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# EUROPEAN

# *Insights*

Autumn 2011

INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM THEATRE ALLIANCE - EUROPE

European Affiliate

of the International Museum Theatre Alliance

## MUSEUM PUPPETRY WITH PATRICIA O'DONOVAN

by Fay Tsitou

## "Museum Pieces"

at the IMTAL-Europe AGM

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*Oh dear me! What to wear!?*

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& what's up "down under" at  
the IMTAL/IMTAP international  
conference in Australia

ENGAGING PEOPLE THROUGH PERFORMANCE

## News from the Chair

After a surprisingly sunny spring, summer in the UK is even wetter than usual. So let's hope for a warm and dry autumn when we meet for the AGM, Mini-conference and Networking Weekend in Bristol in October.

The current financial climate is challenging, and the latest crop of blockbuster new museums in Liverpool, Glasgow, Bristol and Cardiff may well be the last for a while. It may be an opportune moment to remind everyone that the most economical (and potentially most effective) way to refresh a site or exhibition is by changing the way it is interpreted, by real people, in real time. Hence the title of our AGM this year is REVITALISE! More details of the myriad events that this fantastic weekend offers later on.

Your board members have been busy. While I have been opening M Shed and graduating from my seemingly everlasting PhD, Emily has been editing this wonderful edition of Insights and Chris has been surveying the members. Also, our attempts to join the digital revolution continue. Bjorn will shortly be establishing IMTAL's presence on social media and video streams, and by now you will have received your annual subscription invoices via email from Lara. This has the new option of paying by Paypal, which we will also be making available for conference bookings. Although we lose a small fee to Paypal, it saves much time chasing payments and most people seem to have found it convenient. For those who don't, the old methods of payment still stand (cheque, bank transfer etc).

Whichever payment method you choose, we hope that you agree IMTAL membership is of increasing value in an environment where permanent posts are being reduced, workplace training is being cut, and networks of supportive peers and mentors are increasingly necessary. IMTAL is your organisation, and it will only survive and thrive if the membership contribute to what it can offer.

At the next AGM Lynne Ashton will be standing down. We thank her for all her sterling work and for bringing her experience to bear, particularly on conference organisation, and more recently as membership secretary. Others among the longest serving board members will also have to either resign or stand for re-election as the constitution demands it, and not all may choose to continue.

We therefore need members to come forward and stand for the board. All board posts are voluntary, although pre-agreed out of pocket expenses are reimbursed. The roles are decided according to the strengths and interests of the individuals, but with Lynne standing down, we know we will need a new membership secretary. It would also be good to have more active representatives outside the UK, and from institutions. And if anyone is willing to take on the Chair, I will happily step aside. So if you are interested, please contact [board@imtall-europe.org](mailto:board@imtall-europe.org) for further information.

I look forward to seeing you in Bristol in October and, until then, have a great summer.

All best wishes  
Dr Anna Farthing  
IMTAL Chair

**We are listening & welcome members ideas, especially if they come with offers of help to get them off the ground!**

## Editor's Note

Hi everyone! Hope you're all well and the work bountiful. Thanks to Fay (and Patricia), Chris, Lynne, Janet, Anna and Patrick (all the way over in Melbourne) for your contributions this month. Please do consider sharing your experiences with other members of IMTAL-Europe. Or maybe you've been on an interesting training course or conference... We'd love to hear from you. I can be reached at [board@imtal-europe.com](mailto:board@imtal-europe.com)

**See you in Bristol for a great weekend!**

*Emily*

## *Oh dear me! What to wear?*

*by Lynne Ashton*

We have a story and we have the setting, the presenters, the actors - but what should they wear?!

**Who are they?**

**What is their status?**

**What are they doing?**

**What kind of cloth was available?**

**What are the shoes like?**

We have found over the years that the costumes are vital to the process of engaging the public. They make an instant visual link to the period and a good costume can immediately denote status and position.

The Guernsey History in Action Company started with a story set in the 1860s. We engaged the help of our local expert on period costume and borrowed an example of a dress from that period in the National Trust of Guernsey's collection. A willing seamstress studied its construction and we sourced material that gave the effect we needed.

15 years later this dress is still in action! Gradually, with the help of another knowledgeable enthusiast, several volunteers and a professional costumier (when we could afford her), we have built up a wardrobe of 50 or more outfits relating to local stories from Pre-History to the 1950s.

I am only the Chair of the Company and not its resident costume expert but my personal observations for a 10 point guide to getting costume right goes something like this:

1. Make sure you have an 'expert' on your team- it may be a hobby of theirs but they must care about detail and be willing to research carefully.
  2. Be clear about the status and position of your character.
- A high status character will be more fashionable than a lower status character- and if you were doing manual work- you needed to be practical!
3. Never use materials that scream modern fabric.
  4. Know your colours - medieval peasants did not wear shocking pink.



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## *Oh dear me! What to wear? cont.*

5. Uniforms must be accurate- spend money on professionals for these.
6. Professionally made costumes can often be so beautifully cut that people of several shapes and sizes can wear them - a good investment if you need to lend/ hire them out or change the cast.
7. Make a collection of period patterns - some of our Regency Dancers made their own dresses.
8. Keep a stock of stockings, caps, drawstring muslin or cotton blouses and shirts, long skirts and buckles.
9. Calico, linen, woollen cloth and bits of lace, buttons and jewellery that has a period look are store cupboard essentials.
10. Source 'the look' from second hand clothes or materials but make sure an expert gives you an honest appraisal!

