



ADAPTATION! WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

There is not one of us reading this for which all projects have gone as planned. We've all been there, and we will go there again, perhaps sooner than we expect. What we envision when we first write a program outline, a monologue, a special event, or even a gallery tour rarely results in the exactly what we planned. Part of this can be attributed to poor budgeting (time/finances/resources) and part of it is the just the way the world seems to work. Find out how some of your colleagues have adapted within the pages of this issue.

This issue marks the end of tenure for our Publications Officer, Ilana Gustafson, who has ably pursued stories, transcribed interviews, selected photographs, and edited them all into the fascinating, useful, and compelling *Insights* that we have had the pleasure of producing these last 24 months.

Our Treasurer, Annie Johnson, comes to the end of her term in May. Annie's cool business acumen and no nonsense approach to our finances is just what we needed at IMTAL. We are financially stable and thriving, thanks in large part to her management of the books. I thank Ilana and Annie for their service, and I know that the board and IMTAL have been made stronger through their contributions.

The end of May also marks the end of my term as President. I am happy that I will continue to serve on the board for the next twelve months in the position of Immediate Past President, and I am delighted for all of us that I can pass the baton to your new President, Todd D. Norris.

It has been an honor and a pleasure. Enjoy the issue!

- Douglas Coler
IMTAL President



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With this issue I wanted to play with a new theme, *Adaptation: When things don't go as planned*. As I reached out to colleagues to write articles, there were many questions about how to interpret that theme. "Do you want me to write about a particular project that went awry?" "Do you mean from the perspective of the performer during a show?" "Do you mean evolutionarily speaking?" (Well, I didn't get asked that last one, but I work in a Natural History Museum, so it crossed my mind.) To which I replied, "Any and all of it! What ever sparks your storytelling mind!" I'll admit that I was expecting to get articles that explored the former of the three questions I listed, but to my delight I got responses that surprised me entirely!

Molly Ritchie, in her article

"Mitigating Failure Through Unscripted Expertise: a polemic," explores the idea of the museum theater artist having a special ability for being adaptive, and what it means to forge ahead despite being a bit... misunderstood. She encourages museum theater artists to embrace this ability to improvise in career and in performance. Lisa Hayes took the theme to mean the adaptation of both stories found from a variety of sources and the adaptation of her own plays to different settings.

I hope hearing from these perspectives and continuing to explore this theme inspires thought, or even conversation. What are some ways that you interpret the word "adaptation" in your careers? We'd love to hear from you.

- Ilana Gustafson
IMTAL Publications Officer



Ilana Gustafson, *Insights Editor*

This issue will be Ilana's last as Publications Officer. The IMTAL Board would like to thank Ilana for her amazing work over the past two years!

LOOKING AHEAD... (check the website for more information!)

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ADAPTATION! WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED...

Photo credit: Science Museum of Minnesota



Rita Boersma and Darius Dotch in
INFESTATION: The Evolution Begins
by John Gordon and Liza Pryor

Mitigating Failure Through Unscripted Expertise: a polemic

— By Molly M. Ritchie —

When first asked to write an article on the theme “Adaptation! When things don’t go as planned...” I thought it would be fun to ask my fellow castmates for Science Live Theatre horror stories, then write peppy responses to how we fixed them through being adaptive. That’s not what this has turned out to be...

Instead I would like to talk about casting practices, performance practices, and our mindset of what “legitimate” theater is, and if by courting that image we are only asking for a place at the table, instead of asking what is being served. By questioning these things, we can become more adaptive as Museum Theater artists.

As practitioners of museum theater we often find ourselves in a battle for artistic legitimacy in the eyes of the others. This can mean

having to explain ourselves to upper management who may hold live performers in such low regard they think we could be easily replaced by a low-budget video, or a well-trained squirrel. Or to parents upset that not everything we do is a puppet show for kids 4 and under, or a science demo for kids 8 and under that involves the pure recitation of facts, so the parents can then feel secure while sitting in the back of the audience rubbing on their phones.

Or to boards composed primarily of extremely wealthy people from the private sector who would never personally avail themselves of, but still want to have control over, our programming (several in the nonprofit sector seem to fetishize these oligarchs, perhaps out of personal financial envy, but that can be saved for another tirade).

