

Museum Theatre Program Honored by First Lady Michelle Obama

By Elizabeth Pickard

The words “museum theatre” were said at the White House this November—and by the head of IMLS too!

On Monday, November 10, 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama honored the Missouri History Museum’s Teens Make History Program with the 2014 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program (NAHYP) Award. The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities gives the award annually and describes it as the Nation’s Highest Honor for out of school programs in the arts and the humanities. The NAHYP honor can only be received once in the lifetime of a program.

Teens Make History was one of twelve organizations to receive the award this year from a pool of more than 350 applicants. In addition to the ceremony at the White House, each program receives a \$10,000 award in support of the program.

Teens Make History was founded in 2007 as a work based learning program – using museum theatre to teach teens work skills. The Teens Make History Players are paid apprentices in the museum and they research, write, and perform plays linked to exhibit content.

They help the Missouri History Museum’s guests make personal, emotional connections to the people and the stories of the past.



First Lady Michelle Obama presents the 2014 National Arts and Humanities Program Award to Amesha Payne and Elizabeth Pickard of the Missouri History Museum’s Teens Make History Program. Photo courtesy President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Over the years the program has expanded to include the Teens Make History Academy—an 8-week mini museum studies course that introduces teens to museum work and a group of apprentices focused on exhibition work.

Find out more about the program at mohistory.org/tmh

President's Report

Happy New Year! We start the IMTAL New Year with conference updates and election notices.

Our next gathering of IMTAL members will be at the annual meeting of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in Atlanta from April 26 – 29th. We hope to see you at our annual luncheon. Pre-registration is required for the lunch, so please sign up when you register for the AAM conference. And as always, all are welcome to attend our board meeting at AAM on Saturday, April 25th. We will send more details closer to the date.

In other AAM news, the IMTAL board made our annual donation to Museum Advocacy Day, which is in Washington, DC from Feb. 23-24. If you are in the DC area, please consider attending and representing IMTAL.

If you had as wonderful a time at the last Global Conference as I did, you'll be pleased to know that our next IMTAL World Congress Conference is in Hollviken, Sweden September 10 – 13th, 2015. We thank our host museum the Fotevikens for agreeing to have us. I also want to take a moment to praise the working group of IMTAL volunteers who are making this event happen. We are looking for recommendations for speakers and performances. And, of course, we will soon be accepting session proposals, too.

Keep abreast of all the World Congress updates by checking the following sites:

http://imtal-us.org/conference_2015

<http://www.fotevikensmuseum.se/d/en/home>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/212828592103912/>



So as another year has come to a close and a new one begins, we look forward to many new IMTAL endeavors and hope you will become even more involved in our organization. One of the best ways to do so is by participating on our board. We are now accepting nominations for Vice President and Publications Officer. Both roles are extremely essential to the running of IMTAL. We hope you will consider running and send your brief statement of interest and biography to president@imtal-us.org or slong@smm.org.

I look forward to hearing about your 2015 museum theatre productions and wish you the best.

*Stephanie Long, IMTAL President
Science Live Theatre
Science Museum of Minnesota*

Editor's Corner: Newsletter Survey, Take 2

The newsletter survey launched just as the problem with our domain name surfaced. You might have been able to respond to the survey—or you might have ended up at another company's sales page. Our apologies for any confusion.

We'll try the survey again in late January. Even if you successfully completed the previous one, please take a few minutes to do the new one, too.

And as always, if you have questions, comments, feedback, or are interested in submitting an article or announcement, send me an email to my NEW EMAIL ADDRESS:

publications@imtal-us.org.

*Judy Fort-Brenneman, IMTAL Newsletter Editor
Greenfire Creative, LLC*

New Domain Name—New URL—New Email Addresses!

We're now imtal-us.org.

IMTAL Americas has a new domain name, and with it, a new website url and new email addresses for our board members.

The new name—imtal-us.org—isn't meant as a slight to our neighbors. We're still IMTAL Americas, with members throughout North, Middle, and South America.

Due to a recordkeeping glitch, we have temporarily lost our original domain name (imtal.org), a problem we discovered after another company snagged our name and put it up for sale. (If you try to access our website with the original url, you'll end up on that company's sales page.) We hope to eventually recover imtal.org, but in the meantime, please update your bookmarks and address books.

links to all three IMTAL branches (Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific):
<http://imtal-us.org/>

IMTAL Americas homepage:
<http://imtal-us.org/home>

Board member email addresses are listed on the last page of the newsletter.

