is helpful for assisting facilitators who may be reluctant to "let themselves go" in the context of a persona in a gallery. Occasionally, we will offer a gallery-specific version of this class. Recently, for our "Pirates and Princesses: Storybook Adventures"

gallery, we offered the class to the staff working in that space that focused on storybook knights, royalty, and scallywags.

3. Also within that first quarter, all interpretive staff receive "Family Learning Training." Although we are called a children's museum, we are really focused on being a museum for the entire family to enjoy. TCM has set a goal that every exhibit and program will encourage and enhance family learning for our guests. This is also a metric against which we evaluate our programming. In this training, we explore strategies to use particular behaviors, such as working together to complete an activity or discussing a family memory, as indicators that family learning is happening in an exhibit or program. We ensure that staff understands that our team is integral in creating opportunities for families to interact and explore together. Exhibit elements are static, but interpreters can respond to individual interests. Sometimes adults need an invitation and encouragement to participate.
4. The last piece of training that all interpretive staff receives in that first year is "Powerful Interactions." This training is based on the book of the same name by Amy Laura Dombro, Judy Jablon, and Charlotte Stetson (Stenhouse Publishers, 2011, available through National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)). This training explores how to connect with children and their families, and how to extend their learning through observations, memories and five levels of interaction.

Whew! That seems like a lot for the first year, and it is.

Just as it can be challenging for an interpreter to memorize a role and deliver it believably, an actor's confidence can be shaken if they don't feel in command of their material.

But, if we set the bar high for our staff, we need to provide the tools that will help them succeed. This training is particularly valuable for the actor interpreters who may be less familiar with museum settings, educational theory, and incorporating learning moments into their performances.

This brings me to another challenge: Museums, particularly living history museums, have long attracted and developed character interpreters who are accustomed to real time, unscripted, direct interaction with guests on a range



Todd D. Norris, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Experience Manager/Actor Interpretation: Aaron Bonds

of topics related to the museum's setting and environment. These skilled interpreters have often (though not always) spent several years studying and researching their characters and the world they inhabit. The best of these interpreters are walking libraries who have the gift of educating through engaging, direct, period interaction with both small and large groups. But for actors who find themselves tasked with developing informal interpretations in addition to performing formal scripts, this style of informed improvisation can seem daunting. Just as it can be challenging for an interpreter to memorize a role and deliver it believably, an actor's confidence can be shaken if they don't feel in command of their material.

At the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, we have traditionally used our actor interpreters in our children's theatre productions, and in our galleries and atrium, performing scripted and directed plays, monologues, and programs. The actors have prepared well enough that they can lead post-show discussions and answer questions authoritatively. Still, that is different from improvising an entire program—something that character interpreters take for granted. As we were developing the interpretation for our new permanent gallery, *Beyond Spaceship Earth*, we knew that this space, designed to look and feel like the International Space Station, was not going to lend itself to our standard forms of museum theatre. There was no program space, and certainly no stage. We opted to adapt a successful program format from our annual winter traditions gallery, *Jolly Days*, and introduce it to our newest permanent exhibit.

Every year, from late November until early January, families are encouraged to share winter memories and traditions in Jolly Days. In addition to activities including ice fishing, skating, snowball fights, cookie baking, visiting Santa Claus, and feeding reindeer, our guests can encounter a wide range of fictional characters (sorry, Mrs. Claus) that engage them with questions and props designed to meet the sharing and memory making goals of the gallery. It took us a couple

years to perfect these interpretations, partially because our actors were not as accustomed to informal, inquiry-based interactions as our gallery facilitators are. Through additional facilitation training, staff observation, and evaluation, the actor interpreters were able to refine their engagement techniques. Currently, we present Zazzelz, the Stand Up Comic Elf; Mrs. Claus; Patty Cakes, the North Pole Chef; Andy, the North Pole Zookeeper; Ebenezer Scrooge (after he learned his lesson); and Gucci, the North Pole Fashion Designer, with confidence that they have successful interactions, and the families have additional, prompted opportunities for family learning and sharing.

