

## ***Not Just for Actors Any More***

*by Timothy Rhue II*

Explainers Program Manager,  
Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum

I love museum theatre, but it's not my day job. As the manager of the Explainers Program at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, I oversee a group of over forty students who teach science to the public on the floor of the Museum. The goals of this program are better served by using other methods. That being said, we do use museum theatre techniques, and those techniques have become much more explicit and effective as a result of my participation in IMTAL.

My involvement first started at an American Alliance of Museums (AAM) annual conference, at one of the famous IMTAL showcases which happen annually.

I was fascinated. I was amazed. I was bewildered. Most of all I was intrigued. I was intrigued enough to come back and see the showcase again the next year.

This second time I asked some of the people there what else might be a good session to learn about museum theatre and how it could apply to my current job. I was directed to a session on "Creating Staff Community by Fostering Creativity." Part of this session involved a mini-workshop using some improvisational games.



Tim Rhue, Smithsonian Air & Space Museum.

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*continued on page 4*

The International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) is a nonprofit, professional membership organization and an affiliate to 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. For more information, to become a member, or to volunteer, please visit our website, <http://www.imtal.org>, or contact a board member via email.

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# SAY YES! It's Conference Time!

September 28 through October 2, 2014

## 2014 IMTAL–Americas Conference (and pre-conference, too)

We call it our “regional” conference, but in the case of IMTAL—a global organization—“regional” means Americas. This year, the Museum of Science and Industry (MSI) in Chicago is our host, and they have a grand time planned! You’ll want to come early to take advantage of the one-day preconference session, too—a workshop taught by Tessa Bridal on starting museum theatre at your institution.

This is the conference you don’t want to miss! What other conference includes tickets to Second City? VIP tickets and shows at MSI, Shedd Aquarium, and the DuSable Museum? Chicago-style pizza? Only IMTAL!

Pre-registration has closed, but you can register on-site. Please note that for on-site registration, some conference items will be

Hosted by  
The Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago

included only if there is still space available; these include transportation between the hotel and conference venues, Second City show tickets, and food. All conference sessions and IMTAL performance presentations (breakout and plenary) are open to all registrants, including those registering on-site for single or multiple days.

ON-SITE REGISTRATION LOCATION VARIES, depending on where a particular day’s activities take place (MSI, Shedd Aquarium, DuSable); please refer to the conference schedule for details: <http://tinyurl.com/q5bvbhl>

## Editor’s Corner

**New Discoveries:** As I write this, it’s 10 days until the 2014 IMTAL Americas regional conference. The day before, September 27, I’ll join other board members for the second of our two annual “in person” board meetings, where we’ll continue the work on strategic planning we began at AAM last May. We’ll talk about what we hope for IMTAL, what discoveries await, what futures we dream of, and how we might get there. Sunday, I’ll be in the pre-conference workshop led by long-time museum theatre advocate Tessa Bridal, and Sunday night, I’ll plunge headlong into the amazing programs and events the conference committee has lined up.

Attending a conference is always a challenge. Time is tight, money is tight. Deadlines loom. I’m self-employed; in addition to paying my own way, I’m not earning money during the conference. Several other friends are traveling on their own nickel, too—they’re either freelance like me, or they’re working for sites that acknowledge the value of this conference but aren’t quite willing to spring for the cost, or all of the cost, this year.

Yet we all still come. We find a way. We share hotel rooms, we cadge rides and cheap airfares, we count pennies before, during and after.

Why?

Because at every IMTAL conference, there are incredible discoveries. Something new every session—an idea, a person, an approach, a technique. A challenge that’s been overcome, another that can be, will be, thanks to the creativity, enthusiasm, and dedication of this small and growing group of museum theatre professionals.

Because, as author Kristen Lamb says, “If we aren’t learning, we’re dying.”

Poet Mary Oliver says,

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.*

This is what I’ll strive for at the conference.

This is what I’ll do when I return home.

This is what I live for every day.

I hope you enjoy this issue of INSIGHTS—and I hope to see you in Chicago, too!

**Judy Fort Brenneman**  
Greenfire Creative, LLC  
IMTAL Publications Officer

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Kristen Lamb, *Rise of the Machines* (2013), p. 281.