So too do we fight for legitimacy in the eyes of our fellow theater practitioners who work outside of the museum world. I am more guilty of this than anyone else I know. It has practically become a function of my autonomic nervous system that whenever I tell fellow artists about where I’ve been working, I trot out the old chestnut that Science Live’s first resident playwright was August freaking Wilson.

EJ Subkoviak in *As the Worm Turns*
by Melanie Wehrmacher



Photo credit: Science Museum of Minnesota



Legitimacy?
Attained.

This is not the first time in my career I have faced this.

I have a long, complicated relationship with “legitimacy” in theater.

Despite my background in and continuing study of, scripted theater, shortly after high school I found myself getting a paycheck for doing improv shows several nights a week. I always hated improv exercises in acting class because they didn't seem “real.” I have a bachelor's degree, and half of an MFA in acting for goodness' sake (my grad program fell apart, it's a long story) and while I continued to poo poo the value of improv in my head, I kept coming back to it, and not just because it was a reliable paycheck. Improv was not something I studied, I learned it in a brutally Socratic way through trial and error in front

of a paying audience, as a member of a troupe run by an insecure megalomaniac who had no idea what the heck he was doing (another long story). If I have any improv expertise nowadays it's because of that Malcolm Gladwell hour ratio.

Improv is not considered “legitimate” theater.

Sound familiar?

And just as my internalized self-loathing over the legitimacy of museum theater has had a sinister grasp on my psyche, so too has improv's lack of legitimacy lead to a tendency for me to over explain my place in the theater world at large (by the way, my Equity name is Michael Harrigan Ritchie, in case you were wondering).

So here I am, the bastard daughter of two illegitimate art forms.

What's next?

I advise this.

Whether you run, manage, or perform museum theater, embrace the illegitimacy.

A fine way of doing this is to seek out, hire, and mine the expertise of this new generation of artists who have studied improv not as Viola Spolin first wrote about it—a private, rehearsal room-only exercise for script creation and actor training—but as its own perfectly “legitimate” art form. Then, give them room to run.

When we museum theater artists create shows, then treat each and every one of them as being as rigidly unchangeable as Beckett, it is the equivalent of me invoking August Wilson's name. We are attempting to legitimize our practice by mimicking the practices of professional “legitimate” theater. Those practices of docking pay for a dropped line, of maintaining a rigid hierarchy within the theater structure may work well in that setting, (I mentioned I'm Equity right?) but by doing that are we actually doing what is best for our form of theater?

By seeking out, hiring, and



Neal Hazard and Melanie Wehrmacher in *The Cure-All Road Show* by Melanie Wehrmacher

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training improv artists, our shows can become as adaptive as needed, and lead to the creation of a new movement in museum theater based not on expectations we bring from other art forms. By making room for a few of our shows to not have rigid scripts, but instead have teaching points, rudimentary blocking, some notes on character, and/or demonstration tools, we can create a form of museum theater that is engaging, well-informed, and undeniably adaptive.

I recognize that this puts a lot of pressure on casting. Not only do you need to look for people with performance expertise, but also with intellectual curiosity, integrity, and a hunger for informal education. However, I would like to state that those are the very same people who are best at museum theater anyway.

I also recognize that this is easier said than done. We have several interests to please. Funders, grant committees, consulting scientists, museum leadership with no artistic background, our work can



Photo credit: Science Museum of Minnesota

Jen Maren and Denzil Belin in
A Fraction of the Whole by Melanie Wehrmacher

quickly turn into art by committee (looking at you, Boston Irish Famine Memorial statues). However, through repeated examples of how this more adaptive, and less rigidly controlled kind of theater can lead to entirely new kinds of educational and artistic success, perhaps this will lead to greater autonomy within our organizations.

To cultivate ideas on how to

do this, start by reaching out to long form improv theaters in your community. Or contact me and we can brainstorm.

Who knows, maybe it will make us seem more legitimate? ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Molly M. Ritchie is a Minneapolis-based actor, unscripted theater director, and the creator of several innovative, critically acclaimed improv shows. She has worked with SMM's Science Live Theatre since 2009. Her expressed views in this article are her own opinions and do not reflect those of the Science Museum of Minnesota or Science Live Theatre.



