



Recommended Best Practices for Museum Theatre
Adopted by the membership at Atlanta Conference August, 2012.

Introduction:

As an affiliate of the American Association of Museums (AAM), the International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) serves as the professional association and network for individuals and institutions engaged in the use of live theatre and theatrical techniques for educational, interpretive, and programmatic purposes. As the practice has become embedded into the work of museums and other cultural and/or informal learning institutions, IMTAL has developed a set of standards of excellence for use when evaluating these programs for professional recognition, accreditation, benchmarking, and in the development of new programs.

Key Definitions:

“Museum Theatre” is a term that has been used to refer both to the performance of theatre (i.e. a play) in or by a museum and also to the use of any of a variety of theatrical techniques by museums. IMTAL embraces both definitions and welcomes practitioners of all types of museum theatre to participate fully as members of the organization. In order to promote clarity, this document will utilize the following definitions:

Live Theatrical Program: A live interpretive presentation with skilled performers who engage museum visitors (including field trips and outreach) by portraying characters and conveying a story or dramatic narrative. Theatrical museum programs can take the form of a scripted play, dramatic demonstration, living history and first-person interpretation, puppetry, role play, music, movement, creative drama and simulation, gallery characters and enactors interacting with visitors, among others.

Play: A theatrical play in or by a museum refers specifically to a performance by an actor or actors portraying a character or characters and utilizing a dramatic narrative.

Museum: For the sake of this document, the term “museum” will refer to any cultural or informal learning institution, including but not limited to art, science, children’s, natural history, and history museums, historic sites, zoos and aquariums, public and botanical gardens, arboreta, parks, libraries, and cultural centers.

Standards for Museum Education and Interpretation:

AAM and the Committee on Education (EdCom) present clear standards of excellence for museum education and interpretation. Museum theatre is at its core an educational endeavor, and therefore it is understood that *first and foremost* museum theatre programs shall adhere to AAM's Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation and EdCom's Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums. These guidelines have also served as the foundation for this document; notations have been included to demonstrate how these standards align.

In addition, IMTAL has drawn upon standards set forth by the National Association for Interpretation (NAI) and suggests that when appropriate these standards also be consulted.

Recommended Best Practices for Live Theatrical Programs in Museums

Theatrical programs are integrated into the institution.

Theatrical programs align with the institution's overall mission, philosophy, messages and educational strategy.^{1,2}

Whenever possible, theatrical programs support the goals of other departments in the institution.

Theatre programs are specifically outlined in strategic plans and annual reports. Theatre programs are included in yearly budgets with clearly identified and secure means of funding.

A member of the museum's theatrical programs team is included on exhibit development/design teams when theatrical techniques will be used to interpret the exhibit.³

Theatre and theatrical techniques are included among multiple educational and interpretative tools used by an institution and are employed when the approach is the best choice for the content and the audience.⁴

Theatrical programs are specifically marketed through every means reasonably available to the institution, including but not limited to newsletters, websites, member lists, social media, print, posters, fliers, events, etc. Marketing clearly communicates both the content and the theatrical frame of the program.

Theatrical programs serve the institution's audience.⁵

Subject matter, presentation style, and length of program reflect the educational and cultural needs of the intended audience.⁶ Theatrical programs should complement and contribute to the diversity of perspectives represented in a museum's overall program roster.⁷

Attractive, well-maintained, accessible space has been provided for program.

Programs do not interfere with visitor circulation or other museum activities.

Schedule of programs is prominently displayed and/or communicated to visitors.

Way-finding is clear so visitors can easily locate the program.

All audience members can see and hear the presentation in a reasonable amount of comfort.

Accommodations have been considered for individuals with a wide range of abilities and sensitivities. Support for audiences with special needs is provided (translation, audio amplification, verbal description)
Means for answering questions and/or emotional processing is offered after performances.

The content of theatrical programs adheres to highest standards of excellence.⁸

Productions/Presentations have clearly specified educational objectives (determined prior to development), that align with an institution's exhibitions and/or programmatic priorities,⁹ and augment, expand, or fulfill a need that is not being addressed elsewhere in the institution (such as reaching a new or underserved audience, telling a story that cannot be told through exhibitory, etc.) Program content reflects the highest standards of accuracy and is reviewed by experts appointed by the institution.¹⁰ Citations are included in script/outline. When appropriate, members of the community have provided input into the development of the program (including the "script treatment" phase before a first draft has been written).
Institution provides resource materials for visitors wishing to learn more and ample background research for use by program presenters.

