

Our Community at Thirty

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

What an impossible year we have lived through. Exactly one year ago, I was on what would be my last trip for several months. Then I contracted Covid-19, and spent the next month the sickest I can remember. The next several months would be a fog of gaining weight, regaining strength and clarity (such as it is), and figuring out how to balance online content with staffing TCM safely. Every month, I would hear of colleagues who lost their staffs, their jobs, and most tragically, their loved ones. This was arguably the worst year ever for many of us. When my position was eliminated, I had the blessing of two months' advanced notice, which so many of our friends did not have. I did a lot of job and soul searching, and had some interviews, but I had to admit to myself that my heart just wasn't in it. I have relocated to Richmond, Virginia where I have ideas for independent history and tourism-related projects. I do not see myself in a full time museum setting anytime soon, but I am available for contracts (hint), and when my term ends in October, I look forward to watching IMTAL and my colleagues come back stronger than ever.

Despite that downer of a paragraph, I am optimistic. Reading this issue reminds me of all that we have achieved, and have yet to achieve. Programs have risen from the ashes of financial hardship in the past. Innovation has been stoked by evolving audiences and technologies. Doing more with less has been a necessity since the inception of museum theatre. The need for museums to tell their stories is more pressing than ever. We KNOW the stories that need to be told. We know HOW to tell them compellingly. We know WHY they must be shared. Do not shrink from the challenge, but look to practitioners like Catherine Hughes and Betsy Maguire for inspiration. That's why this year's virtual conference was so meaningful. Regardless of what may have been lost, we still have our creativity, our stories, and our community. There is strength in numbers. Here's to that strength! Strength and community is how we will not only survive, but how we will rise to new heights. Break legs this year!

-Todd D Norris
IMTAL President



Todd D. Norris
IMTAL President

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Hello, readers, and welcome back to *Insights*! I am delighted to bring you my first issue as Editor of this newsletter. Like many of you, I'm sure, I was thrilled to learn about the existence of this IMTAL community. Some days I'm still amazed that I have a job that combines so many things I love: theater, education, history... costumes. 12-year-old Fiona, fresh off her first visit to Colonial Williamsburg, would think present-day Fiona is way cool. It's an honor to serve on the board of IMTAL, and I hope to meet many more of you in this community in the years to come.

In this issue, we reflect on the 2020 IMTAL Conference, which

was held virtually. It's been a challenging year in so many regards, but gathering with our community felt hopeful. Ahead, you can read Catherine Hughes' keynote from the conference, an address which celebrated the power and beauty of museum theater. We also hear from the 2019 Lipsky Winner, Betsy Maguire, about her fabulous work "Tales from the Dungeon: Life at Newgate."

If you are interested in writing for a future issue of *Insights*, please send me your proposal! We'd love to hear what you are working on.

-Fiona Meagher
IMTAL Publications Officer



Fiona Meagher
INSIGHTS Editor

Submission guidelines are available online at <http://www.imtal-us.org/insights>.

CREATING OUR COMMUNITY

At the "IMTAL at 30" annual conference, held virtually in November 2020, Founder Catherine Hughes opened proceedings with a keynote address that invoked memories while looking ahead to our future as museum theatre professionals and as an organization. Printed here is a written version of those remarks and Catherine's Postscript.

-By Catherine Hughes-

Greetings to those reading this from the United States, Australia, and Europe and hello to everyone from wherever you are reading. I was touched to be asked to speak at this

conference, celebrating 30 years of an organization that has created a community of museum theatre practitioners who have buoyed each other in dark times, challenged each other in good times, and inspired each other always. One of the goals I remember having at the beginning when I was forming IMTAL was to show people that there were others that thought as they did, that they were not alone in this idea that theatre could have a place in museums, that they weren't crazy! That community has sustained many of us working in the field over these 30 years. To find a group of people who spoke the same language, used the same idioms, and shared

similar dreams was at the same time exhilarating, comforting, and challenging. We formed a community, within which we could then argue over definitions and best practices, to spur us on to be better.

Many people have heard me declare myself a missionary for museum theatre, which is what I became, spreading this idea at conferences and roundtables, and in writing. Happily, I discovered I wasn't alone. I discovered a merry band of museum theatre that spanned the globe. The original organizations that came together to form IMTAL included the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney; the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec;

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The LA Children's Museum; the Science Museum in London; and the Museum of Science, Boston. Over the years, there have been many dynamic personalities that have driven IMTAL forward, and I am thrilled to see many of them in leadership positions in museums now. Some of them joined us for the recent conference. 30 years on, we have much to be proud of in the field. The power of our collective programming has affected and changed many a mind, young and old.

