

This Is So Fun!

Many of us in our institutions spend a lot of good time and effort planning very engaging educational programming for our visitors—but how often do we translate that into our staff, into community building and in training?

That’s the question Amy Bartow-Melia, National Museum of American History (NMAH), asked to kick off the panel presentation and mini-workshop, *This Is So Fun!* at the 2013 AAM conference.

Panelists and IMTAL members Susan Evans (NMAH), Heather Barnes (Museum of Science & Industry), and Doug Coler (Discovery Place) talked briefly about the ways they use educational and theatrical techniques to energize and inspire staff, bridge communication divides, and kick creativity and innovation up a notch or three. With a bit of background under our belts, Heather guided the audience through several improv exercises, including “Thank you” and “What Are You Doing?” (see membership benefit on page 3).

Because the Smithsonian’s size and structure results in many “silos” that make it hard for different sections to connect, Susan and Amy created an ongoing workshop series—end-of-the-workday events—as a way to bring creative people together and “continue the conversation.” They try to hold these in unlikely locations; sometimes they have a guest speaker, and they’re usually sponsored by a brewery. (Susan and Amy quickly point out that the “beer time” isn’t about drinking; it’s about having informal, unstructured



time.) As of May 2013, there have been five workshops: *Finding Your Passion*, *Creative Problem Solving*, *Constraints and Collaboration*, *Leadership and Jazz*, and *Calm, Cool, Collected*. Susan notes that the workshops are hard because they’re no one’s “official” job—but they’re necessary, because “creative people like creative stuff”—and as a result, they’re energized and motivated.

Improv at AAM

At the Museum of Science and Industry, Heather begins each day with a 20-minute meeting that includes an improv or creative team-building activity. The activities are excellent training, especially since MSI has moved away from rigid scripts to using script outlines, where presenters speak in their own style while still communicating the relevant

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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://www.imtal.org>, or contact a board member via email.

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President's Report

I'm thrilled to be writing my first presidential IMTAL column. There is not a better group of people and work I would rather represent and support. Thank you for having me, and I look forward to seeing you in October at the IMTAL conference in Washington, D.C.—and don't miss the pre-conference tour day in Baltimore. You can register for both events at www.imtal.org. Isn't it classy to start with a plug for a conference registration? Agreed.

A word, or more accurately, words, from your new president

This piece, however, is dedicated to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conference, but have no fear, I will find a way to plug our IMTAL conference again. The AAM meeting's theme, "The Power of Story," was a perfect fit for our IMTAL mission, and our members met that opportunity.

Here are just some of the impressive highlights from our IMTAL members:

- ◆ The "Stoop Storytelling" event was a late night showcase of tales of favorite artifacts and precious mementos. Both Judy Fort Brennehan, our current Publications Officer, and Simone Mortan, former IMTAL president, stepped up to the microphone and told beautifully touching

stories.

- ◆ Our IMTAL luncheon had the highest attendance ever and one of the tastier meals, too. Thank you to all who attended.
 - ◆ During the luncheon, the IMTY award was presented to Judy Gradwohl of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. For more on Judy and the work that led to this well-deserved reward, check out page 6 of this issue.
 - ◆ The IMTAL sessions were so well attended that many reached capacity and had to turn people away. These successful programs were led by the following IMTAL members:
 - » *Storytelling from Page to Stage: An Oral History Community Project*. To learn more, contact Harriet Lynn, Artistic Director, Heritage Theatre Artists' Consortium (hlynn@umbc.edu);
 - » *Stories Alive: The Power of Theater in Conservation Education*. To learn more contact Jillian Finkle, Providence Children's Museum (jill_finkle@yahoo.com);
 - » This Is So Fun! Creating Staff Community by Fostering Creativity. To learn more contact Susan Evans, National Museum of American History (EvansSN@si.edu).
 - ◆ The Museum Theatre Showcase, organized by Cat Chiappa, was a huge hit. The performances highlighted the diversity of our work and provided a great example of the professionalism of our field. Thank you to the following institutions and performers for representing our field so well:
 - » Clayton Faits, Museum Of Science and Industry
 - » Elizabeth Pickard, Missouri Historical Society
 - » S. Xavier Carnegie, National Museum of American History
 - » Holly Walter Kerby, Science Fusion Theatre
- Your devoted board meets monthly by phone and twice annually in person—AAM being one of the latter occasions. (The other in-person board meeting is held in conjunction with the IMTAL conference—this year, our global conference, in October in Washington D.C.—I told you I'd plug the conference again!) The meetings are always fruitful and fun, and



