



Finding the Story

CREATIVE & COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME

Sharing is caring. As I read through the stories in this issue, I was struck by how varied our approaches are in pursuit of a common goal: to engage and enlighten our audiences. It speaks to the abundance of creativity, talent, and tenacity in the museum theatre community that we **do** engage and enlighten. We entertain and educate and offer perspective. It is not lost on us that in many cases, museum theatre is the first introduction to any type of live theatre that some of our visitors encounter.

In essence, the creative and collaborative process in museum theatre is no different from that of any other type of theatre. A show or program may be dictated by the institution. An idea may be sparked by reading

a stray article or seeing a news report. We may be inspired by a completely unrelated discussion with friends. We might uncover a familial thread. We might find a need to share a personal memory, an image stuck in our heads of that encounter on the street, or to shine a light on a part of history that is overlooked, under-appreciated, or misremembered.

We don't do it alone. As we find more stories to tell, we rely on our fellow practitioners to help shape the narrative, to join in the research, to test the waters and cajole and massage and present, and to share. This is the nature of our business, and this is human nature.

We are storytellers. Listen.

- Douglas Coler
IMTAL President



Douglas Coler
IMTAL President

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We all know the feeling: you get the green light for your project, you're eager to get started and then the hurdles appear. The blank page stares menacingly into your blank mind, the overwhelming amount of resource material screams over your shoulder that "everything is worthy of being included!" the flimsy budget files its nails in the corner, chuckling judgmentally to itself. Then your lead actor is cast in a "dream role" elsewhere! We all have our stories of failure, of adapting, of triumph and all the in-between experiences. In this issue we explore the rich theme of "Finding the Story: Creative & Collaborative Processes."

So often we get trapped in a bubble of our institution's way of doing things. Hearing about how other people go about the process can get us out of a rut or give us the peace of mind to know it's not just US! You're not alone, my colleagues! I hope that you gain some insight from taking a step outside of your own bubble to read about how colleagues at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, The Monterey Bay Aquarium, Discovery Place in Charlotte, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and New York Transit Museum in New York have gone about developing their work.

- Ilana Gustafson
IMTAL Publications Officer



Ilana Gustafson, Insights Editor

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LOOKING AHEAD...

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Puppets: Undomesticated

— By Julia Garcia Combs —



A snow leopard puppet created by Chris Green.

As an artist and educator, when faced with a question or a problem I always return to the source. Recently, the Education staff at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles began a process of investigating the original intention of the puppets aboard the permanent exhibition Noah's Ark at the Skirball. Through discussion, rehearsal and practical implementation with our visitors, we are experimenting with how best to engage visitors with the puppets and bring the exhibition to life in authentic and imaginative ways.

For a little bit of context—"Noah's Ark at the Skirball" is an award-winning, permanent interactive installation at the Skirball Cultural Center where visitors are invited to become part of the story itself. As a Cultural Center with a core mission of being "a place of Welcome" for all people, we open the story to interpretation from visitors. We focus on the metaphor of a community coming together to weather a storm in search of a

second chance to build a better world. Educators bring the galleries to life through imaginative play, inquiry, oral storytelling, music, dance and puppetry. We use the arts to teach social and behavior skills to our youngest visitors and to communicate valuable themes and messages to everyone aboard Noah's Ark.

The ark is filled with animal sculptures made from recycled and repurposed materials. There are 386 static animals, 12 animals with partial moving parts, and 24 extraordinary animal puppets designed by Brooklyn-based artist and puppeteer Chris Green. Our puppets serve as an extension of the space, kinesthetically energizing the exhibition. They are a bridge between story and reality, between the make-believe animals and the human animals that roam the ark.

Visitors may be collecting food in the Ark's kitchen when a Fox (made from a shoe, teacups and a rolling pin) emerges from a dark corner, curious about what might be on the menu. A snow leopard stalks by, pausing to survey the area. A hummingbird flutters by in search of nectar, and a Langur Monkey swings from the rafters. As visitors respond to the animals, a delicate interaction ensues.

Recently Chris Green, the creator of the puppets, returned to the Skirball to lead a workshop for all current staff. As the Puppet Lead, it was an opportunity for me to soak up knowledge to pass on to a new generation of puppeteers. It was an opportunity to develop my ability to teach and train puppeteers, and to grow in my own work as a performer. As I listened to the intention and back-story of each animal, the



A child looks on with wonder at the Red Fox puppet, crafted from a shoe, teacups and a rolling pin.

the artist's philosophy of work, and tips on technical operation of the puppets, we discovered that our team as a whole had subtly departed from the original intention of puppetry in the exhibition.

Chris Green reminded us that the animals he created are wild animals, not domesticated. He described the original idea of "animal sightings" as a source of surprise and awe. Over the years we shifted to an approach that was perhaps a little friendlier to our visitors, our foxes behaving like domesticated dogs and our chickens stopping for long moments to allow toddlers to touch their beaks. Green spoke of kinetics, relating to or resulting from motion; of a work of art depending on movement for its effect. He emphasized the movement through the space as opposed to direct interaction with visitors. Watching him work we could see his deep commitment to the purpose of bringing stories to life through objects. He reminded us that by not giving the visitors everything they want we are actually giving them a gift, it is an act of generosity, teaching patience and respect.

I came away from the training feeling inspired, but also wanting to acknowledge that we on Noah's Ark had moved away from the original

intention of the artist. We realized that we had some difficult work ahead to break our habits. It is our instinct as educators to be kind and generous to everyone we encounter, but we have to remember that our

"He reminded us that by not giving the visitors everything they want we are actually giving them a gift, it is an act of generosity, teaching patience and respect."

objective while puppeteering is to create a sense of authenticity in the movement and behavior of wild animals. As puppeteers it is an opportunity to be more aware of our surroundings, reacting to stimulus as an instinctual creature might respond.