Thanks to IMTAL website and social media board member Doug Coler for getting us up and running with our new alternative name!

A Roaring Year for Zoo and Aquarium Theater

by Dave McLellan, Zoological Society of Milwaukee and IMTAL liaison to AZA

2014 was a great year for museum theater in zoos and aquariums. Two highlights of the year were the AZA mid-year conference and annual conference. Each of these gatherings featured excellent sessions presented by IMTAL members.

AZA Mid-Year Conference, Memphis, TN, March 2014

IMTAL member Andy Park from the Shedd Aquarium (Chicago, IL) paired with Bricken Sparacino from the Wildlife Conservation Society (New York, NY) to lead a collaborative thinking session entitled "In The Spotlight: Theater Programming, what does it take?" This was an introductory session to show participants a variety of ways that theater can be used. The format was a round table discussion with a small group of attendees. It was a great opportunity for the participants to ask questions and expand their understanding of the potential for theater programming. Dave McLellan provided an article entitled "Four Fundamental Questions for Starting a Zoo Theater Program" (also included in this issue of *Insights*).

AZA Annual Conference, Orlando, FL, September 2014

IMTAL had a great showing at the larger annual AZA conference. IMTAL members Dave McLellan (Zoological Society of Milwaukee), Catherine Chiappa (Monterey Bay Aquarium), and Ken Ramirez (Shedd Aquarium) presented alongside Bricken Sparacino (Wildlife Conservation Society) and Dean Noble (Santa Barbara Zoo) to address five common challenges when producing theater in a zoo or aquarium. The session was entitled, "All the World's A Stage, Even Your Zoo or Aquarium."

Unlike most paper conference sessions, the group decided to tackle the subject matter collaboratively. Rather than each speaker giving an individual paper presentation, the session was divided into five common challenges each institution faced. This format provided the

opportunity to showcase how each institution approached the challenges differently. The challenges addressed were as follows:

- 1) Recruiting artistic talent (actors, writers, directors)
- 2) Creating effective stage spaces
- 3) Developing technical elements (sets, costumes, sound design, etc.)
- 4) Coordinating with animal management
- 5) Cultivating funding opportunities

Museum theater is an incredibly versatile art form and is influenced most by the structure of the hosting museum, zoo, or aquarium. Highlights of the presentation included the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s new approach to indoor theatrical interpretation, which is a big shift from their previous experience of performing “deck shows” with the Pacific Ocean as a backdrop. The Santa Barbara Zoo showed the impact of their massive



Dave McLellan, Zoological Society of Milwaukee and IMTAL liaison to AZA

roaming dinosaur puppets. The Wildlife Conservation Society described how they are collaborating with writers and fabricators on the other side of the country, which expands the availability of artistic talent. The Shedd Aquarium discussed how theater is used to enhance animal well-being and the variety of strategies used to effectively incorporate animals in stage performances. The Zoological Society of Milwaukee showed the marketing impact of theater programming and how it can be used to attract sponsorship.

The session was very well attended, with over 100 participants in the large conference room. The audience included vice presidents, architects, educators, and more. One notable participant was Joe Rohde, Executive Designer and Vice President for the Walt Disney Company.

IMTAL was featured prominently in the session. At the onset of the presentation, the IMTAL definitions of museum theater and theatrical techniques were established as a framework for discussion. All presenting IMTAL members mentioned their status as part of their introduction.

Looking to 2015

There has been a lot of interest in IMTAL continuing to present at the AZA conferences. The 2015 mid-year meeting will be in Columbia, SC from March 19-21. The annual conference will be held in Salt Lake City, UT from September 17-21. If IMTAL member is interested in presenting at either conference, please contact the IMTAL/AZA liaison at Animals@imtal-us.org.



**HONOR THE BEST IN MUSEUM THEATRE
CALL FOR NOMINATIONS AND SUBMISSIONS**
Playwriting award submissions deadline is January 31, 2015
IMTY award nominations deadline is April 1, 2015.