VP Elizabeth Pickard recruits at Marketplace of Ideas

we accomplish a lot—it's always “business time” with the IMTAL board. A few points of interest from the May meeting:

- ◆ Our new vice president, Elizabeth Pickard, is taking the lead on our playwriting award. Details to come.
- ◆ After several years of hard work, the finished IMTAL “Best Practices” document is now available on the website.
- ◆ Thanks to the amazing Heather Barnes and Rebecca Colon from the Museum of Science and Industry for providing improv exercises. They are now available on our web page. (More on improv: see below.)

Of course, your board has a long agenda of improvements, action items, and fun laid ahead for the IMTAL New Year. If you want to know more,

check the members section of the IMTAL website (imtal.org/home) or send one of us an email.

And speaking of fun, remember to register for the IMTAL conference at imtal.org. Do it now; I'll wait. Be sure to register for both the conference and the preconference museum theatre tour—two different buttons, with their own registrations and payments.

Thank you for your membership, support and, most importantly, the work that you do at your institution that makes IMTAL such a wonderful organization.

Stephanie Long

Science Museum of Minnesota,
IMTAL President

According to a study by Ivey and Bixler published in the June 2013 issue of *Journal of Interpretation Research*, the five most important communication skills for entry-level interpretive naturalists are “**improvisational skills**, understanding how children of different ages learn, ability to read an audience, good voice, and ability to write lesson plans/program outlines.”

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educational points. The activities also inspire and motivate staff, which in turn enables staff to inspire and motivate visitors.

Discovery Place staff members are spread out over four museums scattered in and near Charlotte, NC. With their actors and presenters, Doug uses many of the same improv techniques as Heather. For staff who don't interact directly with guests, from group sales to those in IT, accounting, and custodial, Discovery Place has a 6-day professional development program, *Innovation Behaviors*, to provide a similar training experience. Innovation is always a good thing—but (citing examples of New Coke and Disco), Doug notes, “We just don't know how it will turn out!” Examples of exercises done in the workshop include giving small groups an ordinary object and seeing how many different uses they can generate in 60 seconds; and giving groups flat-pack furniture kits (without instructions, with parts removed/added, or with another kit added in). Later in the week, the group is given the same exercise, but now must accomplish the task without speaking. ☪

Membership benefit: IMPROV for IMTAL

Detailed instructions—including advice for how to lead improv exercises at your institution—are available in the Members Only section of the IMTAL website. (Log in, then select “Resources” and “Improv Tools”).

Start the Conference

with the Star-Spangled Museum Theatre Tour!

IMTAL Pre-Conference Star Spangled Museum Theatre Tour

Sunday, October 6, 2013—registration & payment deadline September 10, 2013

Climb on board for the IMTAL Pre-Conference Star Spangled Museum Theatre Tour in Baltimore, MD on Sunday, October 6, 2013. Plan on a full day of adventure, history and fun as you are escorted by bus to two historic museums and one national landmark site. This one day round-trip excursion from the Holiday Inn Rosslyn @ Key Bridge Hotel in Arlington, VA to Baltimore, MD is only \$99 and includes breakfast-on-the-go and lunch. Participants will view the immigrant's experience in America at the Jewish Museum of Maryland and also commemorate the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812 at Fort McHenry and the Maryland Historical Society as well as the 150th anniversary of the Civil War at both sites. It will be a day of exciting and memorable museum theatre experiences before

1812 sailor



the 2013 IMTAL Global Conference in Washington, DC. (For more details, see below and the IMTAL website, <http://imtal.org/home>.)

Seating is limited and will be on a first-come first-serve basis. Payment of \$99 for the all day pre-conference museum theatre tour is due by September 10, 2013 using Pay Pal. To register visit: <http://imtal.org/home>.