One of the greatest strengths of our education staff is our ability to receive feedback and work as an ensemble to improve our practice in service of the visitors' experiences. We began to discuss the idea of engaging our visitors with the puppets, yet leaving them wanting more – it became an opportunity for those teachable moments we are all in search of. Intrinsic in the Noah's Ark exhibit are messages of conservation and taking care of the environment and through this new approach to puppeteering our animals we have the opportunity to teach respect for wildlife. We

can also teach a sense of respect for others as we remind children to give animals their space, rather than allowing the approach of ownership one might feel over a domesticated animal.

By taking the time to ask ourselves to look at our process, we serve our staff and visitors simultaneously. In changing our point of view, we have increased visitors' intrigue in the Noah's Ark puppets. Suspension of disbelief grows as our puppeteers find new ways to explore on the ark. New and unusual interactions occur that inspire a sense of awe, awareness and respect. These puppets are a rare opportunity for visitors to witness a unique art form and for us to challenge ourselves as educators. By returning to the original intention of the artists' work we are finding new ways to fulfill the education department's mission to teach through the arts, build human connections, and foster empathy, thereby bringing new life into our facilitation and in turn, to the visitors' experience. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Julia Garcia Combs is a performing artist, full-time Educator at the Skirball Cultural Center and an Ensemble Member with the Rogue Artists Ensemble (a collective of multi-disciplinary artists who create Hyper-theater, an innovative hybrid of theater traditions). At the Skirball, she develops and facilitates programs for the renowned children's space, Noah's Ark serving as Puppet Lead, training and coaching staff in the art of puppetry.

"Sometimes it takes a long time to play like yourself."
- Miles Davis



Julia Garcia Combs



The interior of the Baldizzi Apartment at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Photo credit: Keiko Nitta/Tenement Museum

Then and Now: Finding Our Way Through Storytelling

— By Jenny Gillett —

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City is a historic home and museum that tells the personal stories of American immigration. I remember hearing a lot about the Museum and its immersive approach to teaching history, so one summer on a visit to New York, I made a point of checking it out.

Knowing the tours tended to sell out, I went on the website and selected a tour that reflected my family heritage. My mother's family is Italian-American, so I booked the *Hard Times* tour. Our educator guided us through the space, originally built in 1863 and occupied continuously until 1935, introducing us to real families that lived in 97 Orchard St. One of them was the Baldizzi family, who immigrated from Sicily in the 1920's. Adolfo, the father, was a carpenter like my grandfather Salvatore, who immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1929. I

was struck by the similarities in this family's story and my own family history, was moved by hearing tales of their struggle, and was captivated by audio recordings of some of the family members recalling their memories of the tenement. This history felt like a part of my own story.

Fast forward a few years and I've moved to New York and find myself working as an educator at the Tenement Museum. The first tour I started teaching was *Hard Times*, completely by coincidence, but it was easy for me to learn and lead as I felt connected to its story in a personal way. This intimate connection to history, using the actual stories of residents to help illustrate the larger experiences of immigration, makes the Tenement Museum successful at illuminating countless family journeys to the United States.

In order to construct these stories, the Museum relies upon several methods of research and exploration.

For example, on the *Hard Times* tour, we also feature the story of Julius and Natalie Gumpertz, a German-Jewish family that lived at 97 Orchard Street in the 1870's. To tell the story of this family, we engage in storytelling based upon primary sources—census records, birth and death certificates, court records, and more. From these records we discover information such as when they lived in the building, their professions, whether or not they were educated and whether they sought financial assistance in times of trouble. We have limited knowledge, but what becomes more important is what we can learn from these past experiences that may be cyclical, and may apply to immigrant stories today.

I love the moments on my tours when visitors engage and share their own family traditions and stories. For example, when I lead the *Irish Outsiders* tour I often share Irish music and food traditions, followed



The kitchen of the Baldizzi apartment.

Photo credit: Federico Nizza/Tenement Museum

Orchard Street, features three families and takes us into the 1970's – using interviews with living relatives who have so kindly decided to share their experiences. This provides an even closer look at the lives of our residents, and an even more significant way for visitors to connect.

Another way the Museum engages with its visitorship is through its

by traditions from my own Italian-American family. On a tour this past Christmas Eve, several families shared their own Christmas Eve food and family traditions, from Peru to Austria to the Middle East and more. Learning about traditions we share over time creates a larger idea and conversation, and may illuminate the many values we actually share.

In addition to documents that clue us in to family stories, with our later families such as the Baldizzis, we use recorded oral histories from residents that grew up in the building. The museum's newest tour, *Under One Roof*, located in our second Tenement building at 103

digital initiative, *Your Story, Our Story*, or *YSOS*. *YSOS* invites Museum visitors, both school groups and the public, to contribute images and stories of family heirlooms in order to explore a connection to their heritage. In addition to contributing their own story, visitors can browse thousands of other entries and explore thematic links between contributions. *YSOS* provides a unique opportunity to examine cross-cultural and cross-generational similarities in our family stories. For students, it provides the opportunity to learn more about their own families, and shows us all how we may honor our own ancestral journeys.

When my grandfather passed away last year, I shared his story and a photo of a trestle table he had built on *YSOS*. My grandfather Salvatore, later called Sam, came to the United States when he was only nine years old. His family moved to Erie, Pennsylvania to work at the General Electric factory. He fought in World War II, then met my grandmother Elvira and they settled down and raised four children together. He worked as a cabinet maker at General Electric, but was also an artist, creating beautiful pieces of furniture, turned candlesticks, inlaid dishes, and other family heirlooms that we still treasure today.

Now, when I tell the story of the Baldizzi family, and how Adolfo was a carpenter and cabinet maker himself, I think of my own grandfather and my own family's journey. I am proud to share my story with our visitors to the Tenement Museum, and hope that the experience visiting and engaging in storytelling with us will help inspire reflection and reverence for their own family stories as well. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jenny Gillett is an educator with a performance background in puppetry and movement. As an educator, she focuses on teaching through the arts, and is especially interested in causes rooted in humanitarian work and social justice. She currently works as an Educator at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and as a Teaching Artist in New York public schools through Wingspan Arts. Previously, she has held positions at the Skirball Cultural Center where she facilitated the Build A Better World Program, at the Children's Museum of Manhattan where she led the Museum's Shelter Outreach Program, at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County where she presented educational curriculum using performance and puppetry, and at the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum where she operated a life-sized Saber Toothed Cat puppet built by the Jim Henson Creature Shop. She holds her M.A. in Educational Theatre from New York University.