We have also sourced costumes made to complement an exhibition or provide 'Hands On' activities. Others have been loaned or bought from the local Amateur Dramatic Society who do not require them on a regular basis. These are useful for general events and the occasional crowd scenes. However, we believe that regularly performed presentations should have dedicated costumes specific to the character.

Our costumes are managed by a group of volunteers but it is difficult to ensure that the right parts stay together and the accessories do not go astray. Label each element with the character and the period it is designed for and provide adequate storage and dust covers.

Good quality costumes will be admired and appreciated. We have been able to raise sponsorship as well as support from the local authority as a result of the quality work done by our costumiers.

**Lynne Ashton**



Not Lynne Ashton but David Mosley!

## *A step-by-step guide* by Janet Hull

Considering making a  
re-enactment costume for the  
first time?

Have a go at following these 10  
easy steps and enjoy the  
experience!



& this isn't  
Janet!

1. If this is your first attempt, keep it simple - no frills or gathers. Choose a style that has a flat front and back and a plain sleeve. The garment you make first will be for someone of very little or no wealth. Don't bother too much with a design at this stage just look for the correct style and period.
2. Look for an historical pattern. Your local library could help with these books: *Patterns of Fashion* by Janet Arnold; *The Tudor Tailor* by Ninya Mikhaila and Jane Malcom-Davies; *The Cut of Mens Clothes* by Norah Waugh; or *Period Costumes for Stage and Screen* by Jean Hunniset. All of these books have patterns that are easy to scale up with a 1inch grid and paper. Choose a doublet or dress bodice for your first garment.



3. Cut your full scale pattern out in paper and draw around each piece onto medium weight calico. Don't forget you will need two of each piece. Add at least 1inch seam allowance all the way round each piece before you cut out as you will need this to sew your garment together or alter its size. Cut out the calico carefully and mark what each piece is if necessary; front, back or sleeve, for example.
4. You don't need a fancy machine to sew your calico toile together, just a needle and thread will do and it will make it look more authentic. Match the lines you have drawn on the shoulders and side seams with pins leaving your seam allowance to the outside. Hold it up and check the shape and seams all go to the outside. Now sew along the seam lines with small stitches.
5. If you have sleeves, sew the long underarm seam together but don't sew it on to the body pieces yet. Now try the body on yourself or the person you are making it for. Do this with the seam allowances on the outside so you can see them. This is the way they will be on the finished garment. Pull the sleeve on over the arm and twist it until it looks correct and the seam of the sleeve is down under the arm or at the back. Pin and sew the sleeve on in the same way. If you struggle with this then leave the sleeve separate as they were often laced on later and it makes the garment easier to wear.
6. Now if it all needs to be a bit bigger try sewing your 1" seam allowance at  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch and re-fit. If it needs to be smaller try sewing your 1" seam allowance at  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch or just do it on the side seams. Re-fit until you have the right size. It is so much easier to see what needs doing on a garment when it is on a person or a mannequin.
7. Choose a wool fabric for your first simple garment. This could be an old wool blanket. If its not the right colour, dye it first. Alternatively, you can purchase cloth from a wool supplier or fabric shop. As you improve you will be able to source the exact wools and colours if you are intending to make military costumes but for now we are keeping it simple. When making a garment by hand, stitching wool is best as the stitches will hide themselves in the fabric quite well. This has happened for 1000s of years.
8. Cut out and make up the wool in the same way as the calico, with any alterations to the seam allowance that you made, and you should have two garments. Next put the calico garment on to the person with the seam allowances on the outside where you can see them. Now put the wool garment over the top with the seam allowances to the inside where they are hidden. Pin the two together around all the edges and take off. Use small stitches and sew around all the edges tucking the raw edges between the calico and the wool. You may have to do a bit of snipping with scissors to make it go flatter inside. If you did not sew the sleeve on before then make up the sleeve in the same way, trapping the seam allowances in the middle and sew around the top where it will lace to the body. Sew around the hem to finish it off.
9. Now for fastenings. There are two to choose from on your first garment. Get the local cobbler to put some metal eyelets down the centre fronts or buy an eyelet kit and do it yourself. Then sew over the tops of the eyelets so they are covered in thread and better attached to the fabric. Use long boot laces covered in wax or thin strips of leather to lace up front. Even easier is to just sew strips of leather to the front edges and tie them together to fasten up. Use the same method to attach your separate sleeves.

This is a very basic method of making for your first garment. Keep making more and you will add a skill each time until you start to add the frills, gathers, trims, buttons and buttonholes of a wealthier person. Remember you are re-enacting the making of your garment in the same way people have done for centuries.

10. Want it to look more authentic? Make it look worn. Slightly wet your garment and rub with a cheese grater to distress the fabric at the places where it would be worn out. Also use a diluted-down permanent brown fabric ink and sponge onto the distressed areas and around the neck for authentic sweat stains.

You may finish up with a few of these pauper style costumes before you make your King Henry!

Written by **Janet Hull**

Costume Maker and Tutor, North Yorkshire

(Please contact IMTAL if you would like to get in touch with Janet.)