It's a long sleigh ride from telling elf riddles to explaining microgravity, though. Our new character aboard the International Space Station needed to be believable. Real. Convincing. Our gallery developers worked closely with our Extraordinary-Scientist-in-Residence, former astronaut Dr. David Wolf, in all phases of development. In the 1990s, Dr. Wolf had trained to work on the Russian MIR Space Station, so that meant that he had to complete not only NASA astronaut training, but also Russian Cosmonaut training. There were astronauts of different nationalities, including Russian, on board the ISS, and our gallery included Russian artifacts, so I made the decision that we should portray a composite Russian cosmonaut to emphasize the international aspect of the work being done there. Our actor interpreters began working on believable Russian dialects and dove into the research that we provided to be as knowledgeable on the details of the gallery and the ISS program as possible. In and of itself, the dialect work and topic research were no different for this than for

It's a long sleigh ride from telling elf riddles to explaining microgravity.

any other gallery. What was unique, for our team, was the informal, improvised nature of the interpretation based on current, real-world events. Using standard gathering and initiating techniques that our facilitators use every day, our Cosmonauts quickly became accustomed to drawing both young and old guests to the ISS into their work and their world. The best anecdotal evidence of our success was when a friend of one of my colleagues, who brought her son to the exhibit's opening weekend, shared her total surprise and delight with the gallery, and could not believe how the Children's Museum of Indianapolis was able to secure an actual Cosmonaut for the gallery. It took quite a bit of explaining to convince her, at last, that the woman she had encountered was, indeed, a highly trained professional, just not in the field or the nationality she assumed.

Needless to say, as we continue to expand our boundaries with the addition of the 7.5-acre Riley Children's Health Sports Legends Experience, opening in spring of 2018, it is a sure bet that our guests will encounter historic sports figures who will be only too pleased to engage in free-ranging conversations that will enhance and enrich our guests' connections to sports, family fitness, and personal success.



Dave Rust, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Gallery Interpretation Manager: Josh Estes

It can be a mistake to assume that actors automatically know how to connect to informal audiences as interpreters, or that they need less training. They deserve the same care and attention in training as any other facilitator. In addition to the training classes described above, we augment the staff training with special classes as time and needs dictate. We have been incredibly fortunate to have classes with Jeff Wirth, a master of interactive performance and serious play; Barry Lubin, renowned master clown—better known as “Grandma”; and others over the years to provide unique and topic-specific trainings for our teams so that they continue to stretch, grow, and never stop learning. After all, isn't that what we hope for our guests?



Todd D. Norris

Todd D. Norris is the Director of Interpretation for the Children's Museum of Indianapolis. Prior to moving to Indiana in 2013, he held several positions at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, including Training Specialist, Manager of Evening Programs and Performing Arts, and Senior Manager of Performance Interpretation. Todd has written, directed, produced, and performed many programs and plays for TCM and CWF. Todd has an MFA in Acting from the University of Louisville and a BA in Theatre Performance from The University of Findlay. He has taught and directed at several schools including The College of William and Mary, Christopher Newport University, Alice Lloyd College, and Wright State University. He is an associate member of the theatrical union, Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, and continues to work as a freelance director. He is also an avid amateur musician, having performed at the Sydney Opera House in Sydney, Australia and with the MasterWorks Chorale of the Louisville Orchestra. Todd has served as Membership Officer for IMTAL since 2015 and will begin his first term as IMTAL Vice President in May, 2017. For more information, contact Todd via email at ToddN@childrensmuseum.org.



Notes from a European Immigrant

by Angela Pfenninger, event manager, freelance live interpreter in Germany, & co-editor of Insights Europe

The IMTAL world may be a small community of like-minded enthusiasts, but it is great for networking. When I felt the need to venture further afield for studies of best practice, I approached Judy Fort Brenneman for advice about sites in the U.S. where a German interpreter might not just get a glimpse but ideally, be able to bring something to the table themselves. As per Judy's excellent suggestion, I contacted the [Tenement Museum](#), a house relying heavily on costumed interpreters portraying the lives of generations of European immigrants to New York. The museum also features some German biographies in the Lower East Side, an area that was known as Little Germany, or "Klein Deutschland."

