

IMTAL INSIGHTS

International Museum Theatre Alliance

Fall/Winter 2018-2019 • Volume 29, Issue 1

HOLIDAY PROGRAMMING

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

Halloween at Discovery Place Science isn't celebrated in a big way, but we do observe the some of the traditions. The most enduring of these is our annual staff pumpkin carving contest. Each department - from CEO's office to Exhibits, from Labs to Aquarium to Public Experiences, from Sales to Café, Facilities to Maintenance, about 22 different teams in all - is issued a pumpkin. We're given three days to design and execute a themed, carved pumpkin. There are few restrictions (the gourd must at least be pierced in some way) and the results are always creative, surprising, and delightful. The museum visitors cast ballots for their favorites over the course of the weekend, and the winning department receives a pizza party. It's a way to acknowledge the season without having to drape the entire place in those cob web strands.

Many of our institutions celebrate holidays. The "big ones," of course—

Christmas/Hanukkah/Kwanza, July Fourth, Easter, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day – but the calendar is chock full o' lesser known holidays and days of observance that lend themselves to innovative programming. Pi Day (March 14), Arbor Day (April 26), National Explosive Ordnance Disposal Day (May 4), White Cane Safety Day (Oct. 15), National Aviation Day (Aug. 11), Lost Sock Memorial Day (May 9), Yellow Pig Day (July 17), Fibonacci Day (Nov. 23), Space Exploration Day (July 20) and so many, many more. If you're looking for program ideas, consult your municipal calendar or search online. Marketing departments, by the way, **love** holiday and special day programming. It gives them a reason to seek out local media coverage, and it can spur the customer base to plan a day or two of not-the-usual visit.

– Douglas Coler
IMTAL President



Douglas Coler
IMTAL President

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Hello, readers! I know you've been waiting with baited breath for this latest "Fall" issue, which has now become lovingly known as the "Fall/Winter" issue. Ya know... adaptation! I'm sure you're all too familiar with that concept in your work with Museum Theatre. Make a plan, set a schedule, and yet all great intentions cannot overcome the will of life's great scheme. We had some delays getting this issue out because of new life transitions for myself and our graphic designer, Elysia Segal. So with the blessing of the rest of the Board, this is a double-season issue! I want to take this opportunity to thank Elysia for her brilliant work re-designing the Insights newsletter. We hope you've enjoyed the new look she created a few issues back.

In this issue we take a closer look at highlights from the 2018 IMTAL Conference with our Board President,

Douglas Coler. It was a lovely convening in my home institution, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. We also hear from IMTAL founder and Director of Museum Theatre and Research at Conner Prairie History Museum, Catherine Hughes, as well as Elizabeth Keaney, Character Interpreter at George Washington's Mount Vernon, about their approach to Seasonal Programming. We'd love to hear from you about what sort of seasonal programming your institution embarked upon in 2018. Always feel free to share and comment on any of the articles past and present. And if you'd like to write an article for the Spring issue, take a look at our "Submission Guidelines" section and send me your proposal! Inspired by the experience of getting this issue out, the theme for Spring will be "Adaptation! When Things Don't Go as Planned."

- Ilana Gustafson



Ilana Gustafson, Insights Editor

Want to write for Insights?

Submission guidelines are available online at:

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

LOOKING AHEAD...

SAVE THESE DATES!

Deadlines for the Lipsky and IMTY Awards are approaching!

Submit your play or nomination by **March 31, 2019** to be considered.

2019 IMTAL CONFERENCE Indianapolis, IN

Tentatively August 22-25, 2019

Exact dates and details to be announced.
Stay tuned for more!

ABOUT THE AWARDS

Jon Lipsky Award for Excellence in Playwriting

IMTAL awards the Lipsky Award to the play that best exemplifies standards of excellence and best practices in Museum Theatre. For criteria and submission guidelines, visit:

www.imtal-us.org/lipsky.

IMTY Award

IMTAL recognizes the importance of decision makers to the future of museum theatre. The IMTY Award was established to recognize Senior Staff members who have demonstrated strong support for museum theatre. For more, visit:

www.imtal-us.org/imty.