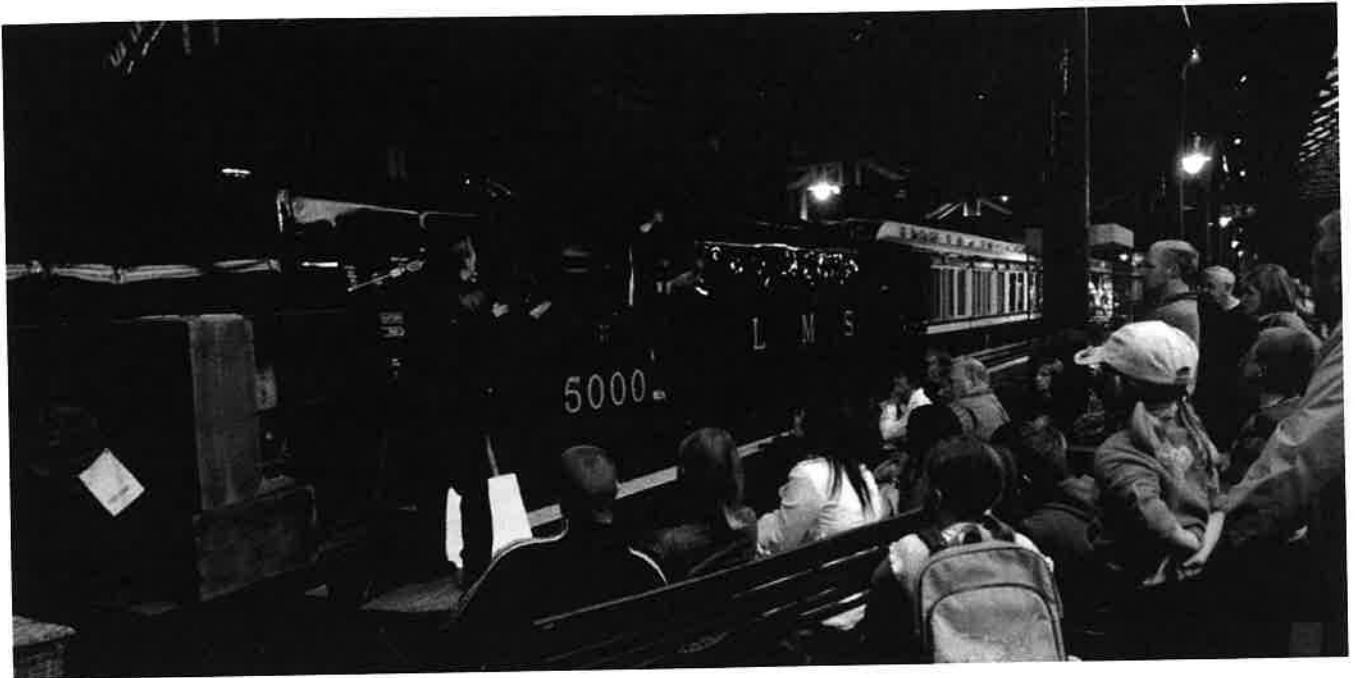


# PERFORMANCE

## Audience Responses

### Empathy and Personal Resonance

by Chris Cade



Some audience members have always felt able to stay behind and verbally share their observations and often their own stories with Platform 4 Theatre at the National Railway Museum. The provision of a 'Comments/Feedback' book made available at the end of performances has prompted permanent responses from those moved to record them.

*Beyond the Call of Duty* is the Museum Theatre programme which receives the most feedback though not necessarily the greatest numbers in its audiences. It was written and devised by Chris Ford to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic accident which took the lives of engine driver John Axon and guard John Creamer. Chris attended the unveiling of a plaque at Chapel-en-le-Frith Station on the Manchester to Buxton line on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2007. He took some black and white photographs of the station and of the relatives present. He also spoke to those who had witnessed the events of that catastrophic day half a century before and who gave evidence at the Inquiry held on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1957. That is where the play is set.

Elaine Parker plays a variety of roles ranging from foreman, fitter, fireman and signaller to the chairman of the Inquiry and a chaplain, each with a change of hat/coat. She only plays one woman; Gladys Axon. This is a poignant non-speaking part when she appears as a widow clasping the George Cross posthumously awarded to her husband. The actual medal is part of the national collection and is displayed in Station Hall in a time-lined showcase.

Audience members are invited to view it after the performance which ends fittingly with a few moments silence, always meticulously observed.

The play is performed in Station Hall next to the Black Five Locomotive (5000), the nearest in class of the exhibited engines to the actual 8F of the fateful day. A trolley acts as a platform for the Inquiry which has in place a signal box block instrument. Its bell provides the only sound effect used during the play. A blackboard details the route of the last journey made by John Axon on 48188 from Buxton, up a gradient of 1 in 66 to the summit at Bibbington Sidings and then down a steep incline into Chapel-en-le-Frith. It also shows the make-up, length and weight of the train. The easel then doubles as a stand for large black and white photographs which illustrate the explained workings of the 8F footplate and the practice of pinning down brakes on a loose coupled freight train. Images of the devastation at Chapel-en-le-Frith Station in 1957 and of the commemoration in 2007 are also shown towards the end of the performance.

Actor/interpreter Chris Cade plays John Axon throughout. He receives details of his 'nice steady duty' from the foreman. This is the only time the two actors have a dialogue face to face. Apart from this introduction and a 'beyond the grave' appearance at the end, Axon appears only on the footplate of the engine. His 'scenes' are juxtaposed with those of the Inquiry.

After a routine 11.05 departure from Buxton, events unfold at a swift pace. The steam brake on Axon's engine gives way. With 650 tons behind him and his fireman, Ron Scanlon, unable to pin down brakes on the passing wagons of the train when told by his driver to jump, the engine picks up speed and hurtles towards disaster. Axon bravely hangs on to the whistle in an attempt to warn fellow railway servants of the impending doom whilst his cab fills with scalding steam at 250 pounds pressure. There is another freight train running ahead on the same track. As the chairman observes:

*'If John Creamer did look out of his guard's van..... he would have known it was all over.'*

The crash takes place at 11.21.