During its time of use between 1863 and 1935, some 7,000 biographies have been interwoven with the house at 97 Orchard Street. Some of these biographies have been chosen by the curatorial team to be highlighted in live interpretation. During my sojourn, I was privileged to see how the team works, witness part of a rehearsal process, and add a few suggestions of my own in the course of the preparation of a new programme featuring a German couple who worked as innkeepers on the property in the 1870s. The lives of John and Caroline Schneider are about to be celebrated with a costumed offering starting this spring.

A warm welcome by my host, Jess Underwood Varma, education coordinator, was followed by my participating in five different formats that week: three school programmes involving live interpretation, one costumed tour for adult visitors, and a themed concert.

Through these events, I "met" inhabitants Bridget Moore from Ireland; Sephardic Victoria Confino; spendthrift Landlady Dora and her somewhat belligerent tenant, Rebeca; as well as Russian-born tailor Harris Levine and resolute Italian "mamma" Rosaria Baldizzi—encompassing some 70 years in the process.

Most of the tours focus on one level of the five-story building at a time, remaining with one family in a particular year, to which the formerly derelict apartment has been refitted. At first, I was surprised at this concept, but once you get to know the building, and learn how tricky it is for the large amount of daily visitor groups to maneuver the numerous staircases, it makes perfect sense.

All the offerings are educator-led, that is, the audience (who can only access the building as part of a tour) do not happen upon the interpreters, but will be prepped as to whom they are about to meet and what their issues are. This is part of the Tenement's philosophy and has proven useful, Jess Varma explained. Without the introduction, interpreters, who may portray people with very complex biographies, can get lost in explaining themselves. This is the case with Tenement's "Victoria" character: you'd have to communicate to the group that you are a Sephardic Jewess who speaks Spanish, but emigrated from a part of Turkey, which at the time of her encounter with the group, was already Greek—your time's up even before you've touched on the subject at hand. Also, the house has no signage, audio guide, or other non-personal interpretation to contextualize what visitors get to see. The educators have the key role of providing those missing links and conjuring the empathy even before the encounter.

Ofentimes, little is known about the lives of our protagonists from before they moved to the U.S., and even the better-documented biographies connected with the Tenement require some (plausible) imaginative leaps. Jess Varma offered me a glimpse of their interpretive guidelines and philosophy, and the rigorous training and research that all interpreters undergo before facing their audience in character, when they will interact with guests who can ask pretty much anything.

The Tenement relies heavily on word of mouth. There are no fat advertising budgets to spend, and also, it is part of the character and charm of the institution that it is not seen to be

The human stories are relevant to all visitors, whether they have any first-hand migration experience in their families or not.

covering the city with billboards, but takes a quieter approach. Whilst in its early days the house mostly drew its crowds from a local audience, that has widened as word got 'round, and it has made its way into international tourist guide books (even mine!).

Now the visitorship is far more far-flung, and the appeal of the stories changes: whilst it may have been primarily nostalgia of the elderly residents of the Lower East Side who may have informed a visit, now a more diverse audience brings other

experiences along. The human stories are relevant to all visitors, whether they have any first-hand migration experience in their families or not.

The interpreters come from different walks of life, but not unlike their European counterparts, trained actors and teachers seem to form the bulk of people who work there as educators. It was clear that every single one of the team has a natural flair for performance and a love of history. Whilst it's relatively doable to teach a newbie content, the passion and interpersonal skills have to be there from the start.

I can thoroughly recommend professional exchange, as it opens up new vistas and got me thinking about my own methods—and how deeply engrained one's own cultural conventions really are.

Just as, historically, there was no space for privacy in the cramped tenement, there is now no safe stage distance. Though no longer heaving with a hundred inhabitants, the house does not afford much room anywhere, and groups attending a costumed offer are limited to about 15 people, due to space restrictions. The interpreter is really up-close and must be comfortable with such proximity and the amount of ad-libbing it entails.