Jenny Gillett

Collaborative Construction:

Building the Perfect Program

— By Michelle Myers —

Story is certainly not something we lack at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Our streets are overflowing with many varied cultures and rich history. In fact, the Aquarium itself sits atop very special ground that has been inhabited by many different people for thousands of years. The Ohlone tribes lived up and down our coast from Salinas to Big Sur. A prominent Chinese fishing village was located on the same site as our Ocean's Edge wing. Nearly 60 years before the Aquarium was even a thought, the Japanese-owned Sea Pride Cannery operated where our Open Sea wing stands today. And just next door lived one of the most famous, or infamous, residents of the area. Still standing today, as a tribute to its owner, is the laboratory of Ed Ricketts. Here, he and John Steinbeck would drink and discuss life amidst the Sicilian influx and the rise of Cannery Row. The difficulty we face in creating a program is not in finding *a story*, but more so in identifying the *right story*. It seemed to make perfect sense that if we were to do a story about the bay, it would need to incorporate the influences of those cultures that made this area what it is today.

This “perfect” idea proved to be



© Monterey Bay Aquarium, photo by Vicki Wasserchak

Turning the Tide: The Story of Monterey Bay at Monterey Bay Aquarium.

a challenging task on many levels. Most importantly, we wanted to be sure that we could provide a genuine and accurate representation of the Rumsien Ohlone, Chinese, Japanese and Sicilian cultures we were to feature in this presentation. To do this, we enlisted the guidance of a team of locally-sourced experts whose families all had a significant impact on the growth of our city. Each person shared his or her family's stories which explained the cultural influences to current fishing practices and subsequently the building of the Monterey area. We knew that the authenticity these people brought from their respective cultures was something we wanted to feature. So much so, that they not

up hearing them at their dinner tables and family gatherings. They all graciously accepted leading roles in our show by allowing us to record their ancestral history and those clips became the building blocks of our current script.

Feeling quite accomplished that the concept was chosen and the script was coming together, our celebration was unfortunately short-lived. We knew that our work had just begun. We had to start the tedious process of crafting everything needed to showcase the fishing styles of the various cultures: props, costumes, boats, portable media, etc. Again, we brought together a team of experts representing many different departments within our

“The difficulty we face in creating a program is not in finding a story, but more so in identifying the right story.”

only lent their stories to shape our production, but they lent their faces and voices as well. We realized there were no better people to share these stories than those who had grown

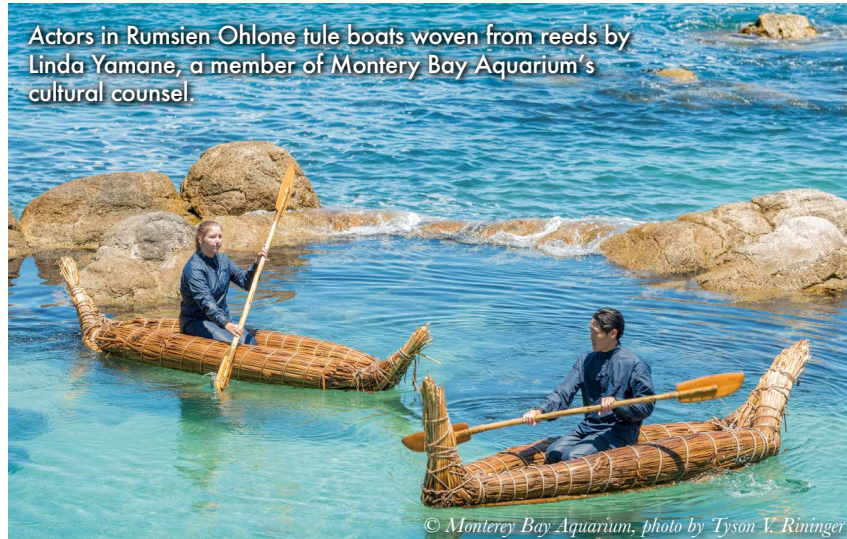
organization. The main players in-house included Interpretive Media for the digital assets, Audio Visual Integration for the technology to run them, Exhibit Design to create

the physical props and Public Programs to develop the casting needs and staging. That doesn't include the companies, museums, composers and local historians outside of the aquarium that helped us to collect footage, build historic boats, create themed music and develop costumes. It truly took a village to get all the pieces of the puzzle in one place and again the hard work was still yet to come.

Up until the day our actors stepped foot on our stage, this show was still very much hypothetical. The word stage is used quite loosely in our context. As we are a science and research institution, we were not built specifically to house theatrical performances. We have dabbled in the arts for some time knowing their importance in bringing story and empathy to science and research; however, this was the largest scale theatrical production we had ever worked on. Being brought in specifically for this project, one of my main roles was to get the production on its feet so the pressure was on! We certainly don't have what is thought of as a traditional proscenium theater space. Instead, we have an outdoor amphitheater on our deck that overlooks the Monterey Bay and features a man-made tide pool area. It is unquestionably a gorgeous space, but it is not without challenges. First and foremost, we were given the very specific directive

for the production to "complement not compete." This space is often referred to as our biggest and best exhibit. We regularly have seals, sea lions, dolphins, whales and sea otters that pass by and the fear was that we may detract from the natural

directorial team! Lacking all of the typical tricks that directors have up their sleeves (i.e. sets, curtains, lighting, etc.) to steer the audience's view, we knew we had to be very thoughtful and specific with our staging and blocking. We used the



Actors in Rumsien Ohlone tule boats woven from reeds by Linda Yamane, a member of Monterey Bay Aquarium's cultural counsel.