Mary Oliver, *Red Bird* (2008), p. 37.

# President's Report

I love the theme of this issue, *New Discoveries*, because both theatre and museums are fundamentally about discovering something about the world or our selves. In the last decade, we have seen many changes in our field and made many new discoveries. Most of these transformations have been extremely positive. While we sadly have seen a couple really amazing museum theatre companies fold, we have also witnessed many new theatre departments grow.

One of the most exciting changes, I find, is the national increase in the use of theatrical techniques. Particularly I find the success and expansion of improv very encouraging. At the Science Museum of Minnesota, we have used improv in performances for years, but we have not until recently used it as a training method, an interview tool, and a daily operational exercise for museum staff. Heather Barnes, Director of Guest Experiences at the Museum of Science and Industry, first introduced me to this methodology of improv at, you guessed it, an IMTAL conference.

Since then, I've had the pleasure of taking part in this infectious manifestation of improv. Heather and I partnered with other colleagues and the Nano-scale Informal Science Education network to train staff on the importance of improv techniques and exercises. The workshop focused on how to host successful conversations between visitors and staff, and improv was the training strategy to improve these conversational skills. Sixty institutions participated and almost all of them have implemented improv into their institutions. It is promising to know that so many museums are taking advantage



of impactful theatrical techniques—and these are just the institutions we know about.

Speaking of which, if you know of any institutions that are using live performances or theatrical techniques, please encourage them to join IMTAL. We know that they are out there, and we are only as strong as our membership. And thank you for your IMTAL membership.

Cheers to new discoveries and continued growth in the field of museum theatre!

*Stephanie Long*

Science Museum of Minnesota,  
IMTAL President

“The games are particularly effective at getting the participants to pay attention to their surroundings, work in the moment, think quickly, and be accepting of others’ requests.”

*Tim Rhue (see the article beginning on page 1)*



Explainer Training Session, Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum.

Once again, I was intrigued. This time I took the next step to register for the IMTAL conference happening in Washington, DC, that October. It didn't hurt that I wouldn't have to travel anywhere to attend the conference.

There was plenty to learn at the conference. I saw amazing storytelling and use of technology to bring theatre outside the museum walls. I met people from around the world doing awe-inspiring projects. Most importantly though, I learned lessons that I brought home to make my program more effective at fulfilling its mission and make me more efficient at my job.

I took home specific new ways to use improvisational games with the Explainers and examples of games and concrete information on how to run them effectively with my staff.

“I learned lessons that I brought home to make my program more effective at fulfilling its mission and make me more efficient at my job.”

The Explainers are high school and college students who come from a number of different backgrounds. Some of them have a little theatre experience, but most don't. They run activities that share some similarities to things done in museum theatre, but their activities aren't what would generally be recognized as theatre. The majority of their work involves running loosely scripted interactive demonstrations, discovery stations where audience members interact with touchable educational items, and brief one-on-one pocket science interactions working with props or exhibits. By sheer number of interpretive interactions with visitors, they are the biggest human face to the Museum, with over 300,000 interactions a year.

As a result of what I learned at the conference, we now use improvisational games in our trainings and our interviews. Most training sessions focused on educational methods incorporate some games which not only keep the students awake, but help teach some of the lessons that we are trying to convey to the Explainers. The games are particularly effective at getting the participants to pay attention to their surroundings, work in the moment, think quickly, and be accepting of others' requests. This has improved the amount Explainers retain at training sessions and improved explainer/visitor interactions on the floor.

Using improvisational games during interviews has improved the program in a different way. In the

past, I've spent a lot of my time arranging individual interviews with a large number of Explainers. In order to fit these new techniques in, I had to try instituting group interviews. This has had the side benefit of saving me time interviewing and setting up the interviews in the first place. The most important benefit of this new interview style is that I am able to see how the applicants work with other people. Are they friendly? Are they quiet? Are they accepting of others? Do they take a lead? Are they thoughtful practitioners? There is a lot that can be gleaned from watching a group play a game. I'm still evaluating the results of this new interview style, but it is a new tool in my arsenal to select better candidates to work with visitors and figure out which potential Explainers will be able to grow most effectively in our environment.