Lisa Hayes in her solo performance of *Jane Eyre*



— By Lisa Hayes —

Stone steps, worn and narrow, spiral up to the top of the round tower, a distinctive feature of 16th century Castle Fraser. Beyond the castle's turrets below stretches the late summer landscape of this Grampian highland National Trust property. Soon I will be performing in the museum below. I have walked into a fairy tale, one that will carry me from castles in Scotland to historic manor houses in England, performing in rooms called The Great Hall, the Music Room, and the Marble Hall. My adaptation of *Jane Eyre* is beginning to lead me on an extraordinary adventure.

Early in my tenure as a struggling actress in New York City I realized that the only way I would survive as an artist would be to create my own

work. While reading a biography of Charlotte Bronte, it suddenly occurred to me that *Jane Eyre*, one of my favorite novels, was written in the first person. I set about transforming the novel into a one-woman show, a process that seemed like it would never end. Needing the urgency of a performance date, I offered to do a staged reading of the yet-to-be completed play at a historic house museum in Greenwich Village. I pared the 500-page novel down to a 50-page script and three months later I was performing my 80-minute 25-character adaptation for an audience at the Merchant's House Museum.

My Journey with Jane has brought many remarkable experiences. Though the UK tour remains one

of the highlights of my journey, there are others that stand out. After seeing my performance, a celebrated television producer and Bronte-ophile invited me to see his Bronte collection. It is impossible to describe the thrill of holding a letter written by Charlotte Bronte. Of course, the letter was encased in protective plastic and my hands in white gloves, but still – Charlotte's hands had touched this paper, her pen had written these words rejecting a marriage proposal from her best friend's brother. A presenter in Ojai California used my performance as a fundraising event for the local homeless shelter. It was a community affair, with the chef from the country club preparing dinner with the help

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of volunteers from the Spanish Mission church where I performed. The pastor's introduction with its eloquent words about homelessness made Jane's wandering the moors homeless and hungry even more poignant. During a 3-month run of the play in a tiny North Hollywood theatre, a few teenagers in the audience turned out to be from a shelter for sexually exploited teens. They were enthusiastic about the show and invited me to come for a tour of the shelter, which I did a couple of weeks later. Since many of the shelter residents had not been to the show, I performed the opening of the play in their classroom. When I finished, a 14-year old girl raised her hand and declared, "I never wanted to see a play before. Now I do."

My repertoire now includes two additional adaptation-based solo performances. *Nurse!*, crafted from oral history interviews, revolves around a nurses strike and

debuted off-Broadway with sponsorship from a nurses union. A performance of *Nurse!* at a conference in Turkey led to an invitation to perform at a conference in The Hague on the theme of America: War, Conflict and Justice. I used that invitation as the inspiration to create a new show. An internet search on the phrase "women and war" led me to the story of Pulitzer prize winning photographer Marissa Roth and her haunting exhibit *One Person Crying: Women and War*. Using transcripts from my interviews with Marissa and Marissa's notes from her interviews with women she had photographed, I created *Finding the Light*, which tells the story of Marissa's thirty-year journey documenting women and war, using her photographs as the backdrop.

I have begun working on a new

project, adapting archival material on the 19th amendment. I am excited to see what new adventures lay ahead on a journey that began in a castle long ago. ❖



Lisa Hayes in her solo show *Nurse!*



Lisa Hayes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lisa Hayes is a long-time member of IMTAL. In addition to touring her solo shows, she is a museum consultant in interpretation and museum theatre. She is the former CEO of the Accokeek Foundation, where she led transformational initiatives around museum theatre and interpretation of Piscataway Park's landscape through a historical, indigenous, and environmental lens.

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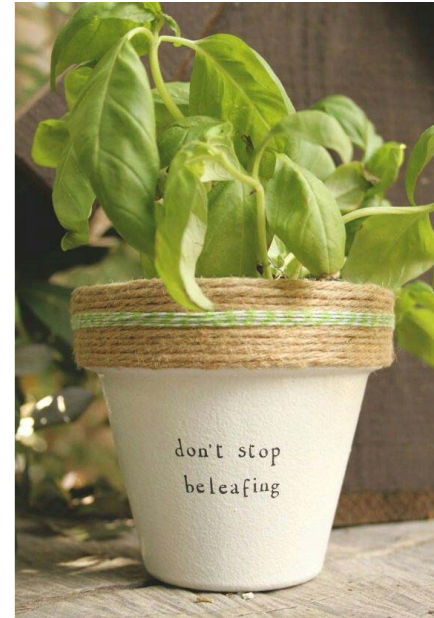
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Want to write for an upcoming issue of *Insights*?

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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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