None of this action can actually be seen by the audience, except through the descriptions offered by the increasingly animated witnesses at the Inquiry and by the simultaneous running commentary and reactions on the footplate, as if in real time, by John Axon. Together they relive the inexorable tragedy. The action cuts swiftly and continuously from left to right. Such dramatic storytelling demands a reciprocal leap of imagination by the audience. They feel the panic and the helplessness demonstrated by the driver and the witnesses, having learned that the engine is out of control and is being pushed down the gradient by its own weight. They know what is going to happen. The chairman provides the cold clinical detachment as he examines the evidence.

As Elaine explains, out of role after the play has finished, the telling of the tale has taken marginally longer than the tragic train journey itself; twenty minutes rather than the actual sixteen.



The chaplain, at the unveiling of the plaque, asks for a few moments silence

27/4/2011 Thankyou for a very moving telling of the story, we all see these plaques and ~~now~~ often never know the Heroes behind them. He made this visit very special. Shirley Henderson

27.4.2011 I have been to the station and have seen the Plaque but never really understood the story until today. He was very brave. Sue Hartley.

An extract from Platform 4 Theatre's Comments/Feedback book

How do audience members describe what they have witnessed? Terms used for the experience by those who gave written feedback are: 'account', 'demonstration', 'display', 'drama', 'exhibition', 'interpretation', 'performance', 'play', 'production', 're-creation', 're-enactment', 'show', 'story', 'tale' and..... 'theatre'. Many describe Platform 4 Theatre's programmes, generally, as 'bringing the museum/engine/scene to life', of them being, 'educational', 'engaging', 'enjoyable', 'entertaining', 'exciting', 'fun', 'informative' and 'interesting'. However, it is individual expressions of empathy and personal resonance that remind us that Museum Theatre can certainly trigger responses in the affective domain as well as the cognitive. People can feel the truthfulness as well as accommodate some of the detail.

Platform 4 Theatre has always prided itself on including the whole spectrum of visitors who choose to become audience members, from expert to novice. Well-researched and crafted Museum Theatre, delivered with integrity, can evoke an emotional response. Only a small percentage of audience members wish to share their reaction, but for those moved to put pen to paper it is satisfying to read how many have been touched by the human story encapsulated within the railway episode.

Despite the necessary technical detail, the play also reveals John Axon's humanity; his family commitments and his daily routine alongside his professional pride and his actions in exceptional circumstances which are *Beyond the Call of Duty*. This allows empathy to be expressed by some audience members who unashamedly admit that the performance 'brought a tear to my eye,' 'a lump to my throat,' or 'a shiver down my spine,' because they can

relate to the man and his wife. One visitor described the experience as *'very powerful and emotional - a slice of railway history and humanity.'*

As an interpretive tool, Museum Theatre gives information and also gives a real context for artefacts from the collection. However, a brushstroke or two of personality breathes life into statistics and invites identification with the characters and their circumstances. As another contributor put it: *'what a superb piece of theatre/information giving. We were really taken there.'*

Some National Railway Museum visitors are there under sufferance. One woman wrote: *'I'm not interested in trains, but for 20 minutes I was absolutely engrossed.'* Her partner was perhaps a railway enthusiast. We have the task of meeting his expectations, too, and the children, who may be expecting *Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends*. Good Museum Theatre works on different levels simultaneously.

Children's comments can be easily recognised by their evolving handwriting style and often by the proud acknowledgement of their age! As we all know, a well told (and animated) story holds the attention of the youngest of listeners/observers. It can also bring out a feeling response from them:

*'Driver John was very brave. He gets my sympathy. - Elizabeth age 8.'*

*'It was a good true story, but dangerous. - Joel age 7.'*

It is an honour but also a great responsibility to portray the lives of others, especially when the events surrounding these real people are within living memory. The life of a courageous railwayman who is admired by his colleagues and is mourned by his wife, is recorded for posterity in just a few words on a memorial which can never quite do him or the extraordinary circumstances justice.

One visitor wrote: *'Thank you for a very moving telling of the story, we all see these plaques and often never know the Heroics behind them. Has made this visit very special.'*

As actor/ interpreters we never really know what an audience member brings in terms of their own personal experience to the sharing that a Museum Theatre programme offers. The play may have significant personal resonance for them in more ways than we can anticipate.

Perhaps they have even seen the actual objects we refer to; in this case, the plaque or the George Cross: *'I have been to the station and have seen the plaque but never really understood the story until today.'*

*'I have met John Axon's granddaughter and held the George Cross itself at Loughborough, my home town.'*

Perhaps they are former railway workers: *'The day John Axon took his last heroic ride I was a fireman on a Class 8 on the Hope Valley line. This small play brought those far off footplate days back to mind more than anything I have experienced since.'*

For those who know the area and its geography, a runaway train can be easily imagined: *'We live near*



Widow Gladys Axon holds the George Cross as John, beyond the grave, explains that he had to do his duty

*Chapel-en-le Frith and could see the track in our minds.'*

*'Very emotive for someone that was involved and grew up in Chapel. Thank you for bringing it all back.'*

*'I thought this absolutely excellent; a good story very well dramatized and performed. Not too much technical detail, but enough to allow people to imagine what happened. At the time I was 50 miles away busy revising for 'O' levels (in a railway family), so while I knew about it, only now have I learned the details.'*