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Timothy Rhue II is the Explainers Program Manager at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, EdCom Chair-Elect of Communications, and a graduate of the GWU Museum Education Program.

*Want to know more about using improv?*

Log into the IMTAL website

<http://www.imtal.org/home>

and in the "Members Only" section, select "Resources" and "Improv Tools."

Explainer Training Session, Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum.



# Interview: Amber Davis Parham

*by Judy Fort Brenneman*

*Our members travel many different paths to museum theatre. I spoke with IMTAL's new Secretary of the Board Amber Davis Parham about her experiences as an actor, museum theatre advocate, and IMTAL volunteer, and what it's been like to launch into a career as a museum theatre professional.*

**JFB:** *You're a new board member, one of the younger officers of the board, too, as well as being newer to the museum field, so I am curious what the world looks like from where you are in your career right now. Let's start with the IMTAL board. Why did you get involved? What convinced you that this is the way to spend your "copious" free time?*

**ADP:** I first learned about IMTAL when I was in grad school. I went to one of Tessa [Bridal]'s workshops at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis in 2011—that was early on in my graduate studies—then, as I worked on my thesis, I got more roped into IMTAL. My thesis focused on how museum theatre impacts science learning for family audiences in the context of science and natural history museums, zoos, and aquariums. My interview subjects included many current and past board members, and so I learned more about the (museum theatre) community and organization. I kind of always knew from that experience that I wanted to be involved with the organization at some point in

Amber Davis Parham, Astronaut on Mars, DMNS 2010.



Photo permission: Amber Davis Parham

time. When the position for board secretary opened, [board member] Doug [Coler] called me and said, “You’d be great, we’d love to have you.” I talked it over with my husband, and initially thought, I don’t know—this is a big commitment for where I am in my career. But in the grand scheme of things, I decided that it was a really good opportunity for professional growth and a good opportunity to get hooked into the niche market within the museum community that I am most interested in, which is creating museum experiences that engage visitors with theatre. So I decided to give this a try. So far I am really glad that I did. Sometimes it seems overwhelming because there are so many things I have to keep track of, between work, IMTAL, and life, but it is a really great experience and really good professional development.

**JFB:** *Has your opinion of IMTAL or museum theatre shifted as a result of your involvement?*

**ADP:** I don’t know that my opinion of the Board has changed for what the organization is and stands for, but certainly being on the inside has shifted my perspective of what is involved in running an organization like this and some of the challenges that we face. We are all volunteers, and we are all working a lot and have a lot to juggle. One of the things that I picked up on prior to becoming a board member, and that being on the board has reinforced, is how supportive everyone is of each other. I really appreciate and admire that. I think it is really great that the organization and the folks who are involved in the organization are so willing to share about their own experience in their institution and talk about some of the more challenging aspects of the work that we do or talk about the more triumphant aspects that work really well. Going back to my thesis, I reached out to a lot of different people, and it was such an open and welcoming crew of individuals.

**JFB:** *What kinds of challenges have you discovered as you’ve gotten into the work of being a board member?*

**ADP:** One thing that has been a challenge is that there is stuff I want to do to improve the website or our whole social media presence, but it is tough when again, all of us are working professionals at various different capacities with a limited budget or a limited amount of extra time. I don’t know how to build a website, so as much as I would like to go through with a fine-tooth comb and make our digital presence a little bit more accessible and clean, it is hard to find the time for that. One of the

challenges I have been grappling with is, “What can I do to make small improvements here and there?” I think that’s something a number of us struggle with, that desire to do more or do things differently or make improvements but not necessarily having the time, where-with-all, or manpower to make those changes.



Amber Davis Parham, Astronaut on Mars, DMNS 2010.

Photo permission: Amber Davis Parham

“It became clear to me, this is what I wanted to do, and I could do it well and be happy.”



ABOVE: Amber and Belle, AstroTot Training, DMNS Discovery Zone, 2014.

OPPOSITE: Captain Amber Pants in "Pirates of the Human Being: Meet Your Microbial Mates."

