

# Zoo and Aquarium Theater



Jillian Finkle

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## Part One: An Introduction to Zoo Theater

Theater is an effective interpretive tool for delivering conservation messages to zoo and aquarium visitors. As an entertaining method of communicating information, theater bridges the gap between education and entertainment with which zoos grapple, yet theater is often undervalued in these institutions. The recent dissolution and downsizing of several well-respected theater programs in zoos and aquariums prompted an investigation into the challenges of using theater in a zoo setting and a thorough exploration of how it can be useful in advancing the conservation education missions of zoos and aquariums.

Theater in zoos and aquariums is included under the umbrella of museum theater. “Museum theater” is a term that refers to the use of theater in institutions of informal learning, including museums, zoos, and aquariums. According to the International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL), the organization that supports professionals working with theater in museums, museum theater “involves engaging visitors in the willing suspension of disbelief – in pretend, or imagination – to enhance the educational experience that happens within a museum.”<sup>1</sup> Museum theater can include storytelling, first and third person interpretation, theatrical performances, puppetry, dance, mime, and more.

While the field of museum theater embraces all uses of theater in museums, for the sake of this paper I will refer to a “theater program” as one that is regularly occurring, and integrated into the program plan of an institution. A theater program in a museum or zoo entails more than hiring outside performers to present their own material, but instead presents plays, skits, interactive drama, or other dramatic performances that directly relate to and interpret the exhibits and collections. Throughout this paper I will use the general term “museum theater” to refer to theater in all types of museums including zoos and aquariums, and I will use the clarifying term “zoo theater” to refer to theater specifically designed for and performed in zoos and aquariums.

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<sup>1</sup> International Museum Theatre Alliance, “Key Questions,” IMTAL website. Accessed 30 March 2008 <<http://www.imtal.org/keyQuestions.php>>.

## Part Two: How We Got Where We Are

### A History of Museum Theater

In the nineteenth century, P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City "featured a Moral Lecture Room where moral plays and farces were presented, sometimes as many as twelve in one day."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Barnum "claimed credit for being the first to transform the museum lecture room into a playhouse in all but name."<sup>3</sup> While museums did not want to be associated with Barnum's less than scholarly antics, the elite museum of the past was beginning to evolve into a place for the public. One practice adopted to help the public understand the objects in the museum was the introduction of dioramas. The design of dioramas drew on the field of theatrical set design and soon became even more theater like with the addition of mannequins, which provided additional context for the objects on display.

The first known instance of true museum theater occurred at Skansen, a historical cultural center established by Artur Hazelius in Stockholm, Sweden in 1891. This outdoor museum exhibited artifacts in their cultural contexts interpreted by costumed educators and musicians.<sup>4</sup> Costumed craft demonstration and interpretation in the United States in the early twentieth century gave way to the first-person interpretation and re-enactments now referred to as "living history." In the 1950's the National Park Service opened many historic parks with live interpreters. The first museum theatre play was probably *The Pangs of Liberty* which was written by a professional playwright and performed by professional actors at Old Sturbridge Village in 1961.

With the first science museums came live demonstrations of experiments and explanations of scientific concepts. The Science Museum of Minnesota and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago were among the very first museums to explore using theater to enhance these demonstrations in the 1970's. Professional associations had now been established in the museum field, and through presentations at meetings and conferences museum theater began to spread. Now museum theater is used in all different kinds of museums all over the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Tessa Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Bridal 11.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors Through Drama (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998) 21.

## A History of Zoo Theater

In the United States, the first “zoos” began as animal shows, first of one species and later of several, that would travel to different Colonial cities and towns. Circuses with animal acts became popular in the mid-1800s. The first zoos in the United States imitated the zoological gardens in Europe which had evolved out of private collections of wild animals. While the Smithsonian was forming in the 1840s there was discussion about including a zoological garden, but The Philadelphia Zoo was the first to be established in 1874. Animal shows, such as the feeding of animals in front of groups of visitors, appear to have been included in the zoo experience since this time. It is likely that guest artists, especially musicians, were brought in to perform for visitors since this time as well.<sup>5</sup> There is no record of regular dramatic performances being used to interpret animals until late in the twentieth century.

The first integrated and consistently running theater program in a zoo was started at The Philadelphia Zoo in 1985. The Philadelphia Zoo adapted a historic animal building into an indoor educational playground called the Treehouse. Seven larger-than-life fiberglass habitats were designed as stage sets for children to role play and create their own shows. Interns with biological knowledge were hired to facilitate children’s play within the exhibit, and over time the interpretive strategy evolved into a structured theatrical approach. Plays were performed in the center of the large, open room, with the audience seated on stadium steps on either side. Plays sometimes but not always related to the nearby fiberglass statues, and typically taught a scientific concept. As the first zoo with a comprehensive theater program, the Philadelphia Zoo received much acclaim in the field. The staff expanded to include a full-time coordinator and five full-time actors.<sup>6</sup>

Theater in zoos and aquariums became very popular in the 1990s. Marcelle Gianelloni, Curator of Education at the Louisville Zoo, recalls that the Aquarium of The Americas and the Chattanooga Aquarium played a major role in introducing and popularizing the idea of zoo theater.<sup>7</sup> Theater programs sprang up at the Central Park Zoo (New York City), Zoo Atlanta, The Louisville Zoo, The Roger Williams Park Zoo (Providence, Rhode Island), and others.

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<sup>5</sup> Vernon N. Kisling, Jr., Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2001) 115.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Maloney and Catherine Hughes, eds., Case Studies in Museum, Zoo, and Aquarium Theater (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1999) 53-7.

Professionals who worked in zoos during this period credit the availability of financial resources at this time as a main contributor to the growth of theater in zoos. Attendance was high, the economy was prosperous, and donations from individuals, foundations and corporations were abundant. This provided zoo staff with the resources to experiment with new programs such as theater and large audiences for which to perform.