Perhaps they have recently suffered their own bereavement: *'We came to the Black Five to remember our dearly loved and recently departed husband/father/grandfather. Black fives were his passion. We were also given the opportunity to remember two brave railwaymen, thanks to your wonderfully moving play.'*

Perhaps they have even met someone who features in the real life story: *'I have worked for fireman Ron Scanlon at his home. He told me the story of how the accident happened. The story still upsets him deeply and he struggles to tell it. For his bravery he showed me a certificate he received from British Rail and he told me he got £50 for his trouble. Ron is still alive and living in a nursing home in Stockport and is one of the nicest people you would want to meet.'*

Finally, it is gratifying to have filled in the gaps of someone's partial understanding of an event from recent history, by playing it out: *'I have read about this accident but it was a fantastic opportunity to see by actions how it happened.'*

Some audience members have gone away better informed about railway operations and some have been moved by a stationary exhibition enlivened by Museum Theatre. The reaction of the majority, apart from warm applause, we will never know. However, Elaine's purchase of a lined A4 book from a stationery stall has been a godsend and provides NRM with some qualitative as well as the usual quantitative evaluation of Platform 4 Theatre's work.

**Chris Cade** is a founder member of **Platform 4 Theatre**, now in its 21<sup>st</sup> year, at the National Railway Museum [www.chriscade.co.uk](http://www.chriscade.co.uk)  
For details of Platform 4 Theatre's 2011 season at NRM, visit: [www.platform4theatre.org.uk](http://www.platform4theatre.org.uk) or [www.nrm.org.uk](http://www.nrm.org.uk)



# ACCESS - ALL - AREAS

Melbourne is gearing up for a really exciting

## IMTAL 7TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE 16 - 20 OCTOBER

..... The theme is Museum Theatre: Access All Areas.

The conference will explore accessing money, curators, artists, educators and venues. The conference will be held at BMW Edge (Federations Square, Melbourne Museum, State Library of Victoria, National Sports Museum, National Gallery of Victoria, Scienceworks Museum, Old Treasury Building and Sovereign Hill in Ballarat.

The conference will be a series of papers, workshops, performances and keynote addresses.



### DAY 2: AT SOVEREIGN HILL: A LIVING GOLD MUSEUM



### DAY 3: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA



### DAY 4: STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

for more information  
[www.imtalap.org](http://www.imtalap.org)

# Museum Puppetry

& Patricia O' Donovan's  
museum projects

by Fay Tsitou

*'In museums there is a kind of expectation that theatre has to be educational in the sense that it has to have a very clear message and meaning; people are very concerned with what children understand'. Patricia O'Donovan*

*(The term "museum puppetry" that I introduce in this article refers to any museum interpretation that has manipulated objects as having a character at its centre.)*

The internationally renowned Jerusalem-based puppeteer Dr. Patricia O'Donovan (she has a PhD in zoology) has collaborated extensively with museums for over ten years. The museum commissions she gets expand from puppet shows, museum demonstrations with puppets, to exhibit designing and exhibition curatorship (Science and Detective exhibition, Bloomfield Science Museum, 1997).

Apart from designing, writing and performing her own shows, the multi-talented artist designs and writes puppet plays for museum staff to perform. Also, occasionally she trains them in object/puppet manipulation, story-telling and acting to enhance their museum communication skills (how to pass the attention to the object and let it speak by itself, how to integrate demonstration/visibility of objects with verbal interpretation, how to create a space/stage for objects, how to use handling and passing objects techniques). Finally, she occasionally conducts museum workshops in sculpture, drama, masks, toy building, puppetry and puppetry in education for teachers and younger visitors.

As it is the case with many puppeteers, O'Donovan not only has an acute sense of humour but also her non-conventional understanding of the world is evident in her playful, evocative and often subversive narratives. For instance, as a parallel event to the exhibition "Heroes" (Youth Wing, Israel Museum of Jerusalem, 1998) she presented the show *Theseus and the Minotaur*, using puppets out of wooden furniture pieces joined together. It was a show about the 'grey boundaries of braveness' and the fact that 'many heroes have also a dark side'. During the open discussion at the end of the show, O'Donovan

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Patricia O'Donovan in her workshop with the Minotaur puppet from *Theseus and the Minotaur*.

attempted to further explore the other side of the Minotaur: that of the victim who could not escape his fate of being a killer. Also, she had 'planted' the same puppets in the sand at a museum's activity corner. The corner always had adult supervision trained by O'Donovan on manipulation and performance techniques. The public could act out their own heroes and invent their own stories using these puppets.

The abstractness of the constructions and the critical thinking O'Donovan's narrative aimed at preventing the project of becoming over-didactic ('illustrative'):

*I never expect children to understand everything...the meaning that you can express in words. Perhaps something touched them aesthetically or emotionally and that is enough, this is the way you approach art, or other cultures. For example, with Chinese opera, I don't understand half of what I am seeing, then I go second time and then... I go to China!*

A common dramaturgical concept in puppetry is that of a universe in miniature being controlled by a *god-like* manipulator (the puppeteer). This very idea is

straightforwardly reflected on O'Donovan's hilarious half hour open-air show *The Watermelon-Eater*. It was presented at the entrance of the Bloomfield Science Museum (2000) as part of a London-based Mechanical Cabaret Theatre exhibition with automata. The show was about the laws of physics in the service of a 'genius'.