**JFB:** *You're right, it is really hard. And I think the drive to want to make those changes despite the challenges grows out of our enthusiasm, too.*

**ADP:** Yes! We are all extremely passionate about the work that we do, and I think in a lot of ways we have the idea that this is one of the best approaches—I mean it is, right?

**JFB:** *Yes, absolutely!*

**ADP:** We are an enthusiastic bunch and incredible advocates of the work that we do, and I think that is a nice aspect of the organization.

**JFB:** *What got you into this field to begin with—the world of non-formal education or interpretation as well as museum theatre, specifically?*

**ADP:** Not necessarily a traditional path, which I think is the case with most people who are in the museum field. When I was in middle school I

decided I wanted to be an actress. I wanted to do that professionally and be in Shakespeare companies around the country. That sounded amazing to me at the time. Becoming a professional actor was my goal and dream through high school and college, though in college I did a mixture of liberal studies and theatre and graduated with a Bachelors in Drama with a performance emphasis.

I am from California originally, but when I graduated from college, my mom was very particular about, "Don't come home—not that I don't love you, but you need to go out and experience the world a bit." And I knew staying in the Bay Area wouldn't really allow me to do that, because I would need to work too much to support my habit of being an actor. I didn't want to live in New York, and I didn't want to go to L.A.; those places were not part of my personality. I settled on Denver and came here right after graduation. I auditioned for a lot of shows and got a part-time job as a teaching assistant at Denver Academy, working with sixth graders who were struggling with learning challenges and other social challenges. I always really enjoyed working with kids, and I spent a lot of time as a babysitter and a nanny during that year as well. Working at the school, in that formal educational environment, I discovered that I enjoyed being a teacher/mentor type for the kids, but the formal part didn't really mesh very well with me.

During this time I was bringing one of the kids I nannied to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science on a regular basis, and I happened to get cast in a show where one of my castmates worked at DMNS. The school year and my job at the school were coming to an end, and it turned out DMNS was looking for Discovery Facilitators to work in an exhibit called the Discovery Zone, interacting with early childhood and young visitors. I ended up getting hired on there, and that transpired into also working there as an actor. I was a Discovery Facilitator/Actor for about two years, rotating between the Discovery Zone, Space Odyssey, and Expedition Health. It was super fun just being able to teach and engage and interact with people in a much more informal way and tap into the skills that I had as an actor.

After I was there for two years, towards the end of that time I was starting to feel like I needed to go back to school and do something different. I really grappled with what that would be for a long time. "Do I want to go to grad school for theatre, my long time dream?" Then I had this realization that if I went to graduate school for theatre, I was going to graduate, be in debt, be looking for work, and auditioning for shows, which I already had been doing

for three years. I really didn't want to do that again! But, there is this great thing that I can do at the museum and that uses theatre and education, that I get paid for, and it is regular, and I don't have to move all over the country. I was back in California over the holidays, visiting my family, and we went to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. It was their new building—they have this really cool living roof, and a rain forest exhibit that you walk through on multiple levels—and I was really inspired. I got to wondering what kind of jobs they might have, and I found a position that sounded like a good fit, dealing with the public and building programs, but it required a Master's degree. It became clear to me, this is what I wanted to do, and I could do it well and be happy. I did a simple Google search for museum studies, Master's Degrees, and the John F. Kennedy University Museum Studies program, based in the Bay Area in Berkeley, CA, popped up. I read the descriptions and the background of the professors and I was like, okay, that is where I want to go. And the rest is history.

During grad school I was required to complete two internships. The first internship was focused on researching the use of theatre in science based institutions, in particular aquariums and zoos, but I also looked to other types of institutions for examples. I got to go on a lot of site visits as well and see a lot of examples of museum theatre and programs that used theatrical technique. As part of my first

“I have come back into it with a really different perspective about what it means to be a museum educator.”

internship at the Aquarium of the Bay, I got to go to Tessa's workshop in Indianapolis. I also put together a survey and sent it out to a bunch of folks on the AZA education listserv as well as through ITMAL and got fifty responses or so with information about various organizations that either were using, had used, were currently, or hoped to use theatre and how they were using it, so that was pretty cool.