© Monterey Bay Aquarium, photo by Tyson V. Riminger

beauty if we were to add a bunch of bulky stage settings. Luckily, our show focused so heavily on the bay that it became a natural backdrop. One problem down, three-hundred and ninety-seven to go! We had no house doors to close to limit traffic in and out. We had no dressing rooms hidden in close proximity to the stage. We had no curtains to close for scene changes and because of that no wings for actors to prep. Most of our challenges had simple, albeit creative solutions. However, the most ominous challenge of all, we had no lighting and no way to easily draw focus.

Our show consisted of actors on the stage space in the amphitheater, actors in the tide pool in boats ten feet below the stage and portable monitors playing historic footage flanking the sides. This was a recipe for chaos and confusion. Enter the

characters themselves to grab and give focus. If a character was exiting stage left, the boat would enter from the same side. If something important was on the screen, we would hold a character's entrance just a few more seconds. If characters were suiting up to free dive for abalone, we would change the physicality of the

character on stage to turn away from the audience and direct his or her attention on the action below. The majority of the three weeks we had to train our ten actors before the show officially opened, was spent honing in on the perfect blocking which was tweaked constantly throughout our twelve-week run. The rest was spent trying to figure out how to row and navigate a fourteen-foot replica of a Chinese sampan in a small tide pool. This was certainly my first time developing historical boat choreography which is a skill now prominently displayed on my theatrical resume.

Turning the Tide: The Story of Monterey Bay officially opened on June 20th, 2015 to rave reviews. As we had hoped, it drew very diverse and very large groups. The production's popularity and success became exceptionally evident from

the sheer number of people that attended each show. We realized that our amphitheater space, which held a hundred or so people, was not enough. Day after day, we saw people lining the railings around the deck and even watching from the balconies overhead. We knew the development process would continue long after opening day so we could continue to grow the experience throughout its allotted three year run. After a successful summer collecting statistical and anecdotal feedback, we brought together a remedial team to discuss. One of the most obvious needs was the necessity to expand our stage space so we could play to the entirety of our audience. With people lining the railings up and down the deck, we were no longer playing to the audience in front

of us. We now had audience on three sides which essentially meant changing our makeshift proscenium into a full thrust stage. Through the help of the interdepartmental team, we expanded our stage to incorporate stage spaces along the side railings and a third monitor that could reach people who were out of view of the two monitors flanking the amphitheater. Along with the hardware changes, we also altered blocking to play to all three sides of our thrust stage. We adjusted some of the digital visuals so as to not draw too much focus in certain high points of our action on stage. We even modified some of our script, music and character introductions to streamline and tighten the production as a whole.

Now gearing up for our *fourth* year after being extended indefinitely due to our success, we

are still relying on countless teams both inside and outside of our organization to make this one fifteen minute, seasonal production a continued success. Each year, we challenge ourselves to identify new ways to better our performance and the overall development system we employ. Amidst the current remediation of *Turning the Tide*, we have also recently begun the process of assembling a development team to look forward to the possibility of new theatrical programming in this space. Our hope is that we not only educate our audience about the diverse community of people and animals interacting all around them, but that through that knowledge we can continue to use theatrical interpretation as a dynamic way to drive our mission: *to inspire conservation of the ocean.* ❖



Michelle Myers

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michelle Myers brings stories to life as the Supervisor of Programs at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. As a member of the Actor's Equity Union and graduating with a degree in Theatre from The Florida State University, she was able to forge a very unique path into the world of zoos and aquariums almost ten years ago. Using her passion for the arts and her admiration of the environment, she brings her own style and flair to the science of EDUtainment.

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 the **IMTAL website** or contact **publications@imtal-us.org**.

Deadline for Spring 2018 issue is **April 15, 2018**.



Photo credit: James Giovan/New York Transit Museum

Mary Walton: Mother of Invention

Bringing a Hidden Figure to Life Using Primary Sources

— By Elysia Segal —



Elysia Segal as Mary Walton
at the New York Transit Museum.

I first “met” Mary Walton in the summer of 2015 after she’d caught the eye of one of my supervisors who was conducting research for a “women in transportation” lecture. She was a vague reference, practically a footnote in the history of women in science, but was mentioned as having played a role in quieting the elevated railroad, the precursor to the subways that today run in a web of organized chaos underneath the streets of New York City.

Located within a historic, decommissioned subway station from 1936, the New York Transit Museum is an immersive and interactive space unto itself, and the *Journey to the Past* program, offered to 1-3 graders, brings to life the social stories found within its collection through an encounter with a figure from the past on board a historic subway car.

For the past six years, I’ve had the opportunity to perform for this

program, however at that point we had never presented actual people from history, rather, our characters were more loosely based on things such as the *idea* of a female subway “conductorette” from WWI and a character from a storybook who was trapped on an elevated train during the Blizzard of 1888. These figures allowed for flexibility and fun, and certainly touched upon community workers and historical events, but lacked authenticity relating to the stories we wanted to tell. Our department had just begun an initiative to overhaul our programming to better meet educational learning standards and to highlight more history and STEM in our collection, so this was a perfect chance to break the mold.

When tasked with creating a program that told her story, I immediately felt a responsibility to ensure that I presented her tale, in full, and honored her legacy. After all, she was a real-life person. What if her real-life descendant visited

the museum one day? I held myself accountable for hunting down her truth and crafting a well-rounded individual... and then I realized just how little had actually been published about her. Oh dear.

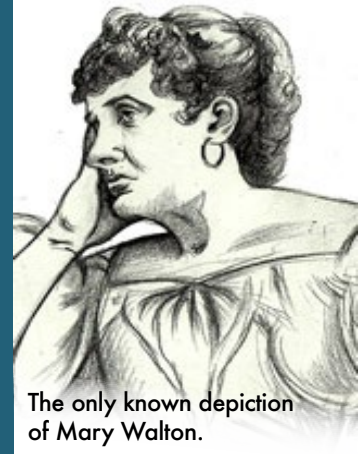
As creators, we sometimes face this challenge of crafting authentic, historically accurate impressions of seemingly invisible people. Mary Walton was one of these “hidden figures” of history: a commonly overlooked heroine in her field. How then would I construct a meaningful piece of theatre which honored her life if no one has since written about her? How could a mere quote here and there open the door to a whole personality?