HOLIDAY PROGRAMMING

The Curtis Family in Conner Prairie by Candlelight

Photo credit: Conner Prairie

Historic Holidays without Tiny Tim

— By Catherine Hughes —

Conner Prairie bestows longevity on its popular annual events. There are several now well into their third decade, like the ever popular Headless Horseman Festival in October. Among these, the venerable Conner Prairie by Candlelight has offered visitors since 1982 insight into how people viewed the notion of Christmas in the early 19th century. Each December since, groups of 15-20 guests have promenaded through Prairietown homes on December 24, 1836, hearing the stories of recent immigrants to the frontier and the traditions they have brought with them. For many years, these stories were exclusively white and Christian. The religious overtones were obvious, but from the beginning, it was the intention

of the program developers to show that the inhabitants of the town were not in agreement as to how this event should be recognized. The secular versus the religious among them attempt to persuade attendants to their view. It was a purposeful narrative, scripted to reveal the diversity of beliefs.

Cranky Mr. Fenton spews the righteousness of his Scotch-Irish, Presbyterian faith. He knows the Bible very well, and believes there just isn't any justification for pagan celebrations, such as those Dr. Campbell is offering that evening at his soiree. On the other hand, the Curtis family has brought with them from New York the Knickerbocker History and the legends of Washington Irving, and they share a reading of "The Children's

Friend" who arrives on Christmas Eve. German immigrant and Inn owner, Mrs. Zimmerman and sons bring Belznichol to life, along with a reading of Jesus's birth from the book of Luke. Meanwhile, Ezra Higbee and several other rowdies celebrate with raucous songs and stories around a fire. The store owner Mr. Whitaker muses to his wife on the future of consumerism if the day is made a holiday across the nation. Generations of guests have joined in the fun each year. It's not uncommon to hear a grandparent telling a young child of how they brought the child's parent when they were young.

There have been changes through the years. In 1997, a scene portraying Hannah and Shemu'el Ullman, a Jewish couple emigrating

from Germany, was added and immediately received positive comments from guests. This scene continues to receive consistent high praise. The Ullmans represent a new immigrant group to Indiana. They were headed to Rising Sun to join a relative who had gone before them, but got lost on the National Road and broke a wagon wheel near Prairietown, forcing them to spend several nights there until it was fixed. The Ullmans share the story of Chanukah.

In 2016, a scene at the School House was adapted to include a new character, Christmas Guilford, who has recently arrived in Indiana from Philadelphia. She is a free African-American woman following her brother to a newly created farming community of free people of color nearby, the Roberts Settlement. Again, we heard from guests their appreciation for another perspective of the holiday season. Christmas, so named for her date of birth, is also

keen to look over the school house as a model for the school she hopes to set up in the Settlement.

Choices about the programming elements have been made according to the historic record, as well as popular demand and contemporary

a bit more toward St. Nicholas than their Methodist faith might normally suggest. The biography of the composite character for Dr. Campbell was made Presbyterian by birth and Episcopalian by his marriage to Mrs. Campbell, which