Because of the growing popularity of theater in zoos and aquariums, a theater resource group was established through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). It was called A.C.T., the Animal Conservation Theater Resource Group and it worked under the auspices of the AZA Conservation Education Committee. Members of the group, who sometimes referred to it as a “support group,” would meet during AZA annual conferences to promote the use of theater in zoos and to discuss successes and challenges with peers.

In 2000, Randi Winter of the Bronx Zoo conducted a survey of theater programs in zoos around the country and presented the results to A.C.T. at the 2000 AZA annual conference. Of 183 AZA institutions to which the survey was sent, 58 responded (32%.) Sixty percent of those responding had theater programs, and of those 64% reported a desire to increase programming. Due to this data, she concluded that the future of theater in zoos seemed “bright” and listed several reasons why theater programming was on the rise, including its potential as a revenue source, its community impact, its demand, support, and popularity.<sup>8</sup>

Although the future may have looked bright for zoo theater in 2000, everything changed after September 11, 2001. Attendance declined at most museums, zoos, and aquariums as tourism slowed and field trips were restricted. Funding became more scarce as the economy faltered, only worsening as the United States entered wars with first Afghanistan and then Iraq. Tighter finances meant that “extracurricular” programs like theater needed to be scaled back or cut altogether to ensure funding was available for core services such as animal care and security. Perhaps it was only an unfortunate coincidence, but during this time key players in the zoo theater movement changed jobs or left the field completely, leaving un-championed programs to flounder or fade. Without strong leadership, A.C.T. stopped meeting and is no longer listed as a resource group on the AZA web site.<sup>9</sup> As with any difficult financial situation, the period

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<sup>7</sup> Marcelle Gianelloni, telephone interview, 24 July 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Randi Winter, unpublished survey of theater programs in American zoos, reported at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Annual Conference, 24 Sept. 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Association of Zoos and Aquariums, AZA website. Accessed 21 July 2006 <[www.aza.org](http://www.aza.org)>.

following September 11, 2001 caused zoos to reevaluate their allocation of resources, examine their educational philosophies, and identify programmatic priorities. At this point some theater programs disappeared, some shrank, some were strengthened, and some weathered the storm and remained the same size. Some zoos opted to adopt the use of theatrical techniques to strengthen non-theater programs without presenting any real theater. Today, zoo theater is still struggling to recover from the post-9/11 downturn.

### Theater in Zoos and Aquariums Today

Based on a small survey of zoos and aquariums, there appears to be less theater in these types of institutions today than there was in 2000 but more than in 2002. While there is no clear trend as to the general direction that zoo theater is headed, a resurgence of interest indicates that it might be on the rise. More zoo and aquarium staff are attending museum theater events at professional conferences, including new staff from organizations like the Shedd Aquarium that had previously cut theater programs. In the past two years the Chicago Zoological Society's Brookfield Zoo and the Indianapolis Zoo have both started new theater programs. Still, the great variation of theater and theatrical programs or lack thereof at zoos across the United States today exemplifies the fluctuating and unclear position of zoo theater. Some zoos have growing or thriving programs while some have maintained a steady but small presence in their institutions for many years. Some use theater very sporadically and others have made conscious decisions not to use theater. The following is a survey of theater programs in zoos today. Even though the sample size is small, the range of different situations provides a suggestion as to the current state of zoo theater.

- The Adventure Aquarium (Camden, NJ)

The Adventure Aquarium is currently using characters and performances on the floor. Prior to a renovation coordinated by a new management company in 2005, the institution was run as the New Jersey State Aquarium. The theater company, known as the Drama Gills, performed music, puppetry, and creative interactive plays in an intimate theater, a large puppet stage, and throughout the aquarium. The theater and the puppet stage were closed during the renovation, and the new management company has directed the theater staff to perform in new

ways and in a new style. Because all parties are currently dissatisfied with what is being done, the program is in a state of flux.<sup>10</sup>

- The Chicago Zoological Society's Brookfield Zoo (Brookfield, IL)

As early as 2005 the Brookfield Zoo began exploring the use of theater in a variety of ways. Initially using theatrical techniques in its animal shows, the Education department introduced a theater program in 2007 that was developed in partnership with the Theater of Western Springs, a local community theater. The program, *Nature Stage Family Theater*, launched with three performances per day on both days of three weekends during the summer. The productions were written and produced by a graduate student and the theatre provided the director and actors at no cost to the zoo. The two scripts, *Finding Raymo* and *Superbug Academy* related to a temporary exhibit about stingrays and a topic chosen for its past popularity: bugs. For the summer of 2008, the zoo plans to remount the productions with the Theater of Western Springs and jointly offer a newly developed theater camp at the zoo.

Each summer the public programs staff also presents an animal show in the children's zoo which showcases domestic animals trained in a variety of behaviors. The show is narrated in an engaging manner by a staff member. The script uses a theme to frame the presentation. This summer, the theme of the show is "BZTV" and plays on the titles of popular television programs for each segment of the show, for example "Desperate Housepets" and "Nanny Goat 911." The popular dolphin show uses many theatrical elements. The show is narrated by an energetic dolphin trainer. Accompanied by music and lights, the narration includes information about dolphin behavior but is very entertaining.

Visiting artists are also brought in. One successful program brought in a puppetry company that created a show about bugs for "Bug Week." The show provided children from the audience with ant costumes and after a fifteen minutes rehearsal, involved them in the show. Music and dance performances have been common in the zoo for years. Often the music and dance performers are cultural in nature, corresponding to the culture represented in an exhibit. One example is a salsa performance outside the *Living Coast* exhibit, which recreates the habitats of South America's coast.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Taylor, telephone interview, 26 June 2006.