O'Donovan collaborated with the museum's technicians to construct a massive mechanical installation where lives a lazy but clever tramp who invests enormous energy to build himself mechanical contraptions that help him meet his needs with no effort. The action starts when he comes home with his shopping: eggs, watermelon and a newspaper, and places them inside this installation. All of a sudden, he decides he wants these goods one after another, and with simple automated mechanisms these move closer to him. Lastly, he wants the watermelon. At this moment, the fruit starts rolling within the installation, jumps, and finally falls on a spot where there are four knives. The watermelon is cut by automated mechanisms just next to him and he eats it!

Occasionally, objects facilitate crowd scenes as this happens with the show *A Touch of Light* based on the biography of the inventor of the alphabet for the blind. The show was presented among other museums, in the Israel Museum and Bloomfield Science Museum in Jerusalem, more than two thousand times since 1994; it was also accepted for the educational system in France and has received prizes worldwide.

In the show there is a scene with Louis Braille's classmates. These are represented by yellow pencils and Louis Braille with a white one. O'Donovan explains:

The pencils fly in the air, and they write [during] lessons... There is a moment when the Louis figure comes close to the pencil that represents him and holds it; the image is like he is holding the white stick of blind people...

These object theatre examples fall under the larger umbrella of puppetry which has not been easy to define over the years. The complexity of the medium has given rise to a number of definitions inspired by the ideas and imagery of magic, death, theology or psychology (Williams, 2007). The definition however that better suits museum puppetry practice has been given by the American puppet theorist and practitioner Steve Tillis (1992), according to whom a puppet cannot exist unless the audience willingly believes in it. This definition not only implies that puppet theatre is a deeply popular and democratic artistic genre but also favors attractive, sophisticated constructions/manipulation and narrative. It is no surprise that, like a skilled craftsman who has developed 'material

consciousness' and whose 'intelligent', 'sensitized' hands are used to 'humanize' and 'anthropomorphize' matter (Sennett, 2009 pp. 119-178), O'Donovan stresses the idea that constructions and narrative go 'hand in hand': 'the gestural language comes together with the writing - they come together: puppets and script'.



Patricia O'Donovan is holding the Galileo puppet from the show *Five Steps to the Moon* (1991-2008, Bloomfield Science Museum).

If for humans puppet theatre is an illusion, for puppets, living in an inanimate material world such as a stage or museum gallery, is their reality. Puppets, whose intentions have to be clear and precise, are specifically tailored to do a job, favouring thus the economy of the visual. Under this perspective, puppets' strong visuals facilitate quick changes in time and place, using often a very limited amount of words to build effectively and dissipate instantly miniature worlds. Particularly during a learning activity within a museum context where time is limited, this proves to be very useful. For example, during the show *Five Steps to the Moon* (1991-2008) commissioned by the Bloomfield Science Museum for the exhibition *The Laws of Motion*, there are a number of imaginary encounters between a girl living today and great scientists of the past who she literally meets while reading a book. In one of those encounters, Copernicus' scientific revolution is condensed in the banging of a column with a plastic hammer and the sound of a glass breaking. Sound and action symbolise instantly the earth giving its place to the sun as well as the shock this theory once brought to humanity.

The strength of the medium lies in its concreteness, in the 'physical link between the signifier and the signified' (Green & Pepicello 1983: 156). The key idea becomes thus the building of a metaphor powerful enough to suspend the participants' disbelief and enhance their interaction with the museum. Once this is achieved, audience interaction and learning can be further explored and built on in any direction.

Overall, O'Donovan's varied collaborations with museums demonstrate that the learning potential of puppetry within this setting is multi-faceted and might

'involve not only visitors but also the museum staff. They also imply that museum puppetry can be divided into two main aspects: the one that explores puppet construction which is directly related to exhibit design (interactive puppet exhibits), and live interpretation which often draws its inspiration from the museum theatre field. What glues both aspects together is the museum visitors' investment (as audience or as manipulators) in the appearance of life. Museum visitors are invited here to become co-creators of an object centered narrative initiated by puppet makers or puppet performers (or trained museum staff).

O'Donovan's projects also suggest that museum puppetry doesn't constitute a unified method or technique either in puppet making, performing, or in ways of interacting with the audience. All these depend on the puppeteer's personal style, the possibilities for picturing each subject as well as on the learning strategies and limitations of each museum. Moreover, given the open-mindedness of the museum staff, a project can be enriched by the close, long term collaborations between the practitioners and the institution, and their negotiations on how to approach learning.

It takes O'Donovan, on average, a year to prepare a project while the museums' and audiences' warm responses prove the high quality of her work. Her projects are an example of what can be achieved when neither puppeteers nor museums are too-easily satisfied with cute shows, smiley puppets, or simplistic stories. Such kind of collaborations seem<sup>15</sup> to be really worth pursuing, and this not only considering the high popularity of the medium among preschoolers. Because, after all and as today's puppetry scene already hints once more in the history of this art, its target group can go far beyond that age.