Visitors will normally be assigned a role or function to involve them. They turn into friends dropping in on a tenant, reporters for the local paper, or a group of inspectors looking into health and safety matters.

Whilst outside school visits are not customary, the Tenement has several modern, in-house classroom-type spaces where the educator-led prep of visitors takes place before the historic site is explored. And the educators need to be more flexible now than ever, as Tenement is ever-evolving and embracing new issues. More contemporary phenomena of immigration in the late 20th and early 21st centuries could previously not be reflected due to space shortage. The building was condemned in 1935 and, whilst it can be used brilliantly to illustrate late 19th and early 20th century biographies, it would not work—or seem authentic—for more recent stories. So a new permanent exhibit is being prepared, to open in July 2017, with the stories of three families who came to New York in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, in the adjoining property.

The week I spent in New York was the most wonderful experience and elucidating introduction to American live interpretation work I could have wished for. I very much hope the new friendships with the marvelous people there will last, and perhaps one time inspire return visits! I can thoroughly recommend professional exchange, as it opens up new vistas and got me thinking about my own methods—and how deeply engrained one's own cultural conventions really are. As a European practitioner, I found it striking, if not to say odd, at first that the whole exercise of make-believe (that most colleagues over here working in first-person will strive for) is being deliberately deconstructed by the guides who serve as contextualisers and announce the encounter with an actor/actress. This “deconstructivist” approach, which still features most excellent and highly professional first-person interactions, but which does not rely on the willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience, will now be added to my personal interpretive toolkit.

I hope very much to be able to visit other sites abroad to study new methods, and engage in fruitful discussions about national perspectives. Anyone keen to get an introduction to the German scene—small though it is—you now know who to call!



Angela Pfenninger

Angela Pfenninger is an event manager and freelance live interpreter in Germany with a particular interest in first-person formats that may be experimental, focusing on very recent history or visual art. She holds a degree in English and Cultural Studies from Regensburg University and, apart from performing at various sites, offers lectures and workshops on the subject of museum theatre. Angela is also the co-editor of Insights Europe, the journal of IMTAL-Europe. For more information, visit her website, www.museum-theater-events.de or contact her via email, angela.pfenninger@gmx.de.



The Volunteer as an Employee

by John Luzader, Principal, Living Museums of the West

All photos by John C. F. Luzader



"Aunt Pat" Tilsley

This article is dedicated to John's mother-in-law, Pat Tilsley, better known as "Aunt Pat." Aunt Pat has dedicated over 60 years in volunteering as a nurse for church summer camps, a deacon of her church, and a school crossing guard.

We have all seen them, though many are unaware of their presence; they seldom ask for recognition. We are exposed to them at nearly every museum, historic, and nature site; they are often dressed in a logoed polo shirt proclaiming their affiliation to the locale. The public is greeted by them at social functions, museum entrances, dessert tables, church kitchens, and youth group meetings. Most receive cursory recognition at the end of a program or event; rarely do participants remember their names, even while applauding their contributions.

They are "the Volunteers."

In this age of restricted and reduced budgets, Volunteers (and I use the capitalization of their title purposefully) are essential to the continued function of numerous agencies, facilities, and entities, yet regularly, their positioned title is the least funded, least trained, and least appreciated in the planning and implementing of any agency.

They are, to be blunt, expected to be there but basically ignored.

However, Volunteers are employees of whatever agency or facility utilizes them. If injured on the job, they are entitled in most states to compensation. They are usually "uniformed," either with name tags, polo shirt type clothing, or costume that ties them to a site or organization in much

the same way as their paid compatriots. They are expected to be unpaid for all their labor and hours, yet their assistance is rightly seen as financial contribution, grant enhancer, and part of the budget logistics of any organization.