Inside the Hamill Family Play Zoo, an exhibit that resembles a children's museum within the zoo, the staff of "play partners" will occasionally use dramatic techniques in storytelling programs. Staff will read popular children's books using props and then invite children in the audience to portray the story's characters.<sup>11</sup>

- The Denver Zoo (Denver, CO)

The Denver Zoo education department offers a program called "Conservation Theater" for groups of preschool and kindergarten students. These programs, individually titled "B is for Birds," "C is for Colors in Nature," and so on, run for thirty minutes each and utilize live animals, puppets, and characters. It is a fee-based program and groups must make reservations in order to participate. This program is also offered to families on a limited basis. The zoo also presents a Wildlife Show in which a person conducts theatrical program with live animals three times a day. The zoo has chosen to train their "animal people" in theatrical presentation instead of using actors.

The zoo briefly experimented with roaming characters for one season during the late 1990s, but the planning process for the program had been rushed and the reception was not as positive as had been expected, so it was not continued. Since then, the zoo has successfully used theater to integrate local Native American communities into zoo programming, with individual Native Americans from local performing groups portraying characters and telling stories while providing interpretation of the animals.<sup>12</sup>

- The Indianapolis Zoo (Indianapolis, IN)

In early 2008, the Indianapolis Zoo conducted a telephone survey researching theater programs at zoos around the country in order to determine how they should structure their own theater program, which is set to launch in the summer of 2008.<sup>13</sup>

- The John G. Shedd Aquarium (Chicago, IL)

Previous to 2004 the Shedd Aquarium was producing plays related to their exhibits in their auditorium, using roaming characters to interpret exhibits and using puppets to supplement

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<sup>11</sup> David Becker and Andre Copeland, personal interview, 30 June 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Brad Parks, telephone interview, 26 June 2006.

special events. A difficult financial situation forced the layoff of the Theater Programs Coordinator. After his departure the live auditorium shows were suspended and roaming characters are no longer used. The only play that was still produced, *Neptune's Holiday Kingdom*, was part of a yearly holiday event. Although it was not presented in 2007, the staff is considering it for 2008. Actors are not specifically recruited as narrators for animal presentations, but many are hired because their skill sets match what the aquarium requires of its "presentation specialists." Animal shows are no longer narrated in character. Puppets are still used to supplement storytelling programs, and as of 2008 costumed characters are used in "Tots on Tuesdays" early childhood programs.<sup>14</sup> The education department does not produce any formal theater programs, but has adopted the widespread use of "theatrical techniques" such as storytelling, "immersion," or imagining to be in another place, and technical theater elements such as music, scenery, and video during programs and presentations. In general, the staff develops programs that run for a year or less, and while no theater is currently being used, they have not ruled it out for the future.<sup>15</sup>

- The Louisville Zoo (Louisville, KY)

The Louisville Zoo special events department has recently begun hiring characters for special events.<sup>16</sup> The education department currently does not offer any theater programs, citing lack of funds as the reason. However, the staff hopes to reintroduce theater when the financial situation improves and funding can be secured. In the 1990's the zoo employed a series of theatrical interpreters within the exhibits to interact with visitors while in character. Nigerian actors would discuss the human side of the Congo, including food eaten, games played, and sustainable development of the forest in a section of the exhibit designed to look like a village. In the rainforest exhibit, the character of Jungle John pointed out animals and provided information to visitors. Jungle John would also perform puppet shows about the rainforest animals for families with young children.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Angela McColgin, telephone interview, 1 Nov. 2007.

<sup>14</sup> The John G. Shedd Aquarium, "Calendar of Events," Shedd Aquarium website. Accessed 1 April 2008, <<http://www.sheddaquarium.org/eventcalendar.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Greer, telephone interview, 7 July 2006; Benjamin Hunt, email to author, 25 July 2006; and Lee Peters, telephone interview, 1 April 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Marcelle Gianelloni, email to author, 16 Feb. 2008.

- The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore

Several years ago the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore developed a puppet show as one of their outreach programs. Soon after that, the Education staff began presenting the puppet shows as public programs during the summer and they have become very popular with the zoo's visitors.<sup>18</sup>

- The Monterey Bay Aquarium (Monterey, CA)

Theatrically inclined education staff present theater programs at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. During the regular season the regular staff that are capable will lead theatrical programs within the exhibits. One example is the "Real Cost Café" in which educators portray a waitperson who delivers visual gags based on what the audience person orders off of a seafood menu. Dialogue is improvised based on an outline. The exhibit was designed so that the educators can perform within the gallery, but interactive videos recreate the same experience when the educators are not there. The educators perform whenever their schedules allow, but there is no set schedule. In past summers, interns presented "deck shows" for visitors waiting in line for the animal shows. These interns were almost always undergraduate students who were majoring in science but who exhibited passion, enthusiasm and personality that made them engaging presenters.<sup>19</sup>

In the summer of 2007 the aquarium replaced the deck shows with a formal theater presentation. The play *¡Basta Basura! Enough Trash!* was developed in partnership with El Teâtro Campesino, a prominent regional theater company located near San Jose, CA. The play, written and directed by Kinan Valdez, son of founder Luis Valdez, was about trash and pollution and was performed three times a day every day from mid-June through Labor Day. The program targeted Hispanic audiences as part of an audience development goal of the aquarium. Although the play had very few lines in Spanish, the inclusion of some Spanish, especially in the title, appears to have succeeded in attracting the intended audience as well as general family audiences at the aquarium. Evaluations collected at the performances indicate that the percentage of playgoers that spoke Spanish was higher than it was in the total population of aquarium visitors. The

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<sup>17</sup> Gianelloni interview.