I have a story of a young mind and an old one changed. Years ago, I performed a play at the Museum of Science called *The Bog Man's Daughter* by Jon Lipsky in an exhibit on bogs. I performed it 4 times a day, usually at least 4 days a week, for a year. I did it a lot. I often saw repeat visitors. One was a young mother with a toddler and a daughter around 5 years old. They came so often the girl began to mouth my lines as I said them, dance when I danced. I would sometimes have to ask her to say the words silently because not everyone else knew them. Many years later, her mother contacted me. She'd found me in Ohio as I was finishing my doctoral studies. She was hesitant and asked if I would remember them. Immediately, I knew who she was. We had mutually affected each other. She told me that her daughter was graduating from high school and she'd never forgotten her time watching me in *The Bog Man's Daughter*. It

had made a deep impression and she wanted me to know. I was surprised and touched to have her find me so many years later.

The second story is from when I was collecting data for my dissertation. I was at the Kentucky History Center and Greg Hardison, a master museum theatre creator, was performing *Into the Veins*, a play about coal mining. A staff member had announced the play in the mining exhibit and invited people to come watch. There were a couple benches indicating a performance/audience area. I was observing how people chose to watch or not. There was an older man in the exhibit reading text panels and he looked over, but then turned back to read. In the first scene, Greg played a young boy getting water from a stream for his coal miner family. As the scene continued, the man kept getting a bit closer, but still faced the exhibit. Just as it was ending, he had turned around and was now part of the audience. When a staff person invited everyone to move to another part of the exhibit for the next scene, this man joined in. In the second scene, Greg now played an Italian immigrant who had been injured mining and now worked in the Company store. He saw the visitors assembled and began talking in Italian, gesticulating and asking questions. After a minute, he switched to an accented English

and said, "Ok, you no speak English, we'll talk in Italian," thus setting up the fiction that the visitors were now new Italian immigrants. He went on to tell us how to fit in as new immigrant miners. The old man stayed. For the third and final scene, Greg became a union organizer at the opening of a mine shaft. He stepped up onto a wooden box and began a rousing speech, assuming those before him to be miners and miners' families. After the play was over, I asked the older gentleman if I could interview him. He agreed, and I asked him why he decided to watch. This is what he said: "I never thought it'd be factual at first, but after I listened for a while that's actually the way it was. I thought it was just kind of a play." He went on to tell me about a friend of his who had been a coal miner, but who had now passed on. He was shocked to realize some of the conditions miners faced and wished he'd asked his friend more about what he'd endured. The work we do poses questions, provides access to new information or reminds of us what we already know, and can often lead to a feeling of connectedness or community. Over thirty years doing this work, I have found this anecdotally as well as in formal research. You might not always realize the effect your work has had on the audience. You might not be lucky enough to collect rich data afterward, and

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hear time and again the surprise in people voices when recounting how they were drawn in by a performance. *It was so dynamic! It was really good!* And my favorite, *I never knew that!*

When it is good, when all the pieces come together, museum theatre in whatever form -- scripted or improvised, musical, comedy, or tragedy -- has the power to transport the audience from the walls of an exhibit or historic site to another time, and another place. And that experience stays with the audience. It goes straight to long term memory, coated in emotional response. My dissertation was a visitor response study exploring how people made meaning from their museum

theatre experience (Hughes, 2008). What I found was that affect or emotion, and cognition, worked together to create strong and long-lasting memories. It was a balancing act. Too much of one without the other did not work the same way.

My research led me to build a 4-point rubric for museum theatre, which I use in my work and my teaching. Good museum theatre, that is able to strike that balance, must be in some way 1. emotional, 2. thought-provoking,

3. participatory, and 4. offer multiple perspectives. Begin with essential questions: *What is justice? What are the social implications of science? Who*

gets to tell their story in history? And make sure you have a reason to be there, in front of an audience. Make sure they know who they are and what they can do. Need their help, need something from the audience.

I have wondered if I have anything to say that could bring hope, inspiration or comfort to the field in this terrible time. Museums have been decimated by the pandemic, many limiting their live programming indefinitely and laying off actors. Independent museum theatre contracts have disappeared. The future is foggy at best. The present moment is not for the faint at heart. But of course, what we all know is that museum theatre people are not



"Get Critical: Forging the Future of Museum Theatre" conference attendees celebrate at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, 2019.