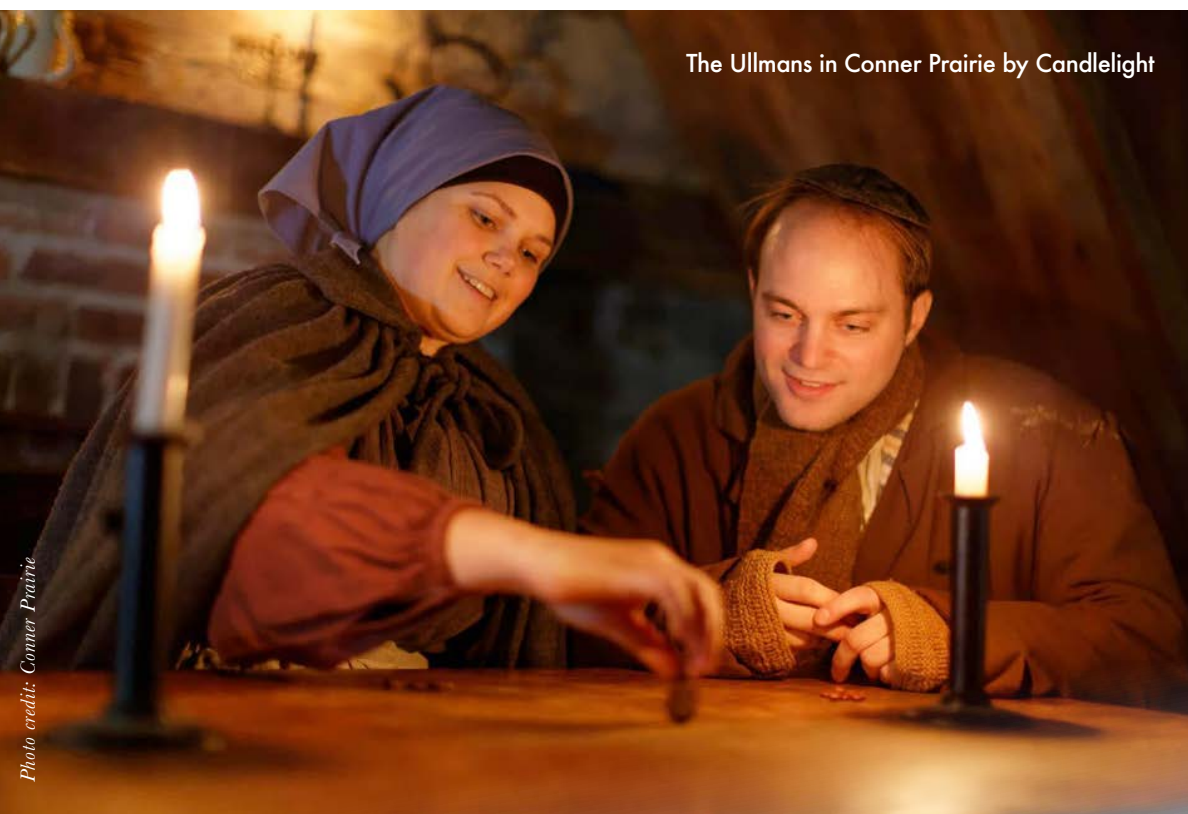
“The historically-accurate notion that Christmas was not widely or uniformly celebrated initially proved less satisfying to some guests.”

concerns, such as diversity and inclusion. When holiday programming first began around 1979, it featured wreaths and familiar Victoriana. As staff worked to bring in more historic authenticity to the holiday program, visitors resisted. The historically-accurate notion that Christmas was not widely or uniformly celebrated initially proved less satisfying to some guests. Giving slightly to popular opinion, The Curtis Family’s story, relying on their Dutch heritage, was stretched

allows his character a wider berth for discussing the shift toward more celebratory and secular holiday traditions.

There are other festivities at Conner Prairie. Breakfasts and Dinners with Santa sell out. Our Gingerbread Village display has dwindled in recent years to a crossroads, but there is a push to revive submissions. Programming has fluctuated inside and outside over the break between Christmas and New Year’s Day.

While Candlelight might be an old-timer, holiday programming cannot be not static. The competition is fierce. The adjacent city of Carmel began a Christkindlmarkt last year, attracting around 150,000 people. The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis offers its hugely popular Jolly Days Winter Wonderland. The light displays win awards for the Christmas at the Zoo celebration at the Indianapolis Zoo. Ongoing planning and



The Ullmans in Conner Prairie by Candlelight

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adjustments are necessary. In order to allow larger crowds, this year Conner Prairie by Candlelight will have guests tour at their own pace, rather than in groups following a set route. In its second year, there is a short two-character play, *Tales at the Holidays: Letters from the Civil War*, using song, dancing and puppetry to tell the intriguing story of brave mail couriers during the Civil War. For the first time, Christmas lights will be added to the front of the Welcome Center. Feet through the door will tell if these tweaks work. Cranky Mr. Fenton, beloved Christmas curmudgeon, might decry the wish to get more people on site celebrating the season, but that just makes reveling all the sweeter. Just ask the rowdies! ❖



The Campbell's soiree in
Conner Prairie by Candlelight

Photo credit: Conner Prairie

Conner Prairie's mission: to inspire curiosity and foster learning about Indiana's past by providing engaging, individualized and unique experiences.