<sup>18</sup> Katie Dryer, personal interview, 29 Aug. 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Simone Mortan, "Tapping the Funny Bone for Social Change," American Association of Museums Annual Meeting, Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston, MA, 28 April 2006.

administration was so impressed with the success of *¡Basta Basura!* that they have earmarked theater as the primary interpretive strategy for communicating messages about global warming, which is currently a high priority of the aquarium.<sup>20</sup>

- The National Aquarium in Baltimore (Baltimore, MD)

Over ten years ago the National Aquarium in Baltimore launched a mentoring program for underserved teens called Aquarium on Wheels (AOW). A major component of this program involves the writing of a conservation-themed play that the teens then perform at the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries throughout the city of Baltimore. When time and space allows, the teens will also perform the play in the aquarium itself. For two years now, AOW has added a second performing arts component to the program where the teens revise and perform a relevant play during Black History Month.<sup>21</sup>

For the past several years the aquarium has been undergoing renovations while building a new wing and a large exhibit on Australia. During construction the aquarium's theater has been closed. Now that the Australia exhibit is open, the theater is used to present a film that all visitors see directly before they enter the exhibit. An energetic presenter uses what might be called "theatrical techniques" to introduce the film before it begins and afterwards introduce the exhibit. The presenter wears a costume, uses Australian terms, and almost assumes a character during the presentation.

- The National Zoological Park (Washington, DC)

As part of the Smithsonian, the National Zoo has the opportunity to utilize the Discovery Theater, a children's theater that operates under the Smithsonian's Resident Associate Program. During 2007 and 2008, Discovery Theater sought to expand its programming from its own theater space in the Ripley Center (formerly they were located in the Arts and Industries Building) into the museums themselves. As part of the new "Meet the Museum" program, a production about the diets of giant pandas, titled *Munching Along the Asia Trail* was produced for the zoo but so far has been performed on only two occasions.

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<sup>20</sup> Simone Mortan, telephone interview, 24 March 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Vicki Fabiyi, telephone interview, 19 July 2006.

The National Zoo had experienced great success with theater in the past, producing a play about Darwin's voyage on *The Beagle* that was piloted in 1991 and performed daily during the summer of 1992. Although the Education staff has often expressed interest in using more theater in its programming, a lack of theatrical experience on the staff has since prevented the development of any additional theater programs.<sup>22</sup>

- The New England Aquarium (Boston, MA)

In 2005 and 2006, the staff at the New England Aquarium began experimenting with improvised theatrical performances that typically included music. The audience response was positive, and director Nick Carlisle had been investigating additional ways to expand the use of theater in the aquarium's programs. The aquarium does not have a traditional theater space, so anything the staff produced would be performed within the exhibits.<sup>23</sup> Carlisle has since resigned from the Aquarium and the theater programs are no longer performed.

- The Philadelphia Zoo (Philadelphia, PA)

The Philadelphia Zoo currently does not offer theater programs. Although its highly acclaimed Treehouse theater program was the first integrated and professional zoo theater program in the country, it was eliminated in 2002.<sup>24</sup>

- The Roger Williams Park Zoo (Providence, RI)

The Roger Williams Park Zoo recently re-introduced theater into their summer programming schedule. The response has been positive.<sup>25</sup>

- The San Diego Zoo (San Diego, CA)

As the character of Dr. Zoolittle, a single employee named Michael Wulffhart performs daily shows at the San Diego Zoo during the summer and on weekends and school holidays. His shows combine magic tricks, science demonstrations and humor and have become a staple of the summer entertainment at the zoo. Education Supervisor Wes Mason calls the Dr. Zoolittle shows

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Hall Surface, telephone interview, 18 March 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Carlisle, email to author, 21 June 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Kathleen Wagner, telephone interview, 29 June 2006; and P.Taylor interview.

<sup>25</sup> Shareen Knowlton, email to author, 14 July 2006.

“magnificently entertaining.” Mason, a musician, has recently teamed with Wulffhart to create fun, interactive, live music shows about wildlife and conservation. Mason presents live animals to the audience while Wulffhart provides humor and magic. Wulffhart also participates alongside education staff to present outreach programs.

The special events department at the San Diego Zoo coordinates many after-hours events at the zoo. When booking these special events, groups have the option to add a *Night Prowl* program to their event. During this one-hour flashlight trek around the zoo, participants encounter four different actors portraying wacky, silly characters as they visit animals that are active at night or at dawn and dusk. The characters are related to the animals being observed but also serve as living advertisements for other zoo programs. Wulffhart wrote the script for *Night Prowl* and also hires, rehearses, and manages the contract actors who perform in the program.<sup>26</sup>

- The St. Louis Zoo (St. Louis, MO)

Ever since the Children’s Zoo opened at the St. Louis Zoo in 1998, its staff has presented animal shows in its outdoor amphitheatre. While some of the shows are typical animal demonstrations, others use characters, such as the farmer’s uninformed nephew, to discuss domestic animals. Several of the performances encourage the audience to participate dramatically, such as acting out animal behaviors. In the show about prairie dogs, the performer becomes the lead prairie dog and leads the audience in acting out digging, noticing the predator, calling and hiding. Audience volunteers are often brought up on stage to perform a task, like pulling a rope to release doves, or to play a role such as the prairie dogs’ lion predator.<sup>27</sup>

The Education staff is now separate from the Children’s Zoo staff. Since 2005 the Education staff, many of which have theater backgrounds, has been developing a series of puppet shows as well as a series of characters that interpret exhibits around the park. The puppet shows are developed in-house and often associate conservation messages with problems children might encounter in their own lives. For example, the penguin/puffin show addresses cooperation. The shows are about ten minutes long and are performed in open areas where visitors might be sitting to rest or eat. Performances are only advertised sometimes, more often in the summer and fall. The theatrical interpretation usually involves a single staff person in costume providing context

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<sup>26</sup> Wes Mason, telephone interview, 22 June 2006.

and human stories about the animals. Examples include a Roman soldier wearing armor to talk about animal defenses or a Masai tribe member that explains how he sees giraffe in his backyard as visitors might see deer in theirs. Although Educator Erik Taylor describes both the staff and visitor response to the program as “mixed” because it is new and different, the Education staff has received a great deal of support from the zoo’s administration that desires personal and evocative programs that will create “affective transformations.”<sup>28</sup>