Every year, IMTAL honors the best in museum theatre—and we can't do that without your nominations. Please submit a play for the **Jon Lipsky Award for Excellence in Museum Theatre Playwriting** or nominate the leadership of your institution for an **IMTY award**, which recognizes outstanding leadership support for museum theatre.

Guidelines for the Jon Lipsky Award: <http://imtal-us.org/lipsky-award>
DEADLINE FOR THE JON LIPSKY AWARD IS JAN. 31, 2015.

Guidelines for the IMTY: <http://imtal-us.org/IMTY-award>
Deadline: April 1, 2015

Submit your applications to Elizabeth Pickard at vicepresident@imtal-us.org.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS
It's election time, and we need you!

Nominations are now open for two board of director positions:
vice president
publications

Board position descriptions are here:
<http://imtal-us.org/board-of-directors-descriptions/>

More questions? Contact president Stephanie Long, president@imtal-us.org; current VP Elizabeth Pickard (who transitions to President at the end of current President Stephanie Long's term), vicepresident@imtal-us.org; or Publications chair Judy Fort Brenneman, publications@imtal-us.org.

Throw your hat in the ring: send a brief statement of interest and biography to president@imtal-us.org!



IMTAL 2014 Conference



Be Courageous! **An interview with Tessa Bridal**

by Elizabeth Pickard

For many of us in IMTAL, the launch of our career has started in some way with Tessa Bridal—with one of her books, attending her Museum Theatre Workshop, or with a phone call and a plea for information. Always generous with her time and her experience, Tessa sat down recently with George Buss to look back on her career in museum theatre.

Tessa Bridal began her work in museums at the Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) in the early 1980's. She would later go on to lead interpretive programs at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis and the Monterey Bay Aquarium. In 1994 she received the Excellence in Practice award from the American Alliance of Museums, which recognizes an individual who demonstrates exemplary service to the public through the practice of education in a museum. She is the author of two books, *Exploring Museum Theatre* and *Effective Exhibit Interpretation and Design*. She led the Theatre in Museums workshop for decades—first at the Science Museum of Minnesota, later at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and most recently as a pre-conference workshop at the IMTAL conference in Chicago.

The workshop began during Tessa's first year at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Her supervisor, Sondra Quinn, who is considered one of the founders of museum theatre, said to her, "Oh, and by the way, we're doing a workshop in September." Sondra helped Tessa develop and put the workshop together, but it was Tessa's



Tessa Bridal and workshop participants.

workshop to run from the first. Needless to say, that first workshop was successful and turned into an annual event. In the time since its launch, hundreds of museum theatre professionals have received instruction in how to start and run a museum theatre program through the workshop.

Through her time teaching the workshop, Tessa learned many things—perhaps most importantly the need for museum theatre programs to have buy-in from upper level management. This concern is in part why IMTAL started to offer the IMTY award—which recognizes outstanding support for museum theatre by museum executives "We all know of programs that have been shut down," says Bridal. This is why her workshop focuses on piloting museum theatre in such a way that practitioners can develop a presentation and data that make it clear how impactful and central to an institution museum theatre can be.

This, in many ways, has been the driving idea behind Tessa's career: "We have had to learn the value of emotion and storytelling. How that engages people. How engagement leads to curiosity, to learning, to being excited by a topic, and how that can totally transform an exhibit experience." She continues, "It's such an obvious thing, but somehow museums and learning institutions in general had got away from that—thinking the visual element was enough. What we can offer is the opportunity for an exhibit to really reach people."

Another element of museum theatre that Bridal has always championed is taking on tough topics. "The more controversial the topic, the more we need museum theatre and storytellers." She calls for the field to be "courageous and fearless about what is presented to our public. Trust your public. If you have created something that is thoughtful and that addresses issues that they are dealing with all the time, don't be afraid of them." She went on to say, "People in my experience are hungry for substance. Whenever we have

presented something that requires thought, that challenges perspectives, that encourages discussion, it has resulted in overwhelming success.” She credits SMM with having given her wide range to experiment and to challenge her audience—latitude she calls a great gift to her career.

Excellent interpretive programs also need excellent spaces, and Tessa has become a champion for designing for interpretation. Very often, she says, we are presented with a finished plan, and then we have to figure out where we can fit in—rather than the exhibition being designed around human interpreters. It is possible, with advance planning to create well-designed, multi-use spaces. Spaces that are good when occupied by an interpreter and good when not. The human element is essential, she says: “I believe very strongly that live interpretation is irreplaceable by media. I believe media has a solid place, a good place, a valuable place, but that does not replace what you get when you have a human being talking to you.”