For more information about the October 6–10, 2013 IMTAL Global Conference, please visit: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/events/imtal-2013>.

Tour Itinerary

On the morning of Sunday, October 6th, tour participants leave from the Holiday Inn-Rosslyn Key Bridge in Arlington, VA at 7:30 am and travel to Baltimore, with a second pick-up in Baltimore at 8:45 am at the Maryland Historical Society. From there participants travel to Fort McHenry, an American national historic landmark now celebrating its 200th anniversary of the War of 1812. Here the tour group will be entertained by a talented group of Baltimore School for the Arts (BSA) high school students in the production of *Torn Asunder*. This is a collaborative effort between the BSA, the Maryland Historical Society (MdHS) and the National Park Service. Participants will see original dramatic vignettes illustrating the complexity of race relations during the American Civil War. Students and faculty from the Baltimore School for the Arts (BSA) worked together to develop scripts and produce performances. The talented students developed the themes for the plays by conducting research at the Maryland Historical Society's (MdHS) library. Tour participants can also explore Fort McHenry (the original home of the same historic American flag on view at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History) and visit the exhibit before continuing to the Jewish Museum of Maryland (JMM).

At the JMM the tour group encounters one of three living history characters from the Leo V. Berger's Immigrant Trunk Program that has been entertaining and informing audiences on the plight of former Russian immigrants who came to Baltimore with nearly nothing and started afresh in this new community. Tour participants will also have time for post-performance talks with the actor, producer/director and museum staff while enjoying lunch (vegetarian and non-vegetarian choices). Participants can also visit the third oldest surviving synagogue in the country next to the museum before boarding the bus traveling to the Maryland Historical Society (MdHS).

The MdHS is a treasure trove of history founded

in 1844 and is the oldest ongoing cultural institution in Maryland. Participants will see the Maryland Historical Society Players (MDHS Players) perform living history vignettes in the War of 1812 exhibit and Civil War gallery. More behind-the-scenes conversations with actors, director, and staff will be available as well as an opportunity to view the original **Star Spangled Banner** by Francis Scott Key before the group boards the bus at 3:00 pm and is whisked back to the original hotel site in plenty of time to prepare for the opening night of the 2013 IMTAL Global Conference.

Don't miss this unique Star Spangled museum theatre day trip experience.

Terry Nicholetti as Bessie Bluefeld, Jewish Museum of Maryland, Leo V. Berger Immigrant Trunk Series



Editor's Corner

Welcome to the summer 2013 issue of *Insights!* I'm delighted to be IMTAL's new publications officer and *Insights* editor. A heartfelt thanks to Marcos Stafne for his excellent work as IMTAL and *Insights* have grown—I hope my term will do you proud.

You'll notice a few changes beginning with this issue—part of our goal to streamline the production and distribution. In each issue, you'll find a message from President Stephanie Long, an interview with notable museum theatre folks, and an article from, by, or about IMTAL people and programs, plus shorter articles as space allows. We'll highlight member benefits and upcoming conferences and events, too.

Have an idea for an article or know someone who'd make a great interview subject? Let us know! Each issue is organized by theme or topic, so check out the editorial schedule below and on the website, imtal.org, and submit your ideas, articles, and announcements to pubsofficer@imtal.org.

About me: I was introduced to IMTAL through Simone Mortan's presentation at a National Association for Interpretation conference. From the start, I've been intrigued by the way IMTAL members use performing arts to engage, teach, and inspire audiences.

I'm a writing coach, certified interpretive trainer (CIT) and guide (CIG), and award-winning author, essayist, and playwright, as well as an interpretive writer. I'm author of the forthcoming *The Art and Craft of Interpretive Writing*, and through my company, Greenfire Creative, LLC, I help people tell their stories.