Initially, many of the materials I found about Mary were poor and lacked much detail. Some were actually simple school reports written by children or a sentence here and there in an anthology about women inventors. Many also, unfortunately, merely repeated incorrect dates and information, I later came to find. I had to go much, much deeper to uncover not only more about her, but also about the things around her that informed who she was. This is where good research skills (and access to good resources) became essential.

WHO WAS MARY WALTON?

Mary Elizabeth Walton was an early environmentalist and citizen-scientist. In 1879, she kept a boarding house on 12th Street and 6th Avenue in NYC, right next to newly constructed Gilbert Elevated Railway. For months these elevated trains provoked noise complaints due to their roaring steam engines and screeching brakes which echoed throughout the neighborhood. A young Thomas Edison had even been commissioned to try to solve this problem, however he abandoned the project after only about six weeks. Mary, citing the dreadful noises (and more personally the need for money!), took it upon herself to perform her own experiments to discover the cause—and solution—for the noise.

After just three days of observation, she noticed that the tracks seemed to amplify the sounds of the trains due to the wooden support boxes that they sat inside, similar to the way the sound post works within a violin. She built a model of the tracks in her basement and discovered that by lining the support boxes with cotton and sand, the noise could be significantly reduced. After patenting the idea, she presented it to the Metropolitan Elevated Railroad Company (who were at first, of course, quite incredulous that a woman might be able to solve such a scientific problem), and was ultimately awarded \$10,000 and royalties for life. Not bad for a lady, eh?



The only known depiction of Mary Walton.

I began with genealogy. After digging through census records, I was able to rather quickly find her exact residence in NYC around the time that she performed her railroad experiments. Her home from that time no longer stands (the land is now part of a 17-story condominium which has housed the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Marisa Tomei and Isaac Mizrahi!), however it perfectly explains her annoyance with the incessant rattling, clanging and screeching of the trains.

I also called upon a number of scholarly databases for years of archived newspapers and journals

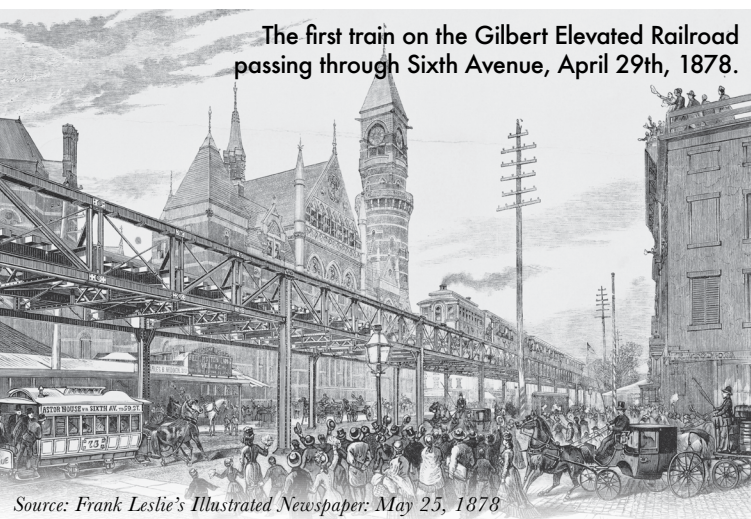
from the era, as well as any other sources I could find that mentioned her. Surely a woman patenting an invention at that time would receive *some* press? I was in luck. Many referenced her tactics (such as riding on the back of the trains to observe sounds), the way she looked, and of course great details of her invention, itself (including her original U.S. Patent No. 237,422). Many also referenced young Thomas Edison's failed attempts, which additionally opened the door for me to research *his* early work on sound aboard these trains. I uncovered an abundance of information, everything from his

somewhat practical approaches (some of his earliest "phonantograph" recordings were of the noises of the elevated trains), to the more unusual, such as watching paper move and even biting a block of wood to feel

the sound vibrations. There are, additionally, numerous accounts of the passengers watching him and hearing about these bizarre experiments and thinking him quite silly... surely Mary thought no different, especially since he abandoned the project after only six weeks of research to no avail. I've always loved to think there was a bit of rivalry between the two of them (one quote I found even nods to this idea), and even if they never met, she certainly didn't hide her unfavorable opinion about him!

After all of this contextual research, I was able to construct a timeline of events and began to understand a bit more about her: who she was, how she carried herself, and how she may have spoken (both from quotes and simply the language of the newspapers of the time). I was also able to find a few rather lengthy quotes from her from varying sources about different aspects of her life, such as her upbringing ("My father had no sons but believed in educating his daughters. He spared

The first train on the Gilbert Elevated Railroad passing through Sixth Avenue, April 29th, 1878.





Students take an active role in history by helping Mary Walton with her sound experiment.

no pains or expense to this end.”) and, of course, her experiment. The more I read, the more I discovered her personality, and could then compare it to the extent to which women were commonly educated at the time, as well as how they carried themselves and were perceived, in order to understand where she fit within society.

She was smart, and though she did not have a formal science education, she was scrappy and resourceful. She read everything she could and used logic and reason to solve her problems (for example, she got the idea of using sand from an instance when her father was able to quiet the clanging of a blacksmith’s shop near her childhood home by setting their anvils in sand). She was also quite stubborn, had a wonderful sense of humor, and was something of an early feminist. In one quote, she mentions that years prior she had made “what has proved to be a valuable invention.” Her husband was so delighted with it that he showed it to one of his friends,

who then promptly stole the idea as his own and reaped the benefits. “This time I determined there should be no man in it,” she is quoted as saying. Later, when patenting her railroad idea, her son even recommended she do it in his name. “People will think you a strong-minded woman, mamma!” he’d said. “Make your *own* inventions, my son,” she replied, “and have *your* name put to them!”

There she was, and what a lively personality compared to the meek and fragile feminine ideal of the Victorian era!