- The Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, WA)

In May 2006 the Woodland Park Zoo opened Zoomazium, an indoor nature play-space for children age eight and under. In addition to recreated natural play environments, Zoomazium was designed with a permanent stage area. Also housed in the building are the offices and work spaces for the Zoo Corps, the zoo’s teen volunteer group. According to the zoo’s web site, the teen volunteers are responsible for designing and presenting interactive theater and storytelling programs on the stage, in addition to live animal demonstrations and videos that children can watch when staff is not available.<sup>29</sup>

- Zoo Atlanta (Atlanta, GA)

Zoo Atlanta does not currently offer any programs that include theater. Many successful theater programs were run in the 1990’s, including the popular *Poacher’s Trial* program in which an actor portraying an African Park Ranger “arrested” an actor portraying a poacher while trying to sell confiscated biological artifacts to visitors. All visitors observing the interaction were invited to the stage area to serve as the jury in the trial of the arrested poacher. Both sides presented their case, and the audience decided on a solution. When the individuals that served as the driving force behind the theater programming moved on to positions in other organizations, the theater program faded away.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Anne Bartin, “St. Louis Children’s Zoo Shows Summer 200,” AZA Children’s Zoo Interest Group Conference, Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, IL, 12 Sept. 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Erik Taylor, telephone interview, 20 March 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Woodland Park Zoo, “Discover Zoomazium,” Woodland Park Zoo website. Accessed 21 July 2006 <<http://www.zoo.org/zoomazium/discover.html>>.

<sup>30</sup> Lori Arkin-Diem, email to author, 21 July 2006; and Cindy, telephone interview, 17 July 2006.

From talking with professionals in the field, there is still a great deal of support for the idea of using theater in zoos. At the Louisville Zoo, both the Curator of Education and the zoo's director still very much believe in the use of theater and "miss" having it at the zoo.<sup>31</sup> This sentiment was expressed over and over again, with the power of theater to educate about conservation an almost universal belief. Because the use of theater is dependent upon economic factors, many have expressed the hope that while many fear that zoo theater might currently be in an "ebb" that it will "flow" again in the future.

If zoo theater is to succeed in more institutions, models of sustainable programs must be available for other zoos to emulate. The following pages contain a case study of the Wildlife Theater program that performs in the zoo facilities operated by the Wildlife Conservations Society (WCS) in New York City. While every institution has different needs and resources, this exemplary program can serve as a guide for other zoos looking to integrate theater into their educational programs.

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<sup>31</sup> Gianelloni interview.



Part Three: A Case Study of Wildlife Theater  
(Summer 2006)



### Introduction

Wildlife Theater, the theater program of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in New York City, currently represents the most comprehensive zoo theater program in the United States. Employing three full-time and twenty-five seasonal employees, it is the biggest theater program existing in any zoo. Actors perform in four zoo facilities operated by WCS, including the Central Park Zoo in Manhattan, the Queens Zoo, the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn, and the Bronx Zoo. Under the direction of Jonathan Ellers, this program provides a potential model to be used by other zoos looking to effectively and thoroughly integrate theater into their program plan.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The following case study was compiled from a series of personal and telephone interviews with staff from WCS and the author's observations during visits to the Bronx Zoo, Central Park Zoo, Prospect Park Zoo and Queens Zoo in New York, NY in June 2006. Personal interviews include: Marybeth Artz and staff on 10 June 2006, Shelle Davis and staff on 24 June 2006, Jonathan Ellers on 9 June 2006, Tom Hurtubise on 11 June 2006, Bricken Sparacino and staff on 25 June 2006, and Natalie Wilder and staff on 11 June 2006. Telephone interviews include: Nicole Greevy on 26 June 2006, Alison Saltz on 12 July 2006 and Randi Winter on 6 July 2006.

## History of Wildlife Theater

Wildlife Theater began in the early 1990s when a WCS administrator named Richard Lattis encountered a theater program at another zoo. He and his family became impatient and disgruntled while waiting in a long line in extremely hot weather, but their experience was transformed when performers appeared and entertained them while they waited. Recognizing the power of theater to improve visitors' experiences, Lattis introduced the idea to the staff at the Central Park Zoo.

In the summers of 1993 and 1994, the zoo experimented with theater as a public program using college interns to develop and perform material. At that point the zoo was searching for a new Education Curator, and the search committee specifically looked for an individual with theater experience. Laura Maloney, who had previously worked with the Treehouse Theater program at the Philadelphia Zoo and had experimented with theater as Curator of Education at the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans, was recruited for the position and tasked with developing and implementing a "high-profile" theater program at the Central Park Zoo. Maloney hired John Fulweiler in 1995 as the first contract theater employee to first develop scripts and then serve as the theatrical director. In 1996 Fulweiler hired a group of actors to perform for the visitors in the zoo. Among this first group of actors was Jonathan Ellers, who currently serves as the director of Wildlife Theater.

When the program was first established, five performances were offered for the public each day. Each actor performed three times on any given day, which represented a very light schedule compared to what actors are now asked to do. Each performance was approximately twelve minutes long, Fulweiler and Maloney having determined this to be the optimum time when factoring in the age and attention span of the average child visitor and the fact that they were performing in an un-shaded area during the summer. A twelve-minute performance translates to approximately a seven page script, which over the years has proven to present a difficult challenge for many playwrights. As other types of performances were developed, these twelve-minute productions came to be known as "mainstage" shows.

At the end of the first year, the company began experimenting with the idea of what they then called "at-exhibit interpretation." Costumed actors would stand just outside an animal enclosure and interact with visitors, imparting information and interpreting the animals while portraying a character. The first "at-exhibit" character was Polar Bear Pappy, or Polar Bear Peg,

depending on the gender of the performer, who would be stationed in the vicinity of the polar bear. As a gold rush era 49er, Polar Bear Pappy had spent a lot of time prospecting in Alaska and therefore knew a lot about polar bears. Because Fulweiler was extremely skilled in improvisation, this type of performance came easily to him. Over the years it has proven to be more difficult for other actors, though the technique is still used. The year after Polar Bear Pappy debuted, another “at exhibit” character was introduced: Jungle Jim (or Jane) that interpreted the rainforest exhibit.