The use of Volunteers has been established in our American system of public service for as long as we have been a nation; I shall limit myself here to the traditional volunteer image and exclude militias and military. Whether as a fire brigade, youth leader, museum docent, PTA member, organizational board member, tour leader, nature trail leader, or other non-paid person upon whom an agency relies, we have created an image that reflects the American perception of, "Oh, they're just a volunteer."



Volunteer assistance in flood cleanup and rebuilding after the September, 2013 Colorado floods

Unfortunately, this view is frequently reinforced by how professionals treat these groups. Despite their importance in being the "make or break" element to so many programs, they are perceived (even disparaged) as being a group of older people with "nothing else to do," merely quaint enthusiasts who volunteer simply to fulfill their personal needs.

The most often neglected aspect of Volunteers is their recruitment and training.

Typically, an organization asks

for folks through an announcement at a meeting, a sign-up sheet, or social media. And, nearly anyone who responds is accepted; it is the "any warm body to fill a slot" approach. Usually, there is no indication by the agency as to what types of Volunteers are needed. Organizational boards are regularly guilty of this type of recruitment, despite the fact that the result of neglecting an application listing skills and interests is having bodies with no purpose.

Volunteer training is too often relegated to a one- or two-day session where a welcome is given, a brief description of the organization is provided, and how to log in hours is explained, followed by how much the "uniform" will cost and what type of schedule is to be maintained. Then a tour or film is shown to the group to orient them to the facility and organization. This is a typical welcome for most Volunteer groups.



Volunteers releasing sea turtles in Baja Peninsula, Mexico, October, 2012

And this is where agencies fail the most: poor recruitment followed by inadequate training.

Recruitment for volunteers, no matter the field or facility, needs to have an application that is as specific as any job for any position. The position should have a published job description listing the volunteer needs, required responsibilities, limitations and special needs, a request of skills and experience, hours available, references, and *the mission of the organization*.

We must recognize that not everyone who volunteers is capable of doing any and every job. Certain people are great with people; others are not. Many—but not all—are able to recognize the needs of the organization, the people they serve, and themselves. It isn't enough to be a "warm body." An organization should be willing to attempt to find appropriate work for anyone interested, but must also recognize that not all who apply are qualified. At times, a Volunteer may not fit any current needs, or may need to be dismissed.

Organizations should be willing to establish training sessions that are beneficial to the Volunteers, helping them to understand the mission and purpose of the facility and the service that is needed for their clients. Training must convey to Volunteers that the importance of their hours to the organization is not just filling a space and time, but also providing a financial benefit. Training must also teach and reinforce the standards that are expected of them.

Each organization should have an employee manual that has descriptions of all positions within the organization, including job titles and descriptions of various Volunteer positions. Each should also have an ethics statement for all employees and Volunteers, plus a form and standard for filing suggestions, concerns, and complaints.

As part of the training, Volunteers and employees should regularly have opportunities where they meet, conference opportunities, and training that includes the entire staff, so that all have a better understanding of what each does and how each serves the organization. Boards need to have regular training on board make-up, responsibilities, and organizational standards (bylaws, statements of purpose, strategic planning, etc.), and if they are the employer of the organization, they need to also know labor laws and Not for Profit and For Profit standards and regulations.



Jack Adler, a Holocaust survivor who volunteers his time talking to Colorado school groups about peace and how to make the world better without looking for blame on the things that are wrong.



Dr. Moriah Istre volunteering at the 2015 National Fur Trade Symposium, Bent's Old Fort NHS, September, 2015

So why should we want to change or revamp how Volunteers are recruited and maintained?

First and foremost, to improve the quality and output of any association and institute and to better serve its clients. Better training and better Volunteer preparation create a stronger agency, no matter what the agency may be. Having a strong, well trained Volunteer creates a better resource, one who can later recruit and mentor others and promote the organization. Often, Volunteers are the First and Last Interactions (FLIS) that an organization has with its audiences and clients. Volunteers are representatives of the organization, and their abilities reflect upon the quality of the organization.

Quality Volunteers are often a major voice of an organization. They provide a resource for publications, assist in grant writing, generate programming ideas, and collect on-site evaluations of events. They provide the majority of one-on-one interactions with the public.