Next I had to marry her tale to the goals of the museum and learning standards, themes like “then and now,” “innovation,” “community,” and “transportation.” Many of these were an obvious fit, and for others I was fortunate to not have to reach too far. Like all *Journey to the Past* characters, this piece is performed inside of one of the museum’s historic train cars, in this case, a wooden BRT Brooklyn Union elevated car from 1907 (the oldest in the collection). This location has allowed me to highlight elements within the car itself—the

seats, the handholds, etc.—allowing students to more easily imagine what it might have been like for Mary Walton, Thomas Edison, or anyone of the era to actually ride inside an elevated car.

My manner of dress and affected

speech would also instantly inform the kids that I was not of this time. I made a point to reference the steam engines that pulled the trains *above* the ground, the woven rattan seats they sat upon, the horses down on the streets that were spooked by all of this dreadful noise... all of these things that were markedly different than the modern, electric subways that they ride today.

Since the program was about an inventor and her innovation, I played up her process, the steps she took from start to finish: the scientific method. She noticed a problem, observed, hypothesized, experimented, and discovered a solution. It made it even more powerful that she wasn’t a formally recognized scientist (or a man!), as it demonstrated that *anyone* can make a difference in his or her community.

I also had to consider my target audience (in this case, 1-3 graders), so in addition to simplifying a bit of the language and more complicated words, I also decided to incorporate a new, hands-on element that we’d never used in storytelling before: a workshop! Mary was a tinkering scientist after all, so I thought it would be fun to have the kids conduct a sound-absorbing experiment right alongside her, helping her come to her conclusion in real-time. She carries a number of small jars, each

“Oh, the excitement when they realize they get to take part in a historical science fair project!”

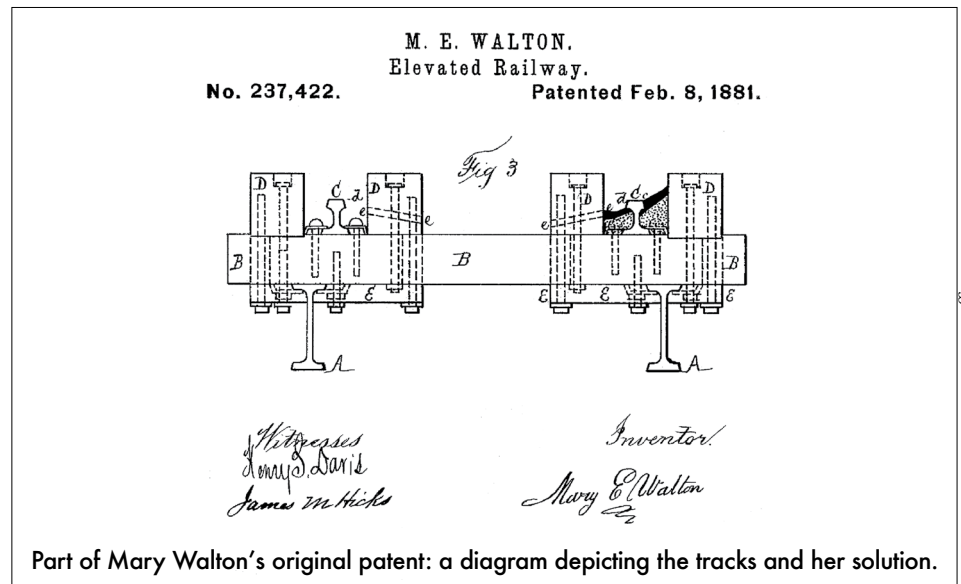
containing different materials—feathers, ribbons, shredded newspaper, even “horsehair” (the kids go nuts!)—as well as a small bell for each. She explains that she’s trying to determine which best “absorbs” sound, shaking a small jar of sand

as an example... might they like to help her with her experiment? Oh, the excitement when they realize they get to take part in a historical science fair project!

The kids are given the chance to observe, make a guess, shake and compare until they've narrowed it down to the very best: cotton! She decides to proceed with cotton and sand in her proposal to the railroad, all thanks to their help.

The program ends with an educator showing her actual patent, pointing out the cotton and sand in the track diagram and her signature underneath the word "inventor." There is instant payoff—the kids are both astounded to hear that her story is real, as well as excited to see that she used the very thing that they helped her discover, thereby validating themselves as scientists right alongside her. I'd love to think that the real Mary Walton would be thrilled that her legacy serves to inspire more young minds, many of them girls, to become problem-solvers.

I have since had the opportunity



Source: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

to repeat this process for another incredible story from our collection, that of Marshall Mabey, a tunnel-digging "sandhog" who, while constructing a tunnel in 1916, survived a "blowout" of pressurized air and was shot up through the riverbed. I have also created a new (moving!) interactive show about the mysterious opening day of Alfred Ely Beach's 1870 Pneumatic Railway (considered to be the first actual subway in New York) which is constructed almost entirely out of primary source material!

There are so many fascinating and overlooked stories and angles of history waiting to be unearthed within the pages of an old newspaper or census record. As more and more organizations begin to offer their materials online, these primary sources are literally at our fingertips. I encourage writers to dig deeper and use primary sources in their projects as a springboard or as supporting content: it will not only honor the truth and legacy of your subjects, but also enrich the offerings of your institution. ❖



Elysia Segal

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Elysia Segal is an actress, historical interpreter and writer who creates engaging historical theatre to educate and inspire diverse audiences. Her interactive pieces, crafted largely from primary source material, tell important, often overlooked stories and bring history and science to life. She has researched, written, and performed as a number of characters at the New York Transit Museum, as well as created educational family shows on topics ranging from "electricity" to an "Epic Rap Battle" on weather preparedness and sustainability. She has also written and performed for organizations such as the New-York Historical Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Sons of Norway. A graduate of NYU, Elysia currently serves as a board member of IMTAL and is also a member of AAM, ALHFAM, NYCMER, Actors' Equity and SAG-AFTRA.