The second internship was less theatre based—it was a smaller, space science institution, so I got to wear a lot of hats. I helped with developing some evening adult programming, was able to provide feedback for partnership work they'd done with an outside theatre company, and I did a training for some staff about using improv techniques, applying those to engaging with visitors. As my graduate studies came to an end, my thesis culminated in many of the things we talked about in school, but I was really able to tailor it to my interests in using theatre as an educational tool.

Another positive aspect about the graduate program was that they encouraged students to get involved in professional organizations, attend conferences, and get involved with the community. It really enhanced the general learning experience. I think a really important component of being a professional in this field is being involved with organizations like IMTAL or AAM or other regional professional organizations.

*JFB: In many ways, you have been doing parts of this for a long time now, and in other ways you are very much a newbie. As you look at the field and where you are now in terms of your career, what kinds of things do you see changing? What kind of discoveries are you making that someone at the earlier stages in their career might be facing—exciting, challenging,*



Photo permission: Amber Davis Parham

“[W]e have only scratched the surface with the evaluative studies we have been doing.”

*anything you see coming that might not have been around even ten years ago?*

**ADP:** One of the things that has been challenging since finishing school is that a lot of the work experience that I have so far has been predominantly entry-level. I really have the desire to move forward and move upward into a slightly higher position, where I have more of an ability to make change and influence the direction that things go. So far, it is hard to get into those positions that have a little bit more authority, that mid-level. I am not ready to be the manager or a coordinator yet. But an assistant manager or assistant coordinator, I am totally there. I have the skills; I am totally capable, and I can learn, but for various reasons, those positions are not available. Either someone is already in those positions, or twice I've had a great interview and had a really good connection with the people, and they chose an internal candidate instead—which in the grand scheme of things, I totally get it. I understand why they made the choice that they made.

Now I have two jobs at two institutions. At one, I am back in my old job that I did for two years with a slightly different position name, but essentially I do the same thing. A lot of it is the exact same programming that I did four years ago, and it is interesting.

For some people, coming back to something that is common and familiar might be uninviting or less exciting. For me, I have come back into it with a really different perspective about what it means to be a museum educator. I feel I have a much stronger sense of what the bigger picture is as far as the overall goals of the institution. Previously I didn't really understand the theories behind what we were doing; it was just cool. And now, I have this much more grounded theoretical understanding and academic understanding of what it is that we are doing. I think that makes me a stronger educator and engager, so I am hopeful that will grow into a higher level position that has a bit more responsibility. I am making

an effort to step up when there is an opportunity to volunteer to help out with something or work on a project or a brainstorm, staying a little bit extra. Doing things like that to demonstrate that I am capable and willing, and hopefully that will pay off in the end with a more full-time position.

**JFB:** *Part of what you want is the excitement and continual learning. It is not ambition as in, “I want to rule the world”; it is ambition in the sense of, “Let me show you what I can do . . . there is so much more I can offer.”*

**ADP:** That desire to be more involved in the creation of the programming at both DMNS and Butterfly Pavilion, to update our training materials—at Butterfly Pavilion, I'm only there one day a week, and at DMNS, I'm there four days a week, but I'm on the floor. Sometimes we barely have time to check our emails. What little time we have, we spend learning new programs and researching whatever subject to get a better grasp of science or health or whatever it may be. To be able to contribute in a larger capacity—without being full-time, I can't do that yet.

**JFB:** *When you step back from the demands of your day-to-day work, what do you see or hope to see in terms of museum theatre overall?*

**ADP:** I think there is a lot of really tremendous museum theatre out there, and there is also some really bad museum theatre out there. And part of the role I see it playing is to better define what museum theatre is—but not to the extent that it puts it in a box, because it is so fluid, and there are so many different approaches that rely on theatrical skills and techniques. Further establishing, “This is what museum theatre is” is important—and the big thing that came out of my thesis research was the realization that we have only scratched the surface with the evaluative studies we have been doing.

I think that is really key. In my research I found one extended length, longitudinal study that came out of the UK. Otherwise the majority of the evaluation studies I came across, mostly from science based institutions, were assessing the impact of museum theatre, but it was all primarily surface stuff, asking: What did you learn? What did you not like? How did you find out about the program? I would love to be able to find a way to better measure the impact of museum theatre.