At the end of the summer in 1997, the Tisch Children’s Zoo opened. Although the theater staff had not been consulted during the planning process, the Children’s Zoo had been designed with a permanent performance area called the Acorn Theater. The theater staff was then asked to take on the difficult task of programming the Acorn Theater with performances for children ages 3-5. Fulweiler wrote some of the material for this new space,



*Ellers at the Acorn Theater at the Central Park Zoo.*

but other playwrights were also hired, including Ellers and other actors in the program. The shows developed for the Acorn Theater were designed to be five minutes in length, and most were designed to complement a preschool curriculum developed at the Bronx Zoo in which children learned basic skills such as counting and shapes. These short performances came to be known as “Acorn shows” and were performed every twenty minutes all day long.

At the end of 1997, Maloney left the Central Park Zoo for a position at another institution. A woman named Ayo Moon assumed the role of Curator of Education after having started as an educator and “worked her way up through the ranks.” In 1998 Fulweiler resigned and Ellers was asked to manage the Wildlife Theater program full-time. A very talented writer, Fulweiler had by this point written many wonderful scripts for Wildlife Theater mainstage and Acorn Theater performances. Due to a misunderstanding regarding the ownership of this written material, the zoo was unable to perform scripts written by Fulweiler after he resigned. As the new director, Ellers was tasked with developing almost a full repertoire of new material in approximately six months. Ellers wrote some of this new material himself, but outside writers

were also brought in to assist with the enormous undertaking. The new material developed during this time included twelve-minute mainstage shows and five-minute Acorn shows. The “at-exhibit” performances were retained after Fulweiler’s departure, though the title was changed to “at-habitat” out of respect for the animals. The characters were altered from prospectors to “perfessers,” and the characters’ names were changed to Paul R. and Paula Bear. Because the prospector costumes unfortunately resembled the clothing often worn by the homeless, the public was often uncomfortable with the actors’ presence. As explorers, the new “perfesser” characters wore orange vests instead of prospectors’ gear, and so became more approachable. The need for an elaborate personal mythology as to how a prospector from 1849 had ended up in Central Park in the twentieth century was also eliminated, which allowed the actors to focus more on the interpretation. Jungle Jim and Jane were also retained, though their characters were not as successful. Later Ellers would discover the reason.

In the rainforest exhibit where Jungle Jim and Jane were stationed, the narrow pathways did not allow for traffic flow around the crowd that would inevitably gather around the performers, compared to the larger open viewing areas surrounding the polar bears. This became clear in the summer of 2005 when the Queens Zoo had asked Wildlife Theater to interpret the Aviary, which suffered from lower attendance than other exhibits. The Aviary is located within a geodesic dome that had been constructed for the 1964 Worlds Fair. One single narrow path runs through the exhibit, which provides inadequate space for two interpreters and visitors at the same time. The actors became frustrated by the continued low attendance, and the visitors did not have the ability to avoid the actors if they preferred not to interact with them. Today at-habitat interpretation is only provided at the wetlands exhibits where there is plenty of room.



*The Polar Bear exhibit.*



*The Rainforest exhibit.*

Another change implemented by Ellers was a reduction in the use of hand puppets operated by unseen puppeteers as main characters in productions. While Wildlife Theater still makes use of puppets, their use was much more pervasive under Fulweiler. Ellers prefers that the children in the audience connect with the actors and less with the puppet.

Under the direction of Ellers, Wildlife Theater continued to prosper at the Central Park Zoo. New material was developed, often by Ellers himself. In 2000 an outreach component of the program was added (see below). In 2002, a special events coordinator at the Bronx Zoo named Rachel Libretti enlisted Ellers and the Wildlife Theater to create a special performance to be included as part of the Bronx Zoo's Holiday Lights program. Libretti asked Wildlife Theater to dramatize the popular children's book *The Polar Express*, which was originally scheduled to be released as a movie that year. Even though the movie's release was postponed, the Bronx Zoo presented the play as planned. The performance, which required additional admission, was a huge financial success, and was produced again the next two winters. Although both zoos are WCS facilities, the salaries of the actors performing in *The Polar Express* were included in the special events budget of the Bronx Zoo.

By 2003, the effects of September 11, 2001 weighed heavily on WCS. WCS owns the Bronx Zoo and the New York Aquarium but operates the zoos owned by the city of New York, which include the Central Park Zoo, the Queens Zoo and the Prospect Park Zoo. Attendance at all of the zoos was significantly lower than pre-9/11 totals due to decreased tourism and school field trips. City budgets had been cut, including the allocations for the city zoos. Many of the zoo's corporate donors had had offices in the World Trade Center and because they were recovering from their own financial crises were unable to contribute to the zoo. Funding from individuals and foundations also dried up as the economy slowed. The city of New York proposed closing the Queens Zoo and the Prospect Park Zoo, but WCS objected. Instead, the city substantially raised the admission fees, in some cases by almost three hundred percent. In order to justify the increase in admission fees, WCS identified Wildlife Theater as a way to add value to the experience of visiting the zoo. In 2004, Wildlife Theater expanded to include a company at each zoo owned by the city of New York. At this time a full-time position was created to assist Ellers with the management of the entire program and to take the lead on the management of the company at the Central Park Zoo. Nicole Greevy, who had been a regular performer with the company, assumed this position with the title of On-Site Theater Manager. Due to the persistence

of Rachel Libretti, a company was added at the Bronx Zoo in 2005. Unlike the companies at the other facilities that are part of their respective Education departments, Wildlife Theater at the Bronx Zoo falls under the Special Events department.