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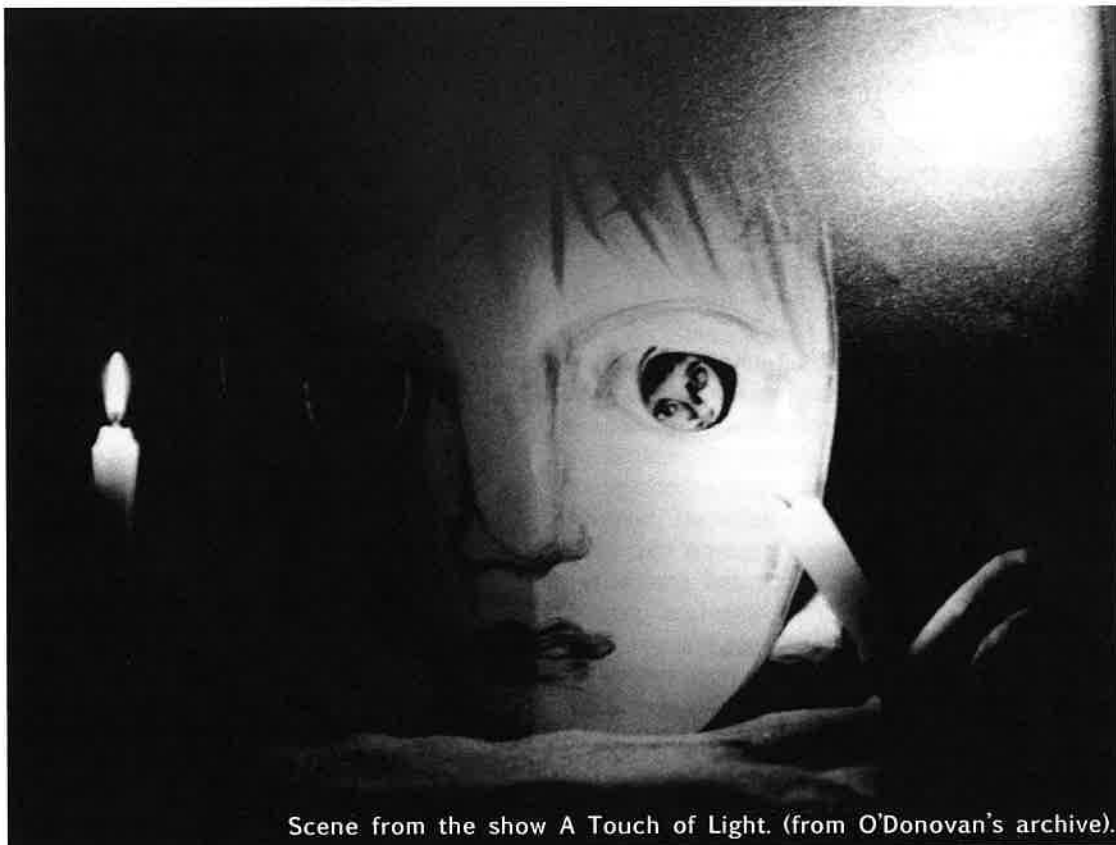
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Scene from the show *A Touch of Light*. (from O'Donovan's archive).



# REVITALISE!

**The next IMTAL AGM Mini Conference and Networking event will take place in Bristol over the weekend of 15th and 16th October 2011.**

On Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> October we will be based at M Shed, the new Museum of Bristol that opened in June. M Shed includes three galleries, Bristol Places, Bristol People and Bristol Life, a dedicated Learning Studio, and a unique collection of cranes, boats and steam trains on the harbourside.



On Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October, we will be based at Tyntesfield, a recently restored Gothic Revival country house on the outskirts of the city. Our base will be the Saw Mill Education Centre and we will have full use of the grounds. Visits to the house are free for NT members (otherwise subject to a small charge).

As both Tyntesfield and M Shed have undergone major transformations recently, the theme for the weekend will be REVITALISE! We have a wonderful programme lined up, with some excellent workshop facilitators, presenters and performers.

**We hope that delegates will leave the conference revitalized and re-energised, with a notebook full of new contacts and new ideas.**

For accommodation we recommend that delegates book the Premiere Inn on King Street, which is in the historic heart of the city, near the oldest working theatre in Britain (The Bristol Old Vic) and within walking distance of M Shed and all major attractions. Bookings can be made online, and prices vary but are in the region of 60 – 70 pounds for a room (for up to two adults and two children). Book early for the best rates.

<http://www.premierinn.com/en/checkHotel/BRIPLI/bristol-city-centre-king-street>

The weekend programme is yet to be confirmed, but sessions suggested so far.....

**Friday 14<sup>th</sup> October** – 8pm informal welcome in **Renatos**, Taverna Dell'Artista on King Street for those arriving early. Renatos is the unofficial 'green room' for the Bristol Old Vic, and is full of theatrical memorabilia. Pizza, drinks and convivial good company available.

**Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> October** – M Shed Learning Studio, Galleries and Harbourside

**Programme to include:**

Welcome coffee, lunch and afternoon tea

*What Are You Saying?* Creative Writing Workshop inspired by objects in the M Shed museum and industrial exhibits on the surrounding harbourside. This follows a successful project entitled 'Museum Pieces' performed at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery in conjunction with South West Scriptwriters earlier in the year.

*Improve Your Image* A professional photographer will advise on how best to document and market your work through digital images online and in print. Bring your publicity material for advice and feedback.

*Show and Tell* An opportunity to see performance work from accomplished live interpreters and museum theatre performers both local and from further afield, and to discuss their processes with them. To include Chris Cade performing *Brunel's Billiard Table* (see below), site specific performances from **Show of Strength** and other performers to be confirmed.



**Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> October** at M Shed cont.

*Dockside animations: The Fireboat Pyronaut* will be running trips with full spraying action.  
(Small additional charge £5/£3)

We intend to make a SKYPE link with the IMTAL/IMTAP Global conference taking place in Australia at some point during Saturday.

On Saturday evening there will be an option to join a conference dinner (at additional cost) in a local restaurant.