I also think that there is a disconnect between museum theatre professionals and evaluators. During the interviews for my thesis, everyone

agreed that evaluation is really essential, and that we need more of it. And then I would ask, “What techniques or approaches do you use to assess museum theatre or to evaluate your programming?” And most of them would say, “I’m not really sure, you should talk to our evaluator,” or “We don’t have an evaluation team,” or, “We did evaluate this one program, and after we saw the results we threw them out.” So there is this disconnect. We know we need more evaluation, but we don’t know how or don’t have the bandwidth to do it. That’s a key missing part of the work that we do, because having documented information and data that says this impacted X amount of people, and we went back and talked to them three weeks later, and five weeks later, and a year later, and they still have that recollection or memory or whatever—that is really important.

We have a tremendous amount of anecdotal evidence that museum theatre is a successful approach for education and a successful approach for engaging visitors.

**JFB:** *What you hope the field will begin to do is actually give the people who are creating and presenting these kinds of programs the tools to actually do—and understand—evaluation.*

**ADP:** A lot of museum professionals say that yes, evaluations and evaluative studies help with funding; it justifies the need for this program. I can talk all day about how great museum theatre is, but until I turn that into data, our funders aren’t go to go, “Oh, that was a lovely story, here is a check for a hundred thousand dollars. . . .”

**JFB:** *There is a stronger push to have data-supported educational approaches in academic settings; it strikes me that you are identifying that same problem in museum theatre. It is just a matter of figuring out who is going to do them, how we are going to do them, and how we get everybody talking together so that information gets shared effectively.*

**ADP:** It is a big question. I don’t know if there is one ultimate way to assess a program, but it is important, and it is necessary, and it needs to be done more. There are so many different puzzle pieces that it is tough to wrap your mind around it all. I hope that as a bigger, broader field and broader community, we can work together to move forward together in finding techniques that *do* work for analyzing and assessing the type of work that we are doing.



“We are all extremely passionate about the work that we do.”

Amber and Belle, AstroTot Training, DMNS Discovery Zone, 2014.



Photo permission: Amber Davis Parham

# Enhanced Vision

## Museum Theatre and MSI's Coal Mine Tour

by Carla Bruton

Senior Coordinator, Guest Experiences  
Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago

**H**ow do you keep an exhibit dating from 1933 fresh and relevant?

How do you meet the changing needs of students, education, and modern society?

How do you continue to “inspire and motivate children to achieve their full potential in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine”?

At the 2014 American Alliance of Museums conference, Carla Bruton, Senior Coordinator of Guest Experiences of the Museum of Science and Industry (yes, the same MSI hosting the IMTAL conference

that begins Sept. 28) led audience members on an overview of MSI's Coal Mine Exhibit that demonstrated how MSI uses museum theatre to do all this and more.

The Coal Mine Exhibit has been part of MSI since the museum's beginning. Philanthropist and then-chairman of Sears, Roebuck and Company Julius Rosenwald was inspired to found MSI after visiting Munich's Deutsches Museum with his young son. Young Rosenwald was captivated by the museum's exhibits that moved, with buttons to push and levers to operate, including a hands-on coal mine exhibit.

MSI's mission then as now is to inspire the inventive genius in everyone. The Coal Mine Exhibit (Old Ben #17) was the first interactive experience to be featured when the museum opened in 1933.

The exhibit, brought to the museum from Johnston City, Illinois, was designed to support the use of live interpretation. The first tour guides were actual coal miners from Johnston City, Illinois. Over time, the Coal Mine Exhibit has been enhanced by

exhibit expansion, annual maintenance, and the guest engagements (interactions between guests and MSI Facilitators) provided during the tour. And, although the museum's central mission has remained the same, how MSI uses its guides and the Coal Mine Exhibit to further that mission has evolved.

The tour itself begins by descending “600 feet” on a simulated ride underground aboard the “man cage.” Guests are guided through what looks like a real coal mine; they see actual mine equipment and machinery that are over 50 years old. The overall tour focuses on the story of coal mining and the evolution of technology used in mining coal. Guests enjoy a brief ride on the “man trip train” to the active face of the Coal Mine. The end of the tour focuses on modern



MSI Coal Mine Exhibit, 1933.