While continuing to be based at the Central Park Zoo, Ellers now serves as the director of all the Wildlife Theater companies at all of the WCS facilities. Because his time is split among these four independent companies, a senior theater staff person, or “STS” has been appointed at each facility. Each company is independent with the STS serving as a satellite site manager and reporting back to Greevy and Ellers. Often visiting two different facilities in the same day, Ellers tries to visit each company twice a week, especially during rehearsals. Although WCS is one large organization, each zoo has a separate budget, and although Ellers now manages the companies at all of the zoos, his salary is still paid entirely by the Central Park Zoo.

## Operations

Each zoo is different and so each Wildlife Theater company operates slightly differently. Performance spaces vary by zoo in terms of their location. The Central Park Zoo’s mainstage is in the middle of the zoo such that the audience has their backs to the sea lion habitat. The stage abuts the edge of the zoo such that pedestrians walking by have a full view of the “backstage” area. There is also much ambient noise, no shade, and no seating, so children and adults must both sit on a concrete ground. The Acorn Theater in the children’s zoo is more secluded and offers benches along the rear, supposedly for the adults, but noise from the street just over the fence can be so loud that performances cannot occur if a parade is occurring that day. Both the Queens Zoo and the Prospect Park Zoo have located their Wildlife Theater stages in their domestic animals areas, each erecting a tent for shade and providing seating for parents at the back and carpet circles for children sitting on the floor. The tented arrangement can accommodate audiences of approximately 100 people. The Bronx Zoo uses the special events stage, which also means that they are not scheduled to perform on weekends with special events, which might be as many as three weekends a month. The stage is higher from the ground than at the other zoos, and more benches are provided for the audience. The arrangement of benches does not allow for children to sit on the floor, but the area is bigger than at the other zoos with much space at the back for visitors to gather and stand, so the Bronx Zoo can accommodate large

groups of up to 200 people for a single performance. Each stage is equipped with microphones and speakers to amplify actors' voices and play music.



The Wildlife Theater stage at the Prospect Park Zoo.



The Wildlife Theater stage at the Queens Zoo.



The Wildlife Theater stage at the Central Park Zoo.



The Wildlife Theater stage at the Bronx Zoo.

Each zoo generally attracts different visitors. The Queens and Prospect Park zoos attract many repeat visitors of local families with young children, while the Central Park and Bronx zoos attract more tourists. The children attending performances at the Bronx Zoo are generally older than at the other sites. Visitors to the Central Park Zoo are often more hurried than those at other sites, mostly because the zoo is only one of many attractions the family is trying to visit on the same day.

The performances at each zoo are geared towards the audience they attract, and while there is some overlap, Ellers attempts to structure schedules such that each company is performing as much different material as possible. All companies perform at least one mainstage production each month and thus will have learned several by the end of a season. The Central

Park Zoo typically performs at least two different mainstage shows on the same day. Each company also knows at least a few of the five-minute “Acorn shows.” The actors at the Central Park Zoo take turns performing Acorn shows at the Acorn Theater in the Children’s Zoo every twenty minutes all day long. Queens and Prospect Park will perform two or three Acorn shows back-to-back when the audience is very young. The actors at the Bronx Zoo rarely perform Acorn shows except for very small audiences of very young children. Queens and Prospect Park are currently the only companies to perform at-habitat pieces, though plans are currently underway to include at-habitat interpretation at a new exhibit at the Bronx Zoo next year. During the lunch hours, the Bronx Zoo company will perform “Lunch Bunch” performances which are shorter than mainstage shows but are geared to an older audience.



*A Lunch Bunch performance at the Bronx Zoo.*

Because each company uses different material they all rehearse independently, and rehearsal space can be an issue. Education programs and birthday parties are given priority over Wildlife Theater rehearsals in the use of classrooms, pushing the actors into office space, rented rehearsal studios or outside on the sidewalks in the park. Because the Wildlife Theater company at the Bronx Zoo is operated through the Special Events department and not the Education department, they are never allowed to use classrooms for rehearsals. Instead, they are forced to rehearse on the stage, often in front of visitors who do not always understand that they are watching a rehearsal. Ellers has observed that a lack of adequate rehearsal space can make a big difference to an individual company. With adequate space, actors can always be working in small groups, but with only one room they are forced to take turns, wasting time watching others instead of each actor working the entire time. In order to ensure that any combination of company members can perform together, each actor is required to learn two of the three roles in every mainstage show their company will be performing. Rehearsal time is paid, but because of the large amount of material, actors are required to memorize lines at home.

The summer of 2006 marked the first time that actors from all of the companies spent a portion of the rehearsal process training together. Instead of using this time for rehearsing the different productions, the integrated training period focused on developing the Wildlife Theater



performance style and the staff's skills at informal interaction with the audience. Specific instruction was provided about how to talk to children. The four-day training period met one day at each facility and allowed the actors to familiarize themselves with each other and with the different facilities. This has been especially useful because actors are allowed to call upon those from other sites to cover their shifts when scheduling conflicts arise and no one from their own site is available. This flexibility is especially valued by the actors who are also allowed to continue to audition and work on other projects while working at the zoo. Having seen the other sites and met the other actors makes this easier.

The performance schedule at each zoo is slightly different. At both the Queens and Prospect Park zoos, a typical day involves three actors per day performing twice in the morning followed by 75-90 minutes of at-habitat performances in which two actors perform at a time, taking turns so everyone has a break. All actors break for lunch together and then perform two or three times again in the afternoon. The Central Park Zoo has devised an elaborate system whereby each of the five actors scheduled for the day assumes a different "shift" of both mainstage and Acorn shows. This system ensures that shows are performed continuously throughout the day and that each actor is given the same amount of break time. The Bronx Zoo company performs two mainstage shows in the morning followed by an hour and forty minutes of Lunch Bunch shows, followed by a short break for lunch and then three more mainstage shows in the afternoon. At all of the facilities, the actors are usually scheduled for no more than four days per week.