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fainthearted. In fact, they are some of the strongest, most resourceful people out there. For museum theatre professionals, it is in your nature to be tenacious, persevering, and resolute. It has always been a true axiom that theatre people are subversive. You do first and ask forgiveness later. Bar the theatre doors and we will go elsewhere to ply our craft. Just ask Oliver Cromwell or Jesse Helms. Still, while the pandemic may be without puritan leanings, its effect has been no less damning. But rise to the challenge we must.

So what can we do now, in this trying time? First and foremost, we must stay subversive. No one generally let us in the front door of the museum in the first place, right? We snuck in the back and surprise, we showed our power with our impact on the visitor. They had no idea what we could do for them.

We can take heart from the related field of escape rooms equally impacted by the coronavirus. *The New York Times* recently profiled how the field is reinventing itself, noting their creative spirit and scrappy nature (Soloski, Nov 5, 2020). This immersive theatre and gaming community has “entered a period of frenetic innovation. In search of pandemic-friendly entertainment, they have created and adapted games to make them available for live remote play, asynchronous point-and-click play, print-and-play, and play by telephone and mail.” According to the *Times*, “these new games

constitute a wholesale rethinking of immersion and experience design.” Let us be inspired by and learn from them.

Christy Coleman, former IMTAL board member and now CEO and President of Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, challenged those who attended the American Association for State and Local History’s virtual conference in September by asking: *How do we tell stories that matter?* Coleman has been telling stories that matter for many years, beginning at Colonial Williamsburg with her work heading up African American interpretation. One thing that we can do to tell stories that matter is lean into the coronavirus and social unrest that has marked 2020.

There is a frenzy to collect oral histories and objects about the pandemic and protests of 2020. Institutions large and small, including mine, are determined to capture the compelling stories of front-line workers, doctors, nurses, police and emergency workers, teachers, students, and regular ordinary people living through this moment. They are being collected from those who lost loved ones or were sick themselves and survived. These oral histories will tell future generations what it was like to navigate economic collapse, home schooling, sickness, and separation from loved ones. Themes will emerge from these

oral history collections, poignant tales of loss and surprising stories of resilience. And museum theatre must be there to interpret these oral histories. We must inhabit them and bring them to life in performances and living history. It will be a treasure trove of human experience, captured by museums, but providing the museum theatre field in particular with compelling drama and immediacy. It will be a necessary exercise in interpretation for the museum theatre maker and the

audience. Whatever discipline you are working in, think of how science has played a role, think of what art will emerge from this time, and if this isn’t history-making, nothing is. As we contemplate the inequities raised by the pandemic, documenting these and giving voice to them is crucial.

While there might be a current vacuum of activity in museums, people need arts and culture like never before. We are chafing to break our isolation, to congregate, to interpret and understand the effects of this moment. We are all trying to understand what it means to be human in 2020. Our daily rituals are disrupted. Fresh paradoxes have emerged. We are afraid of contact, and yet we crave it. There *are* lights in the darkness. We can look to theatre for hope. Outdoor performances are blooming. The work two theatres in western Massachusetts have done to carry on outdoors inspired a brother and sister to

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recently donate 2 million dollars to these companies to stay afloat this winter. Live streaming feels like theatre in many ways. It is immediate and risky. Whatever can go wrong, often does, and when an actor carries on in the face of technical glitches, we all cheer. Access to theatre has opened up paradoxically, as people can watch from home, often for free. How many of you have seen something amazing from home? I recently watched *What the Constitution Means to Me*. I had wanted to see this live, but never had the opportunity. And now I know why people were so over the moon about this show. In my mind, it also contained the balance of museum theatre. It brought the abstract of the constitution down to a very particular set of stories. And that is so often what we do, break down complex and remote issues into specific and familiar human stories.

There are a plethora of historically based theatre pieces out now, inspired no doubt by *Hamilton*, but many carrying on the tradition of theatre based on historic events, like *Frost/Nixon*, *Copenhagen*, and Sondheim's *Assassins*. San Diego Rep has been streaming *JQA* about John Quincy Adams.

We are on a continuum. This collection of oral histories and objects that illuminate the lived experience of the pandemic and social unrest also reminds us that we have been here before. In 1918, the world was changed. In 1968, the world was changed

again. But it didn't stop.

We have to keep breathing and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Museums have been changed and will re-emerge altered, as will museum theatre. Because there is still the human need to tell stories, to hear stories.

Over IMTAL's 30 years, members have shown the power and rightness of theatre in museums at meetings and conferences around the world. In 1993, at the Museum of

Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, England, a lively group of about 100 practitioners converged to tease out, argue, and challenge each other about what makes the best theatre in museums. Was it scripted or improvised? Should characters be composites or real figures from history? We had amazing examples to support each argument. At one site, Oakwell Hall, we the visitors were the ghosts; passing through the house to witness life unseen



"Navigating the Seas of Change" conference attendees enjoy boating in Mystic, Connecticut, 2017.