Catherine Hughes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Catherine Hughes is Director of Museum Theatre and Research at Conner Prairie History Museum. In her work there, she has overseen operations across the grounds, been part of the team developing Create.Connect, an exhibition combining history and science, and partnered with Asante Children's Theatre to create a performance initiative, Giving Voice: African-American's Presence in Indiana's History. She also teaches Museum Education at Indiana University-Indianapolis and has developed and taught a Museum Theatre course in Butler University's theatre department. A theater practitioner, educator and researcher, she has worked at the Atlanta History Center; the Museum of Science, Boston; and the London Science Museum. She founded the International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL), and is the author of *Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama*. She has spoken widely on the use of theatre in museums and received a PhD in Theatre Education from The Ohio State University.

Photo credit: George Washington's Mount Vernon



Elizabeth Keaney and Brian Hilton
portray Martha and George Washington
at George Washington's Mount Vernon

The Washingtons at Home:

Using Seasonal Programs to Tell New Stories

— By Elizabeth Keaney —

Mount Vernon, George Washington's iconic home on the banks of the Potomac, has welcomed over 85 million visitors since opening to the public in 1860. During the spring season it is not unusual for daily attendance to reach more than 8,000. Most of these guests are students who come to Mount Vernon in order to learn about the Washingtons and others that lived and worked on the estate. Though the Mansion is the crown jewel of the estate, Mount Vernon encourages guests to explore the entire property including the Pioneer Farm, Education Center, and Museum.

To implement new strategic initiatives, the Visitor Engagement division has launched interpretive programs to activate spaces across the estate. One such program, *Summer Solstice, 1769*, was part of a larger expansion of character interpretation which highlights George and Martha Washington in

the years before the Revolutionary War. The majority of guests who visit Mount Vernon associate the Washingtons with the Revolutionary War and the presidency; having a younger George and Martha Washington allows visitors to learn about the early experiences that shaped the lives of the couple who would later be considered Father and Mother of the country. The Character Interpretation department, along with the Director of Interpretation, created a "moveable feast" experience that invited guests to explore overlooked spaces, specifically the Lower Garden and the Botanical Garden.

The intended outcomes of the program included illuminating the lives of the Washingtons before they entered a national (and international) stage, and offering activities to visitors in the historic area. At the start of the program, guests chose to join Colonel George Washington (portrayed by Brian Hilton) or Mrs. Washington (portrayed by Elizabeth

Keaney) as they went about their morning duties. Each character interpreter moved through different sites of the historic area and met in the Botanical Garden where they engaged visitors and answered questions together.

A few successes:

- The majority of visitors who joined the program from the beginning stayed throughout its entirety.
- As each character moved about the estate they attracted more guests.
- Visitors' questions centered on the theme of the program, which highlighted the daily duties of the Washingtons. This is quite a switch from other programs which focus on the Revolutionary War and presidency.
- Anticipating that visitors would like to "continue the conversation," an afternoon "audience" with the Washingtons was presented and many attendees of the morning program returned for the session.

Things to change:

- The routes were not equal in length, which meant that one group was standing in direct sun for a longer period than we would have liked.
- Expand the time that characters are engaging visitors together.

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- Improve communications between Character Interpretation and other departments involved in or adjacent to the program to aid in inviting passers-by to the program

Due to the success of the program, a second performance was scheduled for October 28, 2018. *Fall Harvest with the Washingtons* follows a similar format with the above changes made. By thinking creatively about interpretive holiday programming, Mount Vernon moved forward with the goal of activating the historic area with immersive experiences. ❖



Elizabeth Keaney as Martha Washington

Photo credit: George Washington's Mount Vernon



Elizabeth Keaney

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Elizabeth Keaney is a Character Interpreter at George Washington's Mount where she portrays young Martha Washington. She earned her M.A.T. in Museum Education from The George Washington University and has taught history, art, science, and, language arts in museums since 2001. In 2012, Elizabeth produced the first museum theatre programs at National Museum of Women in the Arts, and is a former board member of IMTAL-Americas. She can be reached at ekaney@mountvernon.org.