For people just entering the field, Tessa has more basic advice. “Figure out ‘why theatre?’ That’s a very basic and elementary question, and also sometimes very hard for people to answer.

You need to be able to answer it...because the answer to that question determines all that follows.” Perhaps most importantly, we need to ask whether the answer to “why theatre?” lines up with our own passions. “If it does,” she says, “then go for it and just do it!”

What about the future? To be sure, Tessa has concerns about the future of the field. Too often, she says, museum theatre programs are seen as add-ons—not central to the work a museum does—and this makes them vulnerable to elimination. This is in spite of clear evidence that museum theatre is a proven means of interpretation. And yet for every program eliminated, new ones seem to start. She is encouraged that the museum field as a whole has come to the “realization that storytelling and engaging people emotionally is a very important factor in the success of an exhibit.”

As for Tessa personally, is she really retired? “I hope not!” she says. “I would dearly love to keep my hand in somehow.” She hopes to continue to consult, direct, and to help museum theatre programs flourish. She can be reached at tessa.bridal@icloud.com.

Four Fundamental Questions for Starting a Zoo Theater Program

By Dave McLellan, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

first presented at the AZA Mid-Year Conference, Memphis, TN March 2014

When I receive inquiries from those wanting to start a theater program, it seems the big question is always the cost. Ultimately, one wants to know how expensive it will be. And that makes sense because as administrators we are always thinking about the bottom line. But theater is an art form that can be performed on almost any budget. Below I list four suggested questions you should answer before determining if theater fits your budget.

Question #1) Where will your shows be performed?

The grounds or buildings of your institution are unique and no one knows them better than you. Theater can be performed anywhere that an actor can be observed by an audience. However, some places are more effective, and some carry larger price tags. When thinking about possible locations, here are some factors to consider:

- 1) How large is your performance area?
- 2) How big is the audience area?
- 3) Is the audience sitting and comfortable, or are they standing?
- 4) Is it indoors or outdoors? If outdoors, is shade available?

These questions may seem very simple, but different answers could have a major impact on the content and budget. Our program in Milwaukee offers two performance styles. One is to put on a show in an outdoor amphitheater seating up to 400 audience members with a 500 square-foot stage. The other is to perform in front of an exhibit for 10-15 audience members with a “performance area” of about 10 square feet. It is obvious that the amphitheater performances demand much more upfront investment. Each performance space will have different requirements, but size and audience configurations are the most significant variables. Zoos and aquariums around the country have delivered theater programs in a wide variety of spaces. Once you know the space in your institution that best meets your goals, you will have a better sense of what the budget should be.

Question #2) Who do you want to watch your shows?

Understanding your audience is one of the core values of teaching as well as performing. The obvious distinction to determine is the intended audience age range. A program developed for two-year-olds will be vastly different from one for fifth graders. But other nuances to consider will revolve around the type of visit your audience is having. A group of students on a field trip is very different from an audience filled with family groups. While the differences might not change the cost of the program, it will greatly impact the content. The type of theater you want will inform your decisions for who should write and perform the show.

Question #3) What other programs are being offered?

If you want your theater program to be consistent with other programs in your institution, it is important to evaluate who is developing and executing those programs and their level of experience. For example, if other programs are developed by professional curators with a graduate degree and delivered by professional presenters with an undergraduate degree, then you will want to find a similar amount of theater experience in those who are selected to develop and perform the theater programming. If, on the other hand, other programs in your institution are developed and presented by volunteers and/or students, then it is reasonable to have your theater program developed and performed by volunteers/students.

Another factor to consider is how the theater program will interact with other programs or events. If stage space is being shared, then it is important to consider the logistics of setting up and taking down each program. An example from our zoo in Milwaukee is that our theater program shares a stage with a Birds of Prey Show. To adapt to the birds’ needs, we need to fully remove all of our sets, costumes, and props after each performance so that our equipment doesn’t scare the birds during their time on stage. This logistical challenge, mixed with the size of our stage, has a significant impact on our budget. We also have to adjust our show times to other programs being offered around the Zoo so as to minimize timing conflicts.