Volunteers deserve to be more than just “warm bodies filling a space.” Volunteers are employees deserving respect, excellent and ongoing training, and better remuneration than just a moment to stand and be recognized, a year pin to add to a name tag, or, too often, nothing at all.



John C. F. Luzader

John C.F. Luzader, Living Museums of the West, has created, managed, and performed in a wide range of living history programs and events since 1981. He has been an instructor, educator, and interpretive presenter both nationally and internationally, training interpreters of all levels, both paid and volunteer. He was the primary trainer and speaker for the Corps of Engineers Lewis and Clark Bicentennial and a member of the interpretive training team that guided Chinese National Parks in living history techniques and the 2008 Olympics preparation. John has received numerous national and international honors, including the 2010 NAI Fellow Award and 1997 NAI Master of Interpretation Award. He is a long-time leader in the field, serving on NAI and other boards, including multiple terms as Section Director of the Cultural Interpretation and Living History Section of NAI (now called Cultural and Historical Interpretation) and as NAI Vice President of Programs. His first living history role was as a drummer boy for Company B, Fifth Virginia Infantry, when he was eight-years old. For more information, contact John via email at lmow@juno.com.

Want to write for *Insights*?

Short, long, article, essay, opinion piece, announcement, photos

—if it has to do with Museum Theatre, we’re interested!

Submission guidelines are now online:

<http://imtal-us.org/resources/Documents/Insights/2016-17-18-editorial-schedule.pdf>

Anyone Can Act— with the right script

by Nick Turner, Executive Director, The Grand, Ellsworth, Maine

The theme of Dreamworks’ *Ratatouille* was simple and perfect: “Anyone Can Cook.” Well, guess what? Anyone Can Act. But, as we discover in the movie, the rat, “Little Chef,” is the unexpected “anyone” who helps out the human, “Linguine,” who absolutely can’t cook.

The lesson for us? Your actors may come from unlikely places—your staff, volunteer base, even a retirement community. Your best actors may have chosen a life of security and stability instead of pursuing acting, and they may love the opportunity to stretch out those wings again.

Most professional actors have worked very hard at their craft, and they make it look easy. A lot of amateur actors have also worked hard at their craft and should not be dismissed. Remember: “amateur” used to denote “for the love of”; their love for the craft can be refreshing and their skills often stunning. If you have a volunteer or a staff member with a love for the subject, you have a great starting point.

I’ve learned the most important part of creating an original piece, whether from a raw idea or an historical source, is The Script.

As a career creative in the performing arts, I’ve learned the most important part of creating an original piece, whether from a raw idea or an historical source, is The Script. With a bad script, the most accomplished actor is no better than a raw reluctant rookie. Start with the script. Find and hire an experienced script writer. Yes, pay them fairly. It’s worth it. Yes, I’m a writer, so you might think I’m biased (I’m also worth it), but, most importantly, I recognize, as a director and an actor, that it all starts with a great script. You don’t have to trust me about this; ask any performing artist. Give us a great script, and it’s going to be just fine.

So now you have a great script, and you’ve received solid funding to hire a professional actor. Wonderful. It’s Showtime!

Or you have a great script, and you’ve found a volunteer or staff member with little training, or an amateur actor who needs a little refresher course. It’s still Showtime! With perhaps a bit more work up-front.

The following five key points of performing will guide you through the project and are good reminders for actors of any skill level.

The Five Bs of Performing

1. Be Seen.

If the audience can't SEE the actor it doesn't matter how great their skill level is or how high the quality of the script is. Staging, lighting, seating—all are important.

2. Be Heard.

If the audience can't HEAR the actor. . . you get it. Projection, amplification, and articulation. Do you need a sound system? Depends on the space and the actor. Experiment. (And remember that a sound system will not make up for poor articulation.)

3. Be Understood.

A great script will be inherently UNDERSTOOD as long as the actor understands the content and pronunciations of difficult or unusual words and names. Articulation again.