Six Characters Discovering da Vinci

— By Douglas Coler —

Douglas Coler as Leonardo da Vinci and
Devin Walker as Alessandro de Medici at
Discovery Place Science.

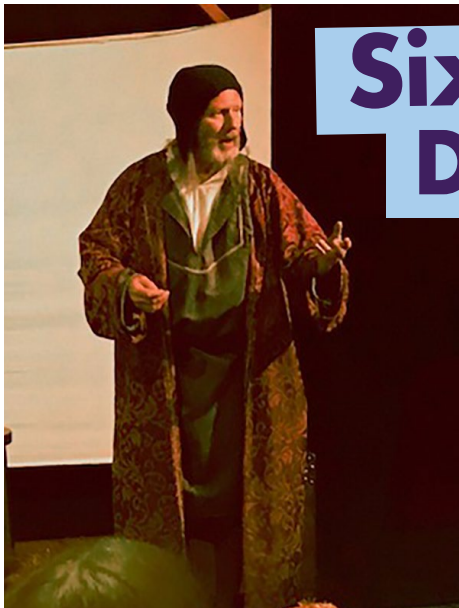


Photo credits: Discovery Place Science

When I was told that Discovery Place Science would host *Da Vinci's Machines* (on exhibit November 2017 to May 2018) I was hopeful for the theatrical possibilities that it presented.

Da Vinci's Machines is a 5,000+ square foot exhibition that features recreations of some the designs in Leonardo da Vinci's surviving notebooks. Some are full sized (a self-propelled cart, and theatrical knights automata), most are scale models of machines da Vinci designed but, as far as is known, never built (his battle tank, his diving apparatus, his flying machines). Scattered among them are copies of his most famous paintings and drawings (*The Last Supper*, *Mona Lisa*, *Lady with an Ermine*, *Madonna of the Rocks*, and others).

I initially wanted to present Jon Lipsky's *The Masque of Leonardo*, written for a da Vinci exhibit at Boston's Museum of Science in the early 1990's. I'd read the piece, posted on his web site and made available royalty-free by his estate, and for a time, I considered it an

ideal companion to the exhibition. It is a challenging, beautifully written short play that our adult audience would very much appreciate. It also calls for a bit more technical support than I had personnel for, so we put it aside in favor of monologues.

We'd had a notable success with this model at Discovery Place Science with *Van Gogh Alive!*, *101 Inventions That Changed The World*, *A Day in Pompeii*, *Guitar*, and *Shipwreck: Pirates and Treasure*. Most of those were done with contracted actors or educator staff, however. Last January, DPS decided to hire InterActors, a part-time staff dedicated solely to theatrical interpretation. That team of four—Christian Payne, Devin Walker, Adaline Pann, and Philip Robertson—present scripted programs throughout the museum, in galleries, in labs, in lobbies, in our Discovery Theatre, and at civic events, and in our traveling exhibitions hall.

I assigned Hannah Simmons, a theatrically trained Educator who has written many of our programs, to find suitable characters for our InterActors to portray in the

exhibit. Hannah's great gift is her ability to, in a short amount of time, distill her research into compelling monologues. We prefer, when possible, to present the actual person and not a composite character, so Hannah and I settled on some historic figures fairly quickly. We knew we'd have Leonardo himself. We settled on Ludovico Sforza, da Vinci's great patron in Milan, the man who commissioned *The Last Supper*; Michelangelo, his young, talented, arrogant rival; Pope Leo X, who housed da Vinci at the Vatican; Alessandro de Medici, the last hereditary Duke of Florence, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent and who as a boy, was privileged to watch da Vinci at work for his father, and Bianca Sforza, niece of Ludovico, future Holy Roman Empress, and subject of the drawing known as *la bella Principessa*.

Composite characters work very well in most cases, particularly if you have them interacting for more than ten or twenty minutes at a time. We did consider this approach, but given that our InterActors have other shows to perform throughout

the day, we opted for a set schedule of three monologues, one each at 11am, 1pm, and 3pm. If a particular InterActor had some clear time before their next, non-da Vinci show, they could opt to mingle in the exhibit after delivering the monologue.

Our Exhibits team built us a small stage, and to keep the aesthetic consistent, we used the spare wood and canvas dividers from the exhibit as our back drop. This also serves as a projection space for a fifteen-minute documentary that plays on a loop between performances. The InterActors control lighting and sound before their entrance from backstage, and reset the film at the conclusion of their monologue. The stage is situated at the second 'turn' in the hall, which allows for seating space and standing room for around 50 people.

The rehearsals were undertaken a few weeks before opening. We are usually time constrained, as the InterActors are limited in their weekly hours and must still perform the other programs for which they were engaged, so

rehearsals were a scattershot affair, but as all are monologues, it was easy enough to catch time and get every one sufficiently prepped. The InterActors are also required to continue reading and research for

Italian accent, which gives a sense of "otherness" without overpowering the story. Michelangelo, too, adopts such an accent, but the absence of an accent for some does not seem to disturb our audience.

"We've found that while many of our audience do want to see Leonardo in particular, they are surprised and delighted to find themselves in the presence of the Dukes, the Pope, the young Empress, and the hot-headed Michelangelo..."

the duration of the exhibit's stay. In addition to the four InterActors, we have a talented volunteer docent with a museum interpretation background, Christopher Emerson, who joins the team as Pope Leo X. Chris also wrote much of his own material.

We've kept the costuming simple, favoring a suggestion of Renaissance clothing as opposed to detailed recreations, which were beyond our budget. Hand props are simple (a bird's wing, scrolls, a book, a bottle and wine glass, an embroidery hoop, sculpting tools). A small plain stool and wooden trunk sit on the stage and serve for all settings and time periods.