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and unheard by the busy inhabitants living their lives. We went to the National Railway Museum in York and witnessed the vaudevillian humor and sudden pathos of Chris Cade and Chris Ford as they inhabited multiple roles each to tell the story of the navies who built the railway tunnels across the UK. They took us down into the darkness of the tunnels, made us feel the fear and courage it took to do this work. Later, Chris Ford shared research he conducted with school children, who drew pictures of what they had seen, and described the story. Many showed the two men tumbling down a shaft. How did they see the shaft? It was just two men with some costume pieces and a woven basket.

Let me end with the story of Clarissa, a young actress I worked with on a play about Frederick Douglass, *More Light: Douglass Returns*, written by Celeste Williams. It was a collaborative production between Conner Prairie and Asante Children's Theatre. In this project, I asked the youth actors to journal through rehearsals and performances. Clarissa was playing Anna Douglass, wife of the great man. While she worried the project might be boring, she wrote that "from the first day of rehearsal I found it anything but." She welcomed the support and guidance of the supervising adults from both Conner Prairie and Asante Children's Theatre. Notably, she felt she grew as an artist, charged with the mission

"to use my body and my voice to give voice to the people that cannot speak." During rehearsals, she did her own independent research of Anna Douglass, and became passionate about portraying her. She wrote of how the project helped her face personal problems, of how working on her scenes helped her learn "something new about my history" and changed the way she carries herself in the world. This was Clarissa's experience. It can stand as an exemplar of what museum theatre can achieve from within. Her performance brought Douglass' great-great grandson to tears. In his public remarks after seeing the play, he talked of how happy he was to have the spotlight shine on Anna. Her story was generally overshadowed by her famous husband. He was moved that her voice was finally heard.

—Post-script—

In the Q & A, Michael Mills of Heaps Good Production in Adelaide, Australia, astutely observed, while appreciating my optimism, that people can't make a living offering free museum theatre programs. He challenged me and the group to offer ways museum theatre might monetize online content. We can see theatres charging for live streamed or prerecorded performances, though the ticket price is most

often far less than an in-person ticket. Some museums are finding that schools will pay for online programming during the pandemic. However, I acknowledge that more is being canceled than is being sustained. My short answer to this query is sponsorship and grants.

In my present institution, the Howard County Historical Society, we received a grant to produce a video that could offer a virtual COVID-safe alternative to our annual Christmas at the Seiberling event. We created a 30-minute video tour of 27 individually decorated areas throughout our historic 1890s mansion, which was launched on our Facebook page, with an accompanying Photo Album that provides the opportunity to vote on your favorite. This interactive aspect was important, as people can do this in person. At this writing, the virtual tour has been viewed over 5,900 times. This far outstrips the number of visitors who have ever come in person. While viewing is free, voting is done by donating \$1-50 for your favorite decorations. Though the pandemic forced our hand to create a virtual tour, we will probably offer this parallel experience next year too, as it has made it so widely accessible and available.

Later in the conference during a free-ranging discussion, I jumped in when the age-old question of who can tell a story came up. It is a central question for the field, and one that has been argued over incessantly.

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Answers have ranged over the 30 years of IMTAL's existence. The field has certainly become more sensitive to the challenges of one culture telling another culture's story, as it should be. But as *Hamilton* has shown us, we have more artistic freedom than we might have dreamed in historic role play. I would argue that not only does an actor not have to look like the historic character they are playing, it is perhaps more effective to not look like them. It can heighten the theatricality, promoting a more Brechtian relationship with the audience. While the strictures of living history might confine who plays which characters to carry out a sense of verisimilitude at a historic site, there is danger in believing any historic character

can speak through the vessel of the contemporary actor.

We are in the business of attempting to bring history to life with full knowledge that we cannot do so entirely. We can bring about an approximation. The best that we can do, which is pretty great and difficult to achieve, is engage the visitors' imagination to travel to another time and place, to invite them to play in that liminal space between here and there. To blur the line and convey that somehow the actor is channeling an historic character, should not be the goal.

I have always come down firmly on the "theatre is art" side of this argument. It is flexible and has many styles and

techniques. We are not lecturing. We are not animatronic. We are balancing emotion and cognition, provoking, prodding, and questioning to get at some elemental human truth or endeavor. And this age-old argument will continue, as the community of museum theatre practitioners challenges and cajoles each other on best practices and the meaning of what we do.