4. Be Entertaining.

Now, the skills of the actors do shine. They have a great script and are in command of the first three B's. With repetition and experience in front of an audience, your actors will start to enhance and adapt their performance to the audiences' responses. Caution—remember that ENTERTAINING the crowd isn't pandering to the crowd. A good actor sticks to the script and tells the story, not eliciting laughter for laughter's sake.

5. Be Remembered.

Great script + Great actor(s) = Great performance. The story and subject matter resonate with your audience, and the audience leaves knowing something new and interesting. They REMEMBER their trip to your site forever. Only you know that great actor is your favorite volunteer or part-time employee, because you discovered anyone can act. . . with a great script and a handful of Bs.

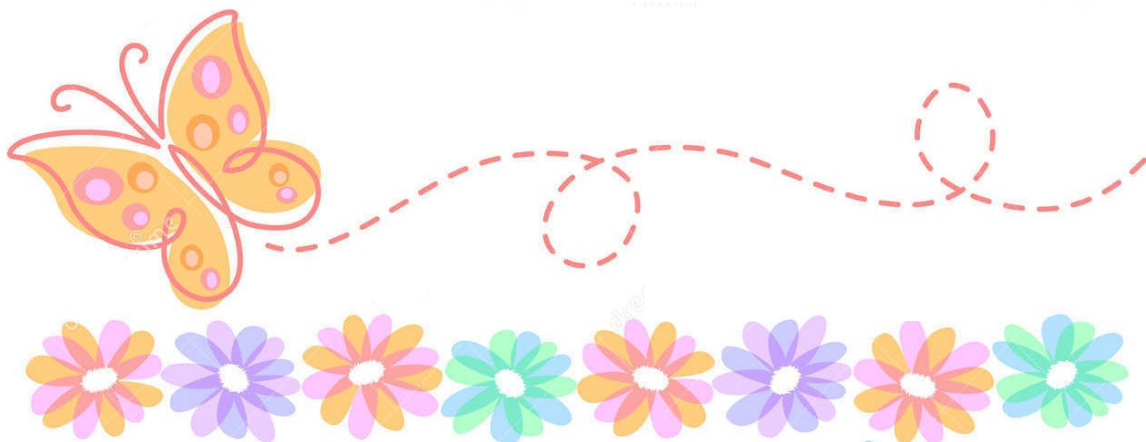
Bonus B: Be human. Your actor is warm and authentic.

Bonus bonus B: Be Fun. It's acting. Lighten up!



Nick Turner

Nick Turner, founder and previous director and lead instructor of la-de-da...performing arts, of Fort Collins, Colorado, is the Executive Director of The Grand in Ellsworth, Maine. Nick has more than 25 years of performing arts experience as a director, actor, teacher, and playwright. He has taught all levels of acting, musical theatre, and improv to all ages, from preschoolers to old-timers, and has developed and presented programs on team-building, creativity, improv, and performing arts to improve team-building and other aspects of for-profit and non-profit companies and organizations. For more information, contact Nick via email, nickalanturner@icloud.com or director@grandonline.org.



Auditions, Calls for Submissions & Announcements

Auditions and Cool Events for Museum Theatre; Calls for Submissions

Calls for Submissions

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 7–10, 2017, St. Louis, MO
AAM (American Alliance of Museums)
conference
<http://annualmeeting.aam-us.org/>

May 7, 2017, Blues Museum, St. Louis, MO
5:00–6:30 p.m. IMTAL Board meeting

May 9, 2017, St. Louis, MO
IMTAL AAM luncheon



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

Send us your article, opinion, or news to publications@imtal-us.org no later than June 22, 2017 for the Summer 2017 issue.

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

Summer 2017 issue: Annual Award Winners, new board members, & AAM report: deadline June 22, 2017

Fall 2017 issue: IMTAL-Americas conference issue; deadline October 10, 2017

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=zYPl9ZckjnWc.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.

Visit IMTAL On-line: imtal-us.org

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

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**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.

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