All the actors have Italian phrases sprinkled throughout their material. As Leonardo, I affect a slight modern

Audiences have responded enthusiastically. We've found that while many of our audience do want to see Leonardo in particular, they are surprised and delighted to find themselves in the presence of the Dukes, the Pope, the young Empress, and the hot-headed Michelangelo, who spends a good part of his time questioning the talent and reputation of da Vinci. (Leonardo, in turn, decries Michelangelo and his ilk, who declare passion as their guide and hold study and practice in low regard.) The six characters offer the visitor a chance to see different sides to the man da Vinci was, and how those contemporary views differ from, but also inform and enlighten our opinions and knowledge of him some 500 years later. ❖



Douglas Coler

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Douglas Coler is Coordinator, Shows and Floor Programming, at Discovery Place Science. In this capacity, he oversees the InterActors and the writing and production of programming at The Discovery Theatre, The Stage, The Rain Forest Theatre, and on-floor interactive demonstrations, as well as support programming for traveling exhibitions. He joined Discovery Place in 2008 as Presenter, and has also served as Dramatic Programming Specialist prior to assuming his current duties. He was an Associate Director for the national touring company Chamber Theatre Productions, and has served as Guest Director at Stonehill College in Easton, MA. He serves as Discovery Place's representative with NISEnet (The National Informal Science Education Network), and is the current president of IMTAL.

Electric Lemons

Interpretation and the Art of Writing

A new book by Judy Fort Brenneman

IMTAL is pleased to announce the release of *Electric Lemons: Interpretation and the Art of Writing*. Author Judy Fort Brenneman is an active member of IMTAL and has served two terms as editor of *Insights*. She has completed interpretive projects and taught workshops for federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as historical societies, historical and scientific museums, an aquarium, and private companies. With this special appreciation and understanding of museum interpretation she offers a unique perspective on writing with museum audiences in mind.

In this one-of-a-kind guide, award-winning author and playwright, veteran interpretive writer, and long-time writing coach Judy Fort Brenneman shares a unique approach to learning and practicing interpretive writing. Here you will find inspiration and practical advice, techniques to court the muse and to craft powerful stories, and the nitty-gritty on fundamental principles and how to create stories that make a difference.

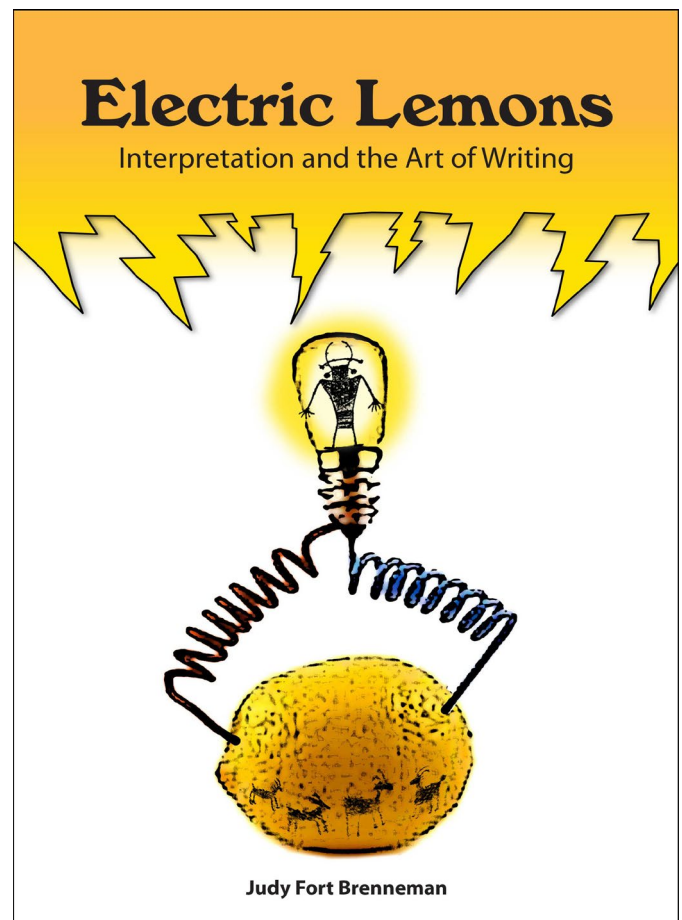
Included in this new release is a 28-page chapter on playwriting and theatre in interpretation, plus the complete script and development notes for *Theater of War: Unresolved Conflict of Vietnam*, courtesy of IMTAL member, Greg Hardison and an excerpt from the script and notes of the Museum of Science and Industry's *Poop Happens!* courtesy of IMTAL member, Heather Barnes.

Judy has led many writing workshops at IMTAL conferences. I was fortunate enough to attend the last conference and found her techniques very insightful. She was able to guide us in teasing out a thought into the beginning of a deeply meaningful story. I look forward to learning more of her secrets presented in *Electric Lemons*.

- Ilana Gustafson
IMTAL Publications Officer

[Click here](#) for more information about *Electric Lemons*.

The book is available directly through [Skysinger Press](#) and through [Acorn Naturalists](#).



"Thoughtful, thorough, personal, engaging, and humorous, *Electric Lemons* is essential reading for... anyone who works with or manages interpretive programs."

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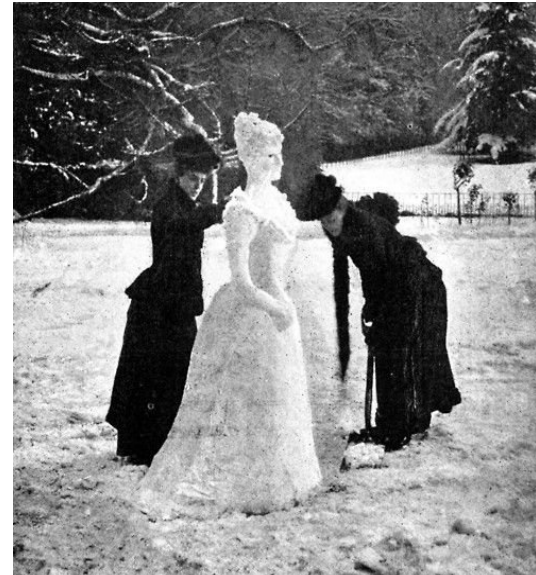
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Check out the **submission guidelines** then send your article, photo, or news to publications@imtal-us.org by **April 15, 2018** for the Spring 2018 issue!



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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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