References

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MEET THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER:

Catherine Hughes, PhD, is a museum leader with more than 20 years experience in education, interpretation, museum theatre, and evaluation. She is the Executive Director of the Howard County Historical Society and Museum in Kokomo, IN.

Catherine is a hybrid museum professional, theatre practitioner, educator, and researcher who has enriched the visitor experience by empowering educational and interpretive teams to transform ways audiences can connect to museums. She has taught Museum Education at IUPUI, and Museum Theatre at Butler University. She has had senior leadership roles at Conner Prairie History Museum, developing and implementing programming, research and evaluation to expand and deepen public and student engagement. Prior to that, Catherine was Project Director for Meet the Past, a 3-year initiative to transform the visitor experience at the Atlanta History Center. She has also worked at the Museum of Science, Boston and the London Science Museum, and founded the International Museum Theatre Alliance. Catherine has consulted with a number of institutions, such as the National Museum of Australia, University of Manchester (UK), and the Center for Chemical Evolution at Emory University. Her book, *Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama*, was published by Heinemann. She has lectured and written widely on the use of theatre in museums.



Catherine Hughes

2020 CONFERENCE RECAP

-By Fiona Meagher-

I attended the “IMTAL at 30” conference in a cabin nestled in the Shenandoah Valley. Fellow board members joined sessions from New York City and the Midwest. Some attendees enjoyed the spring weather of Melbourne and Auckland while others joined from the wee hours of a European night. It wasn’t what we’d expected when we started planning for our 30th anniversary, but what a delight it was to bring together so many different faces from different time zones across the branches of our truly International Museum Theatre Alliance. We were able to see our community join in debate, discussion, celebration, nostalgia, and imagination, in a year full of great personal, professional, and societal challenges.

After Catherine Hughes’s remarks (printed above) attendees -- both IMTAL members and newcomers to our community -- jumped immediately into discussion with our founder. What are the biggest obstacles facing museum theatre practitioners? How do we fund our work, especially this year? What’s the biggest win you’ve seen for museum theatre in the past 30 years? Catherine expands on some of these queries in the post-script to her remarks.

Next, a quick jaunt into small breakout rooms allowed us to connect with new and old friends. After introductions and

some chat, my breakout room bonded over a love of Halloween, morbid histories, and costumes. Look out for the spooky international collaboration, coming at you someday...

Presentations from IMTAL Asia-Pacific followed, led by President Jo Clyne, with a focus on the professional and mental health challenges faced by museum theatre practitioners, as well as the resilience shown by colleagues in the field. IMTAL Asia-Pacific Vice President Patrick Helean of Questacon, Jo Brookbanks of the Auckland Museum, Michael Mills of Heaps Good Production, Barry Kay of Sovereign Hill, and performer Nigel Sutton shared stories about the work they’ve done both on and off site in the past year. They gave many of us in the U.S. who are still under shutdown a glimpse of what reopening our museums might look like. Their insights included ways to navigate institutional prioritization of revenue-generating programs, creative solutions to performing live under health and safety restrictions, and effective methods of virtual programming.

Thursday night ended with a charming slideshow of conferences past. As a newer member of the organization and of the museum theatre field, it was moving to see how many compatriots I’ve had over the years and to hear a bit more

of our history. It put quite a few places on my “Museums to Visit” list, too!

Day Two brought us a Shakespearean presentation from Chair Angela Pfenninger of IMTAL Europe. We heard about the tragedy of the IMTAL Europe conference in March, which suffered from coinciding with the introduction of travel restrictions across the continent. But we also witnessed comedy (the Virtual Pub Crawl of IMTAL Europe) and of course the histories (creative virtual theatre content produced by members). Like Asia-Pacific and Americas members, European museum theatre practitioners faced closures, loss of jobs, and lackluster social safety nets. Angela left us with an invitation to read this newsletter’s sister publication, *Insights Europe*, available online, and with a note to look out for information on the 2021 IMTAL Global Conference which, hopefully, will take place in person in Athens, Greece this fall.

Next up was a duo of delightful presentations on projects in Philadelphia and in Muncie, Indiana. Paul Taylor and David Wrigley presented on “Science After Hours”, a series at the Franklin Institute. Before the building temporarily closed in March, this series of adults-only themed programming combined demos, activities, quizzes, and refreshments.

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Paul and David incorporated museum theatre into these events and enjoyed the freedom to, in their words, “get weird” with pieces about booze, sex, and love. Clips from “Cosmos” and “Tesla’s Dream” showcased a wonderful union of musical talent, artistic video projections, and an electrifying dance sequence inspired by the history of electricity.