Want to write for Insights?

Short article, essay, opinion piece, announcement, photo...
if it has to do with Museum Theatre, we're interested!

For more information and next issue's theme, visit
<http://imtal-us.org/insights> or contact publications@imtal-us.org!

Deadline for Spring 2019 issue is March 15, 2019.



All photos: Elisia Segal and Ilana Gustafson

I was asked by our editor, Ilana Gustafson, to write a recap of *Lighting the Spark, Feeding the Flame*, our recent 2018 Global Conference in Los Angeles. I was filled with ideas and inspiration from those intensely packed three days. I was there, I opened and closed the conference, I attended all the sessions. How hard could this be? And yet, more than a month after that request, and nearly two months past the end of the conference, I struggled. I have so many notes from those days that to translate them to this forum would prove utterly confusing to our readers, and in the interest of space, I've opted for a session by session recap.

A few folks arrived early enough

on Sunday to visit some of the wonderful museums that are situated in Exposition Park and get caught up in the festivities and traffic surrounding the Super Clasico soccer match, happening that very evening in the L.A. Memorial Coliseum (also in Exposition Park), between the two biggest teams in Mexican history, Club America and CD Chivas de Guadalajara. (We pretended the hoopla was for IMTAL returning to the west coast). The Board met at The Natural History Museum, and joined some of our fellow attendees at The Lab Gastropub attached to our home base hotel. After cocktails and tall tales, the evening was still young and some ventured off to explore the city.

The next morning, we gathered in the North American Mammal Hall at NHMLA to kick off the conference. We were warmly welcomed by Laurel Robinson, the museum's Director of Programs. Immediately following, we were treated to a performance of *Dinosaur Encounters*, pre-

sented by Craig Gibson and Jonathan CK Williams, and featuring Brian Meredith in the extraordinarily detailed T. Rex full body puppet. This was followed by a discussion of the program and a visit to get close up and hands on with more of the museum's collection of puppets and to learn about their operation from the hard working team of performers who bring them to life. There were several times throughout the conference (this was the first) when I think we all would've been quite content to have the session go on for several more hours. I certainly felt joy and wonder and a healthy sense of professional jealousy, but this team earned all the institutional support they have. An amazing, dedicated group of artists, to be sure.

This terrific start was followed by a lively workshop with Brent Blair, PhD, of USC's Theatre Department. Brent's session was a callback to those heady times at school/conservatory, when we were all convinced that theatre can save the world. We all knew this going in, of course, but most of us hadn't experienced the bone-deep truth of that in many years. He followed this



Conference attendees get a behind-the-scenes look at the NHMLA puppet collection

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with a keynote presentation focusing on his involvement in Liberation Arts and Community Engagement (LACE), “a praxis that employs popular theatre in an interactive method towards the aim of socio-political transformation, popular education, and community healing.” It was, ultimately, much more than even that succinct statement, and painted a powerful picture of the work that is being done, and what yet needs to be done as we develop our programming to fit the new paradigms we’re encountering in our world.

After lunch, Elysia Segal of the New York Transit Museum showed us in *A New Train of Thought: Using Technology to Enhance Interactive Storytelling* just how far one can go with simple technology and limited budget to engage the digital natives who are, increasingly, our visitors. Elysia’s creativity, joy, and enthusiasm, and her rapping skills, were on full display.

The group was then split for concurrent workshop sessions from Conner Prairie’s Catherine Hughes and Shelsea Ochoa from Denver Museum of Science and Nature. Catherine’s session - *Breaking Down the Pieces of Collaborative Museum Theatre* - focused on Conner Prairie’s

work with Asante Children’s Theatre and their shared desire to expand the collaborative process. A fascinating look at the dedicated hard work of defining and refining what success looks like.

Shelsea’s *Cultural Dimensions for Inquiry-Based Learning* explored how being actively open to the cultural perspectives in our communities can lead to a better museum experience for all visitors. Both Shelsea and Catherine presented thoughtful, challenging workshops that gave no easy answers but encouraged continued vigilance and awareness.