The methodology used in the creation of theatrical programs adheres to highest standards of excellence.¹¹

- Script and presentations evoke **emotion** and encourage audiences to make personal connections with the content and/or characters.
- Dramatic scripts or creative outlines are written by qualified individuals with a proven track record of excellence.
- Program consistently demonstrates the highest possible professional production values. Care and appropriate expertise is considered in program and production preparation. (Content/historical accuracy has been reviewed by experts appointed by the institution.)
- If used, audience participation should be meaningful.
- If live animals are used, program adheres to the program animal and animal demonstration policies set forth by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.¹²

- Programs are routinely evaluated by qualified individuals and results are routinely used to plan and improve activities.¹³
- In addition to the above, scripts/creative outlines for theatrical plays in museums reflect the qualities of a high quality piece of theatre:¹⁴
 - The resulting production is engaging and "not boring."
 - Factual content is embedded within the play so it is "shown" and not "told."
 - Plot contains conflict and/or story arc.
 - The characters are well developed (unless the theatrical style requires otherwise.)
 - Dialogue achieves goals of production and is consistent with style of play.

Human resource policies and processes ensure fairness, health and safety, and the highest quality program presentation.

Performers and other staff are qualified and trained and have been hired specifically for their skills in performance/presentation or production.

Opportunities are provided for the development of new talent.

Appropriate time has been provided for artistic preparation and rehearsal, allowing performers to be engaging and comfortable with content and presentation; and able to facilitate effective learning (roughly 2 hours of preparation for every 2 minutes of presentation). Preparation time is included in (daily) work schedule.

Appropriate breaks (of at least 15 minutes) after performances are included in daily work schedule.

Positions are advertised within and outside of the institution. Appearance may be considered when appropriate for character, audience representation, or other choice but if so must be intentional.

All duties of each position are clearly outlined in a contract and/or job description. Compensation is consistent with that of other program presenters in the institution.

Appropriate care (washing, mending, etc...) for specialized garments provided by institution is identified before production and maintained throughout run.

Appropriate personnel participate in relevant professional associations and conferences, disseminating work with the rest of the field, remaining current on trends and innovations, and influencing museum and public policy to advance the use of theatrical techniques in museums.¹⁵

Acknowledgements:

IMTAL wishes to thank the following individuals and organizations for their contributions and assistance in the development of this document:

Jillian Finkle*^
Stephanie Long*^
George Buss*^
Tessa Bridal*^
Nora Berger-Green*
Greg Hardison*^
Simone Mortan^
Heather Barnes^
Rebecca Colon^
Elizabeth Keaney^
Catherine Hughes*^
Marcos Stafne^

Cat Chiappa^
Melanie Wehrmacher^
Arianna Ross
Rebecca Singer
Margery Gordon
Julie Hart
Dale Jones*^
Paul Taylor^
NAI
EdCom
AAM
All members of IMTAL

*Denotes a member of the IMTAL Best Practices Committee

^Denotes a past or current member of the IMTAL Board of Directors

NOTES:

¹ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Advocacy #6, “Ensure that Education is clearly incorporated into the mission, goals, and financial strategy of the museum.”

² AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation: “The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy, and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.”

³ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Advocacy #6, “Integrate educational expertise into exhibition design and interpretation.”

⁴ AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation, “The museum uses techniques, technologies, and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences, and resources.”

⁵ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Accessibility #1, “Engage the community and serve the museum’s audiences.”

⁶ AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation, “The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.”

⁷ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Accessibility #2, “Address and employ a diversity of perspectives.”

⁸ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Accountability #3, “Demonstrate excellence in content knowledge.”

⁹ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Advocacy #7, “Set goals and measurable objectives and adopt strategies to achieve and document them.”

¹⁰ AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation, “The museum’s interpretive content is based on appropriate research.”

¹¹ AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation, “The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.”

¹² AAM Standards for Excellence in Education and Interpretation, “The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.”

¹³ The characteristics of successful theatrical plays in museums set forth here have been adapted/ excerpted from Paul Taylor’s “10 Commandments of Museum Theatre” available at (list website address.)

¹⁴ EdCom Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums, Advocacy #8, “Promote professional development within the museum community” and #10, “Influence public policy in support of museum learning.”