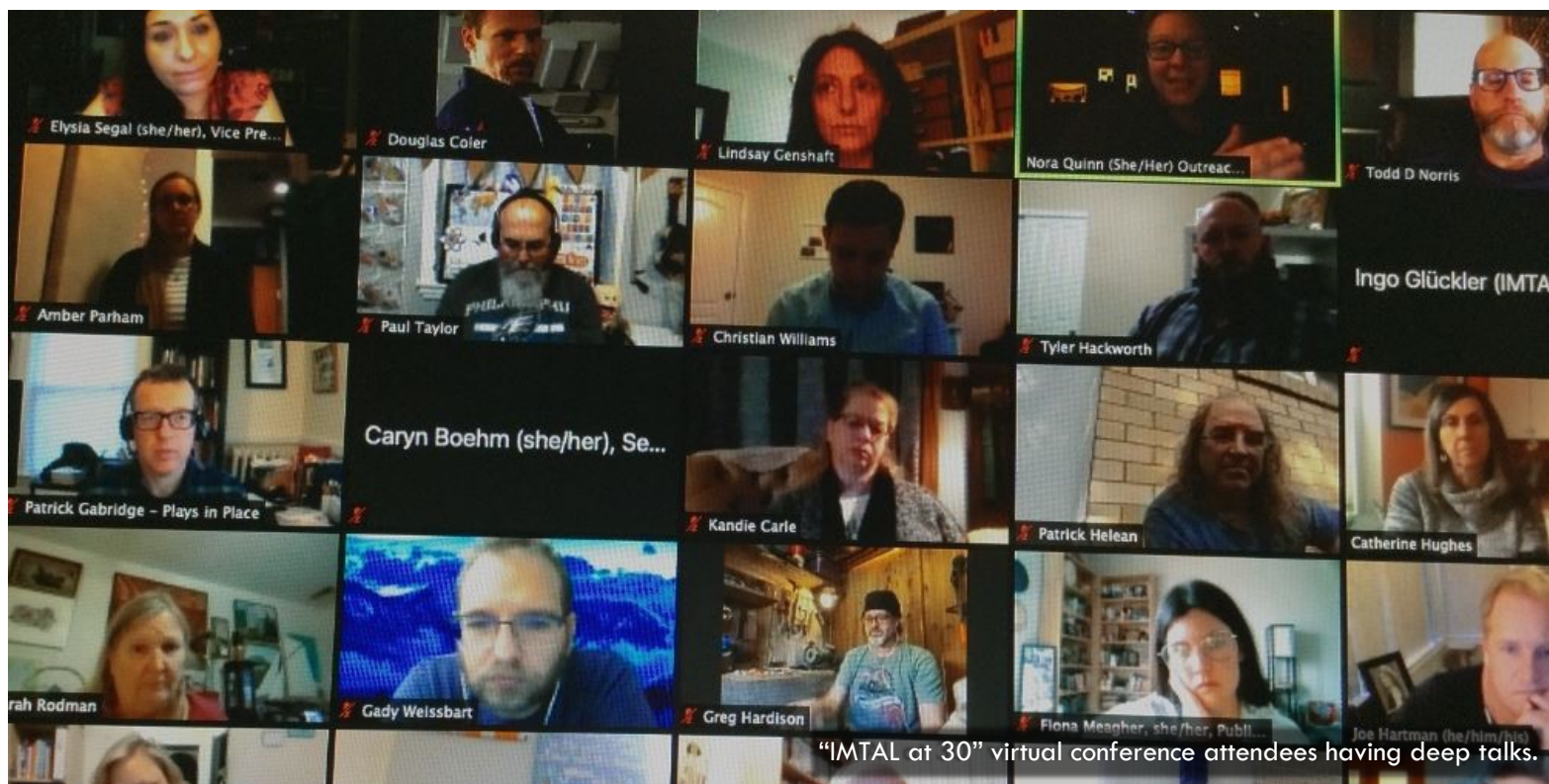
We then chilled with Bob Ross – I mean, IMTAL Americas Treasurer Mason Absher. His institution, Minnetrista, launched the “Bob Ross Experience” in the onsite classroom where soothing painter Ross’s show, *The Joy of Painting*, was filmed in the 1980s. Minnetrista links objects, Bob Ross originals and other media, a life-size 80s living room, and occasional Bob Ross painting classes in an interactive and immersive experience. The Experience opened to great acclaim and remains open with

health and safety precautions in place. Other happenings at the site include pivoting from their usual traveling theatre shows to a podcast exploring the historic book collection owned by the Ball family who once lived at Minnetrista. Adaptation, always!