Theatre as the Lab Rat: Exploring Museum Theatre and Theatrical Gaming as a Research Project, presented by Stephanie Long, Darius Dotch, Rita Boersma, Melanie Wermacher, and Michael Ritchie of Science Museum of Minnesota was an in-depth look at how SMM uses museum theatre to support the emerging field of gaming science. It was thrilling, and not a little bit intimidating, to learn about the many script variations, fits and starts, and technical challenges

that such programming presents. The SMM team is tight-knit, and they are risk takers. Their audiences



The Science Museum of Minnesota team discusses theatrical gaming

are fortunate to share in the creation of their technological, intellectual, and philosophical games.

As the final session of the day, Aaron Bonds and Johnny Marquis of The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis presented *Pushing the Limits: Merging Technology, Special Effects and Creative Writing to Break New Ground in Museum Theatre*. Their clear-eyed, practical approach to was a reminder that exciting, memorable work starts with clear-eyed, practical planning, and successful programming is an evolutionary process.

The long day ended with an authentic Oaxacan meal at Guelaguetza in the heart of Los Angeles. I’m going to assume that



Keynote speaker Brent Blair conducts a LACE workshop with conference attendees



IMTAL dinner at Guelaguetza



Eli Presser brings to life a Saber-toothed Kitten marionette



Ice Age Encounters at the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum

most everyone was as exhausted and excited as I was after day one.

Day two began with a slight transportation snafu as our journey to the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum was delayed by a wayward bus driver. We arrived later than we'd expected, and yet were still treated to the amazing *Ice Age Encounters*, again presented by the NHM team in their other home. It's one thing to know you're going to see a Saber-toothed Cat puppet. It's quite another to feel the hairs stand up on your neck when that cat saunters across the stage. These are performers who are at the top of their game. After the show, we were privileged to have Betsy Zajko, Drew McCourt, Eli Presser, Liza McNeely, and Rachael Caselli share the secrets of creating, operating, and performing this magnificent specimen. Eli also shared much more about the puppetry work that this team does, and we got hands on with some of the many creatures they work with. This was another one of those sessions that could've gone all day and nobody would've complained. Kudos to Ilana Gustafson and her team.

After lunch, the Alleged bus driver delivered us to Bel Air and the Skirball Cultural Center. The permanent installation, Noah's Ark,

is stunning in its innovation and its simplicity. The ark's animals are created from found objects and everyday items: gears and teapots and ropes and suitcases, umbrellas and bedsheets and mops and kitchen whisks, drums and brooms and marbles. We shared the space with dozens of children who were as enchanted as we were. And then, Belize Wilhelm and Julia Garcia Combs enveloped us in their dance/movement piece, *The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge*. Deeply moving, intense, joyous, profound, and loving, all woven in around the animals, the ark, and us. After this, we assembled in the beautiful amphitheater and listened as an incredible storyteller treated us to the ancient Nigerian tale of the flood. Group discussion followed, and finally, reluctantly, we put our lives in the hands of our perplexed bus driver for the return to the hotel.

Our final day was once again hosted among the mammals, and began with *Keeping the Human in History: Empathy, Costumed Historical Interpretation, & Reaching Underserved Communities*, presented by Stephanie Vickers of the University of North Alabama. Stephanie's program was about WWI volunteers called the Four Minute Men. This was a glimpse into a time in U.S. history



IMTALers try their hands at Bunraku puppetry

2018 CONFERENCE RECAP

that is largely overlooked, and her performance reminded us, yet again, how powerful simple, straightforward costumed interpretation can be.

We had concurrent sessions again for late morning. Judy Fort Brenneman of Greenfire Creative conducted her workshop *Burning, Burning, Burning: The Transformative Power of Story*, an interactive session that taught techniques to help “convert chaos to clarity.”

Sue Ellen Winstead of the Littleton Museum presented *You Can Do It All (with a little help from your friends)*, a step by step narrative of how she mounted the first theatrical production her institution had ever done, the lessons she learned, and the pitfalls she encountered.