## “[T]he commitment to enhance that vision required a change.”

technology, primary uses of coal, and coal byproducts used in our everyday lives, such as toothpaste and Twinkies. A small display at the exit focuses on cleaner coal technology and addresses environmental concerns. This reiterates the vision of the museum to inspire and motivate children, with a focus on engineering by showing them how technology has made coal mining safer and more efficient.

Until 2007, “Facilitators”—interpretive tour guides—followed a strict script to deliver the Coal Mine Exhibit program. In 2008, MSI launched an initiative to improve and expand its STEM programming “to inspire and motivate children to achieve their full potential in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine.”

MSI remains committed to using live interpretation, storytelling, role playing, and immersive experiences as tools to fulfill the vision of the Museum, but the commitment to enhance that vision required a change in how they presented their programming. That, in turn, required a change in how they train their Facilitators.

MSI Facilitators have a wide range of experience in science, theater, education, and customer service. Training is designed to set up all Facilitators for success, from the quiet science guy to the extraverted customer service person. Facilitators participate in a one-week training that includes theater techniques, improvisation, content, and guest interactions. They also receive ongoing coaching and professional development.

MSI issues a script and outline to each Facilitator giving the tour. The script isn’t meant to be “memorized and delivered”; instead, it and the outline are designed to help set the standard expectation for all Facilitators giving the tour.

Facilitators practice improvisation techniques daily as a training tool to develop skills in quick thinking, listening, and the supportive role of “yes and.” This training allows Facilitators to adapt tour content to a range of ages, experiences, and educational backgrounds without sacrificing the content.

New Facilitators also observe trained Facilitators giving tours and partner with them to practice. Once Facilitators successfully complete training, they are cleared (“MSI certified”) to give tours without being shadowed.



MSI’s program leadership team members coach Facilitators regularly as well as provide feedback on their tours. For ongoing professional development, multiple Facilitators attend the Coal Education Conference held annually in Whittington, Illinois. During the conference, Facilitators participate in workshops with coal engineers, geologists, and teachers, and they visit a real working coal mine.

This opportunity allows the Facilitators to gain real world experience. It also enhances their facilitations by providing references and knowledge that can be used to add content to their tours.

Time for ongoing research is built into the Facilitators’ schedules, too. When someone uncovers

Carla Bruton,  
MSI Coal Mine  
Exhibit.



Old Ben #17.

“Training is designed to set up all Facilitators for success.”

Coal Mine exhibit photos by J. B. Spector, courtesy of Museum of Science and Industry.

new content they'd like to include in the tour, it's vetted by the leadership team and, once verified, the Facilitator is cleared to use the new material. This helps keep the Facilitators engaged in the topic and at the same time, keeps the program fresh and current.

The shift in Facilitator training and program delivery, like any change, presented some challenges. One important aspect of making the transition work—which is also central to the ongoing success of the program—is being very strategic. When the team rolls out something new, they don't just say, “Here's the outline, do it”; they work intensely on everything that goes into a successful program, from guest readiness to how to bring content, museum theatre techniques, and the museum's central mission and vision together in ways that are fun, educational, and have that all-important emotional connection. Bruton notes that the new approach involves ongoing support on leadership's part, but the reworked programming approach is so successful, that it is clearly worth it.

The Coal Mine Exhibit sets the stage, but MSI Facilitators bring it to life. Guests continue to rave about MSI Facilitators giving

the tours; MSI receives positive feedback online throughout the year, for example, “The Coal Mine tour was very educational and the guides for these tours were so good. I suppose they may be college students but they were so informed and professional. The museum must have a great training program.”

The MSI Coal Mine Exhibit has inspired guests for 81 years and continues to be one of the most iconic—and popular—exhibits in the Museum. In 2013, 143,362 guests visited the Coal Mine, and 2014 is on track to exceed 2013's numbers.



*Carla Bruton works on the leadership team in the Guest Experiences department. She previously worked in various roles throughout the museum, including facilitating, coaching, training, and creating multiple programs.*



*Interested in seeing the Coal Mine Exhibit and learning more about MSI's approach?*

Join us at the IMTAL 2014 conference, Sept. 28 through Oct. 2. Pre-registration is closed, but same-day registration will be available on-site during the conference. More information: <http://imtal.org>

1: Coal Mine tunnel.  
2: Longwall machine.