We ended our conference with odes to the projects we lost to 2020 and with the “Idea Thunderdome” – an open discussion about where museum theatre might and should go, both during and after this unique historical moment. As IMTAL President Todd Norris put it, “What happens from here?” Fears, hopes, predictions, and creative solutions flew. The final 90 minutes or so featured a robust discussion of museum theatre’s role in perpetuating and combating systemic and interpersonal racism. The ever-present question of who gets to tell whose stories, and when,

sparked deep discussion. There were no brilliant final answers or consensus formed over our practices, but common ground and new perspectives were found. It was clear to me that our field has both a renewed commitment to racial justice and quite a bit of work to do to reckon with our nations’ and our institutions’ pasts.

Just like an in-person conference where we find ourselves in eager discussion at hotel bars long after formal sessions have wrapped, many of us stayed on Zoom far longer than scheduled, and surely many more wished we could have had more time together. I look forward to meeting all of you again in person someday, but this conference proved that distance and a pandemic can’t prevent us from forming meaningful, productive connections. Stay safe.



“IMTAL at 30” virtual conference attendees having deep talks.

2019 LIPSKY AWARD WINNER

The winner of 2019's Lipsky Award for Excellence in Playwriting was Betsy Maguire for her play "Tales from the Dungeon: Life at Newgate." This script, created for presentation at The Old New-Gate Prison & Copper Mine in East Granby, Connecticut, is playful and humorous but does not shy away from the darker history of Newgate. It employs four historic characters, including a notorious counterfeiter, a murderess, a preacher and an abusive prison keeper. Two fictional characters, a prison guard and his wife, round out the cast and provide levity and interaction with the audience. The play is based on over twenty sources and was presented in the open, one-acre prison yard, using the brick ruins as the perfect backdrop for live theatre. Member-at-Large and former IMTAL President Douglas Coler sat down last fall to chat with Betsy to learn more.

Doug: We first met during the IMTAL conference in Connecticut in 2017, at Mark Twain House. You and the team were presenting character tours there.

Betsy: I started as a historic interpreter and I was there for about five years total. Around three years in, the Executive Director was very interested in creating theater in the space. She thought it would be fun to do a nighttime event over a couple of weekends with the servant staff in the house in character. Anybody on staff who had theater on their resumé was invited to create their own little piece to do at this event. I created Lizzie the gossipy maid, which was based on a young girl in the House back in Twain's time. The Executive Director loved it and asked if I would create a program that could be done on a daily basis in the house. I was hired to create their living history programs, which I loved doing. After two years I left the program in good hands and went on to do freelance work.

Having taken the character tour, I honestly can't imagine touring the house in any other way.

Spending an hour with an actor in character really isn't for everyone, but, to me, it makes it very personal. Some of the scripts I wrote were very emotional and some were funny, and I thought we had a great response to it. With six characters going at once I made sure there was no overlap in information. I thought that was important. What we were trying to do was get people, especially local people, to come back to the house and not just say, "Oh I've seen that house. I don't have to go back." We wanted people to visit and then revisit. I was very careful not to make anything redundant within the scripts I wrote. It's not that I didn't mention the same people, but the various characters spoke very differently about certain events and rooms and things like that.

So how did the Newgate script come about?

It wasn't too long after I decided to go off on my own [that] I got my first gig. Morgan Bengel of the Old New-Gate Prison & Copper Mine approached our local theatre

company and said, "We're reopening after nine years of being dark, and I would like to have visitors come and stay at the prison ground longer than 15 minutes to just read the placards, go down into the mines, and be on their way. Maybe if there was theatre going on, they would stick around and learn some more, and the local theatre company could perform."

So the prison itself had been closed for more than nine years?

Connecticut has four state museums and it's one of the four. They had all been closed for a while -- I believe Newgate definitely had been for nine years. So the question became, *How long am I going to give myself?* Because I knew nothing about it, I had never been there, I didn't know anything of the history, but there was so much information to absorb! Morgan was very helpful giving me things. Whole books were written about some of the prisoners. Connecticut has a very old and rich history and people love to write about it. I had plenty to read, and thank goodness for the

2019 LIPSKY AWARD WINNER



Todd D. Norris presents the Lipsky Award to Betsy Maguire at the 2019 IMTAL Conference.