Our final session was presented by Lisa Hayes. *Decolonizing Interpretation: Using Theatre to Facilitate Difficult Conversations* began with a reading of Lisa’s short play *Telling the Story of a Landscape*, and transitioned into an examination of The Accocek Foundation’s National Colonial Farm and their intention to include honest portrayals of the original indigenous occupants of the land, the European settlers on that land, and the enslaved peoples who worked that land. Who’s story is the truth? Who’s story matters? Where do we draw the line, and where does that leave those whose stories are not told? This closing session sparked an amazing, far ranging discussion of the value we place on those stories, the struggle to shine a light on underserved communities, the lives left unexamined in the process, and the responsibility that comes



with historical interpretation.

The discussion was everything you’d imagine a group of passionate, intelligent people would be like, and it honestly made me proud to be associated with such folks.

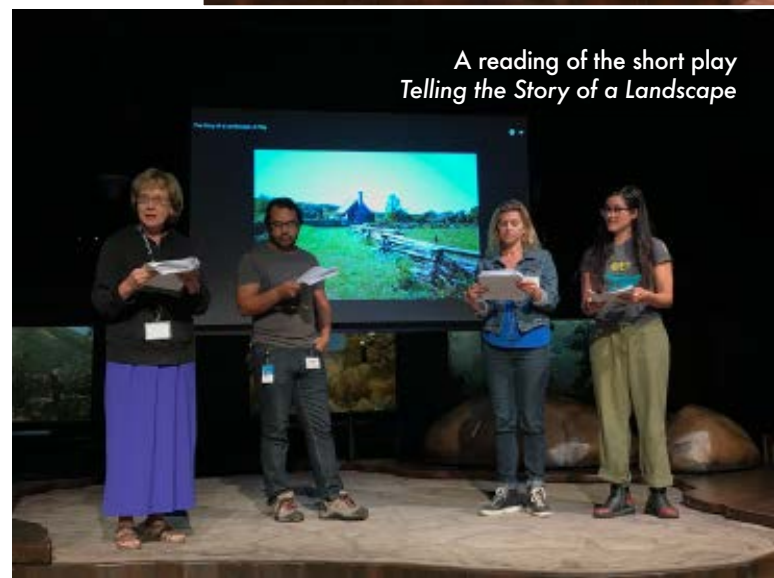
The conference was everything we hoped it would be, except for the poor, misguided bus driver. It showed us that we who are IMTAL are still, as ever, a vital part of museum culture, in the U.S. and around the world. It renewed our commitment to education and sharing of ideas, techniques and technologies. The sharing of our weaknesses, of our strengths, our desires, and our fears, and it reminded us that once the spark is struck, the flame that it creates needs to be fed. Feed it a regular diet of compassion and hope, daily meals of curiosity and joy. Tend to it, and not only will it keep you warm, that flame will light the way. ❖



Masterful storytelling and *The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge* at Skirball Cultural Center



Stephanie Vickers performs as a WWI volunteer



A reading of the short play *Telling the Story of a Landscape*

Here's Your Chance to Change the World!

Want to get involved with IMTAL but aren't sure how?
It's a slippery slope!

New year, new you...

- Help with next year's conference planning
- Submit articles, news, photos and ideas for *Insights*
- Share IMTAL with friends and colleagues
- Send a photo to post on the IMTAL website
- Write up a blog post for the IMTAL Facebook page

Snow day but today!

- Become an At-Large IMTAL Board Member
- Submit a script for the Jon Lipsky Award for Excellence in Playwriting
 For more information, visit: <http://imtal-us.org/Lipsky>
- Nominate your leader for the IMTY Award
 For more information, visit: <http://imtal-us.org/IMTY>



Want to be in the next issue of *Insights*?

Check out the **submission guidelines** then send your article, photo, or news to publications@imtal-us.org by **March 15, 2019** for the Spring 2019 issue!

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...with IMTAL online and on social media!

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for posts and pictures about IMTAL news and events!

Tag us when sharing your own museum theatre-related posts and tweets so we can help spread the word.

...and don't forget to check out our [online archive](#) for past issues of *Insights*!

The International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) is a nonprofit, professional membership organization and an affiliate of 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.

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