Editorial schedule

Issue	Theme/topic	Submission deadline
Fall 2013	Creativity, innovation, and the future of museum theatre	Oct. 1, 2013
Winter 2013-14	Can we talk? Live performance, facilitated discussion, and "hard" stories	Jan. 1, 2014
Spring 2014	How do your programs grow? Expanding connection, community, and commitment	Apr. 1, 2014
Summer 2014	Theatre techniques for all	Jul. 1, 2014

Interview: Judith Gradwohl

2013 IMTY Award Winner

I admit to being a bit awestruck after reading the IMTY nomination form for Judith Gradwohl. Here was the person who had taken a program from nonexistence to national prominence in under nine years, found funding for it “in these economic times,” and in the process transformed both the philosophy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and the museum experience of almost a million visitors (probably more than a million by the time you read this). The person behind such powerful, ground-breaking work—We Shall Overcome, Join the Student Sit-Ins, the Time Trial of John Brown (presented at the 2012 IMTAL conference in Atlanta), and more. The person who supports museum theatre beyond her own museum, agreeing to host IMTAL’s 2013 Global Conference in October. Surely she must be an intimidating powerhouse of a super-woman.

I still suspect she’s a superhero, but during our phone interview, I discovered a personable, self-effacing, and humble woman who is incredibly proud of her staff and the work they do. It was an honor and a delight to interview Judy, and I’m looking forward to our paths crossing again.

Excerpts of the interview are below. To read the entire interview as well as her nomination, visit the IMTAL website.

Judy Fort Brenneman

JFB: *Tell me a little bit about how and why you got involved in being such an advocate for theatre in this kind of setting.*

JG: Well, Chris Wilson gets a lot of credit for this, because when we hired him, we didn’t have theatre in the museum, and he really showed us the potential of theatre through some very early work that he did.

It seems there would be significant risk—both creative risk and institutional risk—involved.

It came at an interesting time for us, because we were renovating the museum, and I saw that as an opportunity to rethink our relationship to visitors and how we implemented our programming. Before we closed, our programming had for the most part been in enclosed spaces, like a theatre or auditorium. The museum would be packed and we couldn’t even

get people to go into the auditorium for a program, or we would be serving small numbers in other ways. We set a goal of reaching, I think it was one in four of our visitors with our programming, and we decided to try moving our programming into public space. Theatre worked perfectly for that.

And I—we all—thought that theatre was a great way to address concepts inside the exhibits that were challenging, that stimulated conversation, and that showed that history is an ongoing process subject to interpretation. It allowed us to have people feel like they were there.

Our director, too, was very interested in how living history settings could be used in a history museum, and so we also looked at whether we wanted to have more demonstrations.

Mostly, Chris’s talent in writing and in casting the small plays that we were doing convinced me that that was a better way to go; it was more in line with the storytelling nature of the rest of the museum.

When we reopened, we raised money to do more museum theatre, and I made the decision to spend the entire sum in one year and to try to do it right—that was the risk! Because usually when we get money, we think how can we stretch every penny over as much time as possible.

We knew that in our reopening year, we were probably going to see the largest number of visitors, and we would have the most attention focused on us. So we said, Let’s come out of the gate fully formed. We took that risk and decided that we would have a full slate of theatre offerings from right when we reopened.

And of course, over that year, it turned out to be extremely successful, well regarded, and then we did get a three-year grant to continue it on the basis of that. It was a calculated risk, but a good one, in the end.

Have numbers continued to be high, or higher, and do you have feedback that attributes at least part of that to the theatre programs?

Well, our numbers continue to go up, which is really remarkable. And I do attribute a lot of that to the effort that we make once people are here to ensure that they have a personalized and meaningful experience. I think that’s the other thing the theatre programs do. Beyond giving a sense that you’re there, you’re experiencing history, they have a way—because of the pieces we select and the way

they're presented—of making an emotional connection with most of our visitors. Some of the programs are a lot more conversational, some of them are more theatrical, more dramatic, and some of them are really debate-style programs, so people can choose different forms. But they're all very different from the more passive experience of seeing an exhibition. Word of mouth about the plays has been phenomenal—we actually have issues where we've been presenting some of the pieces continuously for years now, but we know if we stop, we'll get outraged visitors.

How do you test a new concept when you're developing a program?