Internet. I always say I don't know how people wrote pre-internet. I really don't. I had to put a pin in it and say, *Well after a month or a month and a half I'm just going to stop reading and start writing.*

The obvious thing I could have written about but didn't is that Newgate was thought to be escape-proof, but people escaped left and right. My original thought was something kind of lighthearted and funny about how people got out of those mines. Then I realized there was this very interesting time period, a couple of years before it closed, where these characters that I was reading a lot about were all there at the same time, including one of their only female prisoners. I thought

Okay, I'm just going to set it right in that month and then I can write about all these people and the murderess. All I had was a newspaper article about her trial and that was it pretty much. That's fun to me: to take very little information but use it as much as you can. I met with Morgan Bengel in February and delivered her the script in May, and we began rehearsals in June. The first performance was July of 2018. They did it again this year [2019] without me, which I thought was great.

You said that some of the descendants of the characters in this script have seen the show?

One of the characters was a notorious counterfeiter. He was a braggart and wrote in his own autobiography that he faked an injury to get released from prison. He was just a funny guy. One of his descendants came and then came again and brought family members -- and I think came again this past summer. I was nervous because he introduced himself to me before the show. I really poked fun at this guy -- I mean, it was just that kind of character, it was easy to have some fun with it. I thought, *Oh my gosh I hope he doesn't revere this guy or think that I'm being terrible.* But he loved it. He laughed, he thought it was funny, he seemed to really like it and not be offended at all.

And you're working on a radio drama now?

There's a company here called Herstory Theater and they produce various historical shows. Actress/Playwright Virginia Wolf, who runs it, does a one woman show called *Panic in Connecticut* about the witch trials. Every year she presents *It's a Wonderful Life* as a live radio drama as if it were being done in the 1940s. I've been part of that as an actor. Next year she would like to do four spooky one-acts set in a radio studio in the 1940s. She asked for playwrights who live in Connecticut to each contribute a piece to it.

I like getting different things. One of the historical societies in town is doing an exhibit called The

2019 LIPSKY AWARD WINNER

Road to Equality next year, so I'll be working on that [as well]. I'm concentrating on the women's suffrage movement and [they] asked me to tie a play to their exhibit which I've actually never done before. I'm at the point where I am able to and feel very lucky that I can turn down work. I've done so three times in the last two years for various reasons, but a lot of history is men and boys fighting and I'm just, like, ...*I don't care about that.* So when *The Road to Equality* came along, I said now you're talking! I also feel very strongly that certain stories require and deserve a writer who is personally tied to the history. Native history, for example... I feel that they should have a Native writer. I mean, who am I to try and dramatize the struggles of Native life?

Did you always know this is what you wanted to do, or did you come to writing later?

Oh, I was a computer science major. I worked for IBM. That was my career. So no, no.

So how did this first happen?

When we moved to Simsbury in 1992 I had twins and then another daughter and my husband was traveling quite a bit internationally. I started to get into community theater and was really enjoying it. Our kids were too little to be left all the time and I wanted to keep my hand in the theater. We're a pretty small community in Connecticut. There's a very active, lovely community of actors here, and I wanted to stay involved. I decided, well, I could write for theater and that'd be fun, right?. I had never written before but I was a voracious reader... I think I've read every single play that's on the shelves in our library. So that's how I learned. I saw a notice that the Association for Theater and Higher Education was sponsoring this national playwriting contest for 30- to 40-minute plays. I wrote a play in

2002 called *Heart Suspended* and it came in second. I thought, *Oh this is fun. Maybe I'll just do this now.* I started writing one act plays and they were getting into festivals and being performed and I was going to see them, and it was really fun.

Your first IMTAL conference as an attendee was at Indianapolis Children's Museum, who do amazing work.

And the theater, I thought, was off the charts. I thought it was absolutely wonderful. The whole place is great. It was an unexpected place to see such poignant theatre being done. Honestly I thought it was going to be all bubbles and magnets. You know it's the *children's* museum. Yes, it was terrific.

But I'm so thrilled that you are now part of this organization and I'm thrilled that you can help us spread the word. I'm just delighted that you found us and we found you. Thank you, and congratulations again on the Lipsky award!



MEET THE LIPSKY WINNER:

Betsy Maguire is a freelance writer specializing in grant-funded plays and unconventional theatre spaces. She created the Living History program at The Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, writing scripts and training actors to portray members of Mark Twain's family and servant staff. Other nonprofit and history organizations Betsy has worked with include the Simsbury Historical Society, Old New-Gate Prison & Copper Mine, the New England Air Museum and the Theatre Guild of Simsbury. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild and the International Museum Theatre Alliance.

Betsy Maguire

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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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