## ***Announcements & Calls for Submissions & Auditions***

### **Conferences and workshops**

**Sept. 28–Oct. 2, 2014: IMTAL–Americas Regional Conference**, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL. (Pre-conference is Sept. 28, noon to 6 p.m.)  
Details and registration: <http://imtal.org>

**Oct. 18–21, 2014: ASTC (The Association of Science-Technology Centers) Annual Conference**, Raleigh, NC

**Nov. 18–22, 2014: National Association for Interpretation (NAI) National Workshop**, Denver, CO  
<http://interpnet.com>

#### INCLUDING:

- Nov. 22, 2014: *Better than Broadway: How to use theatre to create and present amazing interpretive programs*: A 3-hour intensive mini-workshop co-presented by IMTAL and CILH (Cultural and Living History, a Section of NAI) members Judy Fort Brenneman, Simone Mortan, Bill Weldon, and John Luzader.
- Nov. 20, 2014, 7:30–9:30 p.m.: *Most Misunderstood Characters*: An evening event where the audience and a panel of judges determine which of the performers is truly the most misunderstood. Open to all NAI conference attendees; performances by audition/proposal or invitation only; For more information or an application, contact Bill Weldon, [bweldon@cwfi.org](mailto:bweldon@cwfi.org), or Jerri Spellman, [lmow2@comcast.net](mailto:lmow2@comcast.net).

**Feb. 8–13, 2015 Anza-Borrego Nature Writing Retreat**, Borrego Springs, CA  
<http://www.theabf.org/retreat>

A week-long writers' retreat offering time to write and reflect in the vast and inspiring landscapes of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Enjoy daily focused sessions, individual feedback, one-on-one guidance, and explorations in the Park. Led by Judy Fort Brenneman, IMTAL's Publications Officer and owner of Greenfire Creative, LLC.

### **Call for Submissions**

***Submit articles, news, and ideas for the next issue of INSIGHTS!***

We're looking for articles, opinions, and news about events, programs, your site, and your self. Articles and opinion pieces can be from 250 to 3,000 words long; must be in MS Word format (.doc preferred, please); and it would be really nice if you could format your file to be double-spaced, first paragraph indented, 11- or 12-point Times New Roman or similar. But the most important thing is to send us your article, opinion, or news: to [pubsofficer@imtal.org](mailto:pubsofficer@imtal.org) no later than Dec. 15, 2014). *(It doesn't have to be perfect; it just needs to be reasonably coherent. If we have questions, we'll contact you.)*

# Exhibit News

## *The A-Mazing Mendes Cohen*

A new living history character, Mendes Cohen, has been “unveiled” and on September 14, 2014, the new exhibit “The A-Mazing Mendes Cohen” opened at the Jewish Museum of Maryland (JMM). The character joins the Leo V. Berger Trunk Program of the JMM. These characters tour throughout the community (Baltimore/DC) and perform on occasion at the museum.

The museum has gone all out to promote the exhibit and the new museum theatre character—TV, radio, special event appearances, etc.—especially since a huge celebration marking the 200th anniversary of the 1814 Battle of Baltimore (War of 1812) coincided with the exhibit’s opening weekend. The Battle of Baltimore, in which Mendes Cohen fought, along with his brother, Philip, is the famous battle during which Francis Scott Key wrote “The Star Spangled Banner.” In addition to his war experience, Mendes had an extraordinary career. He was a banker, businessman, adventurer, state representative, philanthropist, and more.

IMTAL board member Harriet Lynn of Heritage Theatre Artists’ Consortium is the producer/director of the new show; other team members are Jonathan Scott Fuqua, playwright; Maggie Masson, costumer; and Grant Cloyd, actor, in the role of Mendes Cohen.

The exhibit will run through June 14, 2015. For more information including performance schedule, visit <http://jewishmuseummd.org/single/the-a-mazing-mendes-cohen/>



Mendes Cohen.

*The museum has gone all out to promote the exhibit and the new museum theatre character.*

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