Question #4) Who should you call for help when making plans?

A great place to start is the International Museum Theater Alliance (IMTAL). Placing theater in an informal learning institution is an art unto itself. There are many organizations around the country, including zoos and aquariums, running successful theater programs. IMTAL hosts a national conference each year, which is a great opportunity to learn more about other programs. As you begin to explore these fundamental questions, seek out institutions that have similar parameters. They will have the best perspective to set you on the best path forward. For more information on IMTAL, please visit the website at www.imtal-us.org and click the “Americas” link.

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Announcements & Calls for Submissions & Auditions

Conferences, Workshops, and Events

Anza-Borrego Writing Retreat

Feb. 8–13, 2015

<http://www.theabf.org/retreat>

A week-long writers' retreat in Borrego Springs, California offering time to write and reflect in the vast and inspiring landscapes of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park (about 2 hours east of San Diego). 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.

Museums Advocacy Day

Feb. 23–24, 2015

<http://aam-us.org/>

Join AAM in DC on Feb. 23-24 and help make the case that museums are essential—as education providers and economic drivers—in every community.

AZA Mid-Year Conference

March 19–21

Columbia, SC

<https://www.aza.org/midyearmeeting/>

Hosted by Riverbanks Zoo and Garden

AAM annual conference and expo

April 26–29, 2015

Atlanta, GA

<http://aam-us.org/events/annual-meeting>

Remember to sign up for the IMTAL luncheon, too!

National Association for Interpretation International Conference

May 3–7, 2015

Montréal, Québec, Canada

<http://interpnet.com>

Crossing Bridges: IMTAL World Congress Conference

September 10–13, 2015

Hollviken, Sweden

IMTAL's Global Conference 2015 will be held at the FOTEVIKEN VIKING MUSEUM.

"Crossing Bridges" is a reference to the amazing bridge that links Copenhagen and Malmo—over which most conference participants will cross en route to Foteviken. The conference will feature international keynote speakers, workshops, and panels of speakers dealing with the theory and practice of museum theatre and live interpretation, as well as visits to local museums and historic sites. Having already built many of the bridges that link theatre, museums, historic sites, research, and practice, now we need to explore the routes across them, and in the context of rapid changes in the economy and ecology of museums and cultural policy. Call for session proposals will be available early 2015. Keep up to date with announcements and info at these sites:

<http://www.imtal-europe.net/events/2015-09-10/imtal-global-conference-2015.html>

http://imtal-us.org/conference_2015

<http://www.fotevikensmuseum.se/d/en/home>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/212828592103912/>

AZA Annual Conference

September 17–21.

Salt Lake City, UT

<https://www.aza.org/annualconference/>

Hosted by Hogle Zoo

National Association for Interpretation

November 10–14, 2015

Virginia Beach, VA

<http://interpnet.com>

Grants, Awards, Calls for Submissions

Grant funding initiative to celebrate the arts and national parks

deadlines Feb. 19, 2015 and July 23, 2015

"Imagine Your Parks" is a new grant initiative created as a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Park Service to celebrate the intersections between the two agencies in honor of the NEA's 50th anniversary in 2015 and the National Park Service's centennial in 2016. Part of the NEA's Art Works category, "Imagine Your Parks" will support art projects that encourage the creation of and greater public engagement with art around the National Park System. Deadlines are February 19, 2015 for projects beginning no earlier than January 1, 2016, and July 23, 2015, for projects beginning no earlier than June 1, 2016. NEA guidelines with further details will be available at www.arts.gov before the end of the year. Email tighet@arts.gov with questions.

Call for submissions: Jon Lipsky Award for Playwriting Excellence

DEADLINE: Jan. 31, 2015. Info and guidelines: <http://imtal-us.org/lipsky-award>

Call for nominations: IMTY Award

DEADLINE: April 1, 2015. Info and guidelines: <http://imtal-us.org/IMTY-award>

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 (.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 publications@imtal-us.org **no later than March 20, 2014**. *(It doesn't have to be perfect; it just needs to be reasonably coherent. If we have questions, we'll contact you.)*



IMTAL Board of Directors—Note new email addresses!

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S. Xavier Carnegie, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington, DC

Cat Chiappa, Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey, CA

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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://imtal-us.org/home>, or contact a board member via email.

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