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October** – Tyntesfield Sawmill Education Centre and estate grounds (Entrance to the house is free for NT members or additional cost for non-members. Transport from the conference hotel to Tyntesfield will be arranged by lift share.)

**Programme to include:**

Welcome coffee, lunch and afternoon tea

**AGM for members:** Several board members are standing down, so please consider standing for election to the board of IMTAL and helping to shape it into the kind of membership organisation you want it to be. Further details on request from board@imtal.org

**What's the latest?** An open mic session and an opportunity to update on the latest conferences, academic research, practice as research and relevant publications, with opportunities to purchase books and resources direct from authors.

*Walking and Talking Tours* An opportunity to explore some inventive techniques for inventive storytelling on the move, interpreting the sights, sounds and smells of the vast and diverse Tyntesfield estate grounds.

*Other workshops by members*

This may include...

**Musings on Music** Using music to convey the message including songs, period music, recordings played on archaic devices & new commissions.

**Making Things Move** A workshop on using puppets and storytelling with object manipulation, led by Emily Capstick of Peoplescape Theatre.

**Please check the website for the latest information**

Transport will be available from 4pm to return delegates to the town centre or railway station.

Conference Fee: IMTAL Members: £95 Non-Members: £130

New members are encouraged to join in order to receive the member's rate.

Bursaries: There will be two student places at £60 for the weekend. Students will be asked to take photographs and write about the conference for the newsletter.

For further information

[www.mshed.org](http://www.mshed.org) <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-tyntesfield>

[www.southwest-scriptwriters.co.uk/](http://www.southwest-scriptwriters.co.uk/)

<http://showofstrength.org.uk/> [www.chriscade.co.uk](http://www.chriscade.co.uk)

NB: The programme is not rigid and welcomes contributions from delegates wishing to respond to the above themes. The programme may also be subject to change owing to circumstances beyond our control. Should the conference have to be cancelled, only the conference booking fee will be refunded. No responsibility can be taken for travel or accommodation costs.

## BRUNEL'S BILLIARD TABLE



Meet the engineer of The Great Western Railway, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, engaged by the merchants of Bristol to **revitalise** the fortunes of the South-Western port in competition with its North-Western rival, Liverpool. George Stephenson has built a railway between the cities of Manchester and Liverpool at a narrow gauge of four feet eight and a half inches. Brunel explains how he has travelled on it and can improve upon it. He has surveyed a route 118 miles from Bristol to London at an average gradient of 1: 1320 for a broad gauge railway at seven feet and a quarter inch. The Royal Commission of 1845 must set a standard gauge throughout the land. Can Brunel win the day? Listen to the arguments and the vision of a genius! 30 minute performance by **Chris Cade** at M.Shed adjacent to railway tracks

# OPPORTUNITY REVITALISE!

## IMTAL AGM MINI CONFERENCE AND NETWORKING EVENT M SHED AND TYNTESFIELD, BRISTOL 15TH AND 16TH OCTOBER 2011.

Please complete this form and email to **board@imtal.org.uk** Or post to Lara Muth, IMTAL Treasurer, c/o The Rayne Foundation, 100 George Street, London, W1U 8NU.

An invoice for payment will be sent to you by email.

Payment may be made online, or by cheque.

Name:

Institution:

Purchase Order reference for invoice if required:

Address:

Email:

Telephone:

Mobile:



Please underline your preferences according to the following options

Individual Member / Institutional Member / Non-Member / I would like to join IMTAL

I will book my accommodation at The Premier Inn, King Street

<http://www.premierinn.com/en/checkHotel/BRIPLI/bristol-city-centre-king-street>

I will be staying elsewhere

I will attend Renato's, La Taverna Dell'Artista, King Street on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> October

I will attend dinner at a local restaurant on Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> October

I have National Trust Membership

I have attached a proposal for the Show and Tell session

I have dietary or access requirements (please give details)

### Conference Fee:

IMTAL Members: £95

Non-Members: £130

I am a student and would like to apply for the bursary rate of £60

We are listening & welcome members ideas, especially if they come with offers of help to get them off the ground!

**NEXT EDITION** of IMTAL-European Insights will be out in December 2011. Read about...  
**The GEM conference at Norwich**  
 Sharing experiences from  
**the IMTAL-Europe Mini Conference and "Access All Areas" in Australia**  
 plus more news of performances and projects in Europe.

**Join us in Bristol for the mini-conference**



**Or in Australia?**



Thanks to the National Trust for images of Tynesfield.  
 The views expressed within are those of the individual authors

## WHY WAIT? JOIN UP NOW

Join IMTAL-Europe as an individual or institutional member to enjoy all the benefits of membership.

Membership benefits include:

- Access to the membership network for advice and support
- Reduced fees at training days and conferences
- Access to online resources
- A publicly searchable online profile with links to your own website
- Opportunity to shape IMTAL's future by voting at the AGM
- Regular newsletters with reports and reviews

You can pay by Paypal, BACS, cheque or we can send you an invoice. See the website for more information. An application form can be downloaded from the website.

Institutional membership rate: £70 or 100 Euros per year (June to May)

Individual membership rate; £30 or 35 Euros per year (June to May)

**PLEASE WRITE TO US WITH YOUR IDEAS. TELL US WHAT'S GOING ON IN YOUR AREA AND WHAT YOU'RE UP TO. SEND A LETTER OR RAISE A DEBATE...**

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[board@imtal-europe.com](mailto:board@imtal-europe.com)

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