They're actually developed in a really careful, meaningful way. For example, with the John Brown program, it started with talking to visitors on the floor about what they know about John Brown, what kinds of questions they would want to ask him, what they think about him, and then taking John Brown's own writing and trying to devise answers to those questions. Then we met with scholars to evaluate the answers and identify other questions we should include in the script. We also have a facilitator who's a graduate student who knows quite a bit about the time period, and he guides the discussion as well.

It's been a bit of an adjustment for the museum in comfort level because we need to take things out on the floor before they're final, and that has not been a tradition here! I learned to trust the staff's instincts on that: when they say it's ready or it's going to work, I'll say, "Go ahead," because they really do get a good sense from their experience. So we do a similar form of review that we do for everything that goes out on the floor here, but it needs to be considerably looser than an exhibition.

It sounds like it would give you and your interpreters more flexibility to improve quality on the fly, so to speak, so that you can tune as you go, and then it becomes a tighter production and a more accurate production, as well as increasing and enhancing the interpretive aspects of it.

Absolutely. And they do evolve over time. Different actors will take the same play and own it in a different way, and Chris is always really careful to hire actors who are also educators. They're great with people in addition to being wonderful actors and singers. Because we're performing in public space, the messages need to repeat but in a way so that people stay for the whole thing. Once people wander by, it's rare that they wander off.



You're also an actor in community theatre. Was that already an interest when you started seeing how this could be applied in the museum or did it come after?

Judy Gradwohl,
2013 IMTY
winner

The acting came after. I've been on the board of a local theatre group for a number of years. My children have both participated in a Shakespeare program, the Lumina Studio Theatre in Silver Spring, Maryland, so I have been involved in those productions for a number of years. But this past fall, I started acting in a very short Gothic Halloween production. It was really fun.

Has the success of the theatre programs made it easier to do fundraising for other interpretive programs as well?

What we're finding is that once we have the core of the program funded, other parts of the museum will decide that they'd like to sponsor an actor or some type of a production, and so it does become easier once we have the critical mass funded. It's getting to the critical mass that's hard.

What other things would you like people to know about you and your work, what kinds of cool things or scary things or inspirational things would you like to add?

Oh I don't know! I'm still figuring out what I want to be when I grow up!

I want to make sure also that everybody understands how incredibly honored I am. I feel a little sheepish about it, since I'm on the managerial end. But it really is an incredible honor. Thank you!

Announcements

Workshops, Events, Calls for Submissions, Job Opportunities, and Other Cool Stuff You'll Want to Know About

Call for submissions/inquiries

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is looking for a playwright to create a roving theatrical character for an upcoming cephalopod-themed exhibit. The character will address the influence cephalopods have had on art and literature. For further information, please contact Cat Chiappa, at cchiappa@mbayaq.org, or (831) 647-2329. Deadline for inquiries is August 19, 2013.

Workshops

Sept. 20–21, 2013: *How to Create Stories that Make a Difference*, 2-day interpretive writing workshop presented by Judy Fort Brenneman and Greenfire Creative, LLC and hosted by Squam Lakes Natural Science Center, Holderness, NH. More info: <http://greenfire-creative.com/>. Register: CALL 603/968-7194.

Conferences

Oct. 6, 2013: *IMTAL Pre-Conference Star Spangled Museum Theatre Tour*—all day and only 99 bucks! Info and register: <http://imtal.org/home>

Oct. 6–10, 2013: *IMTAL GLOBAL CONFERENCE*, Washington, DC. For details and registration, begin here: <http://imtal.org/home>

NEW! IMTAL's Best Practices for Museum Theatre document is finished, finalized, approved—and available to all on the website. (<http://imtal.org/Default.aspx?pageId=1126437>)

Submission deadlines for *IMTAL Insights*

Please see imtal.org for complete submission guidelines. Send submissions to pubsofficer@imtal.org.

October 1, 2013 for the Fall 2013 issue: Creativity, innovation, & future of museum theatre

January 1, 2014 for the Winter 2013–14 issue: Can we talk? Live performance & facilitated discussion

April 1, 2014 for the Spring 2014 issue: How do your programs grow?

July 1, 2014 for the Summer 2014 issue: Theatre techniques for all

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