There is a storage shed near each Wildlife Theater stage. Because they have the most elaborate stage facility and because they are unique in their lack of affiliation with the facility's Education department, the company at the Bronx Zoo stores all of their props and costumes at the stage location. Queens, Prospect Park and Central Park also store materials in Education department offices, closets and lounges, where actors may also take breaks. The actors at the Bronx Zoo are forced to take their breaks in the very small backstage area.

## Auditions

One large audition is held to recruit actors for all four zoos. A single ad is placed in *Backstage*, a New York publication that serves as the major vehicle for audition notices. The ad outlines the unique nature of the job, and requests that actors have some combination of teaching

experience, skill at improvisation and love of children, animals and the environment. The single ad will result in several hundred resumes.

The Actors' Equity Association (AEA, or "Equity") is the union for professional actors who work in theaters. Many actors in New York City are members of this union, which has strict rules about pay, schedules, dressing rooms, and other matters. WCS cannot afford to meet the requirements of AEA, and according to Ellers, they would be forced to disband the theater program if that were the case. To avoid interfering with AEA, the zoo hires actors with the official title of "temporary instructor." Because of this, both Equity and non-Equity actors are invited to audition for Wildlife Theater.

From the resumes they receive, Ellers and Greevy will decide which actors to bring in for an initial audition. Typically about one hundred actors will be invited to the initial audition. Jenny, one of the actors at the Prospect Park Zoo, estimates her audition was only about four minutes long. In this initial audition, actors are asked to do a cold reading after looking over the material for only a few minutes. The senior theater staff member from each facility was recently invited to attend the auditions and assist in the hiring decisions. While Ellers described the selection process as similar to a professional sports draft with each "team" making a selection in each of several "rounds," the final decision ultimately falls to him. However, Ellers admits that the input from others is very useful to him in making hiring decisions.

About forty actors will be asked to a call back audition. At this time, the duties of the job are thoroughly explained so that actors can decide if it is a job they truly want. For the call back, actors are asked to memorize some material that they then perform. They will be asked to perform improvisation exercises and also to sing a well-known song such as "Oh When the Saints Go Marching In." Even though music is used in almost every show at the zoos, Marybeth Artz says that she is much less concerned about an actor's singing voice and more concerned about their attitude. However, they do need to be able to carry a tune. Actors are evaluated on their talent but also on their personality and whether or not they seem to understand the style of Wildlife Theater, including making "bold choices" in their portrayal of characters. Ellers and Greevy both describe a feeling or "vibe" that they get from an individual to always be a good indicator that a person will fit in with the company.

There is no formal process for asking actors to return the next year. Generally the actors that will want to return are the actors that Ellers and Greevy want to rehire. It takes a unique

actor to do well in this job. According to Natalie Wilder, the STS at the Queens Zoo, the job is not suited for “girly girls” who are concerned about looking pretty and who don’t want to get dirty. Ellers has observed that the actors start to truly prove if they are suited for the job in late July when the crowds are big and demanding and the weather is very hot.

### Style and Philosophy

According to Ellers, the objective of Wildlife Theater is to give the visitors a positive experience at the zoo. To this end, he believes that what occurs before and after a performance is just as important, if not more important, than the performance itself. For a young child, to have an adult take an interest in you, to learn your name, and remember it later in the day or even later in the season or the next year, is a powerful thing that cannot be found anywhere else in New York City. He encourages the actors to interact with the audience while setting up for the show and after the show has ended, including the short periods between the Acorn shows. As the program had expanded and his presence was diminished, he was noticing less of this informal interaction, which led him to implement a combined training session to provide specific instruction addressing these skills with the performers.

### Sample Mainstage Productions:

- *The Adventures of Captain Cocoa*

“Captain Cocoa” is a superhero tasked with saving the habitats of tamarin monkeys in the South American rainforests that are being destroyed by slash and burn coffee farmers. The play cleverly demonstrates how difficult it is to identify a “villain” in that the farmers, the shopkeepers and everyone between the coffee and the consumer is only trying to earn a living to provide for their families. In the end, Captain Cocoa realizes that the consumer is the villain for buying the coffee, but that making the simple choice to buy shade grown coffee can make a difference in the economic chain that has led to the destruction of tamarin habitat. The tamarin monkey is represented by a puppet character in this performance.

- *The Great Treasure Hunt*

This performance, written mostly in rhyme, involves a landowner, Mr. Dredge, who wants to build a shopping mall on his property that includes a pond. Two children that like to explore the pond convince Mr. Dredge that there is a treasure hidden inside it, and he sets out

to find it. Each animal that lives in the pond, including the dragonfly, the bullfrog, the turtle, and the bluegill fish, gives him a clue. With the help of the audience he figures out that the treasure is really the eggs of animals that make their homes in and around the pond and he decides not to build the mall after all.

According to the actors, this production is extremely popular with audiences. They speculate that the repetition of lines is very appealing to very young children. For example, every animal that gives the villain a clue reminds him that:

“It’s not treasure for taking; it’s treasure you share.

And the best way to share is to just leave it there.”

Another reason for its popularity might be the sustained audience participation. Audience members sing a call-and-repeat song with the actors throughout the performance and then become baby turtles hatching out of eggs at the end. Large puppets are also used to represent the different animals and the stylized rhyming speech and movements also contribute to the play’s appeal.

- *Look Homeward Pigeon*

In an effort to encourage local families to appreciate the wildlife found around them in New York City, Wildlife Theater developed this story about a pigeon who is fed up with being unappreciated. The other animals that love living in New York City, including the squirrel and the duck, venture outside of the city with the pigeon, only to be chased by predators that do not exist in the city. The pigeon eventually learns that she is a rock dove, who in the wild would build nests on rocky cliffs. Buildings, window sills and bridges found in New York City make great places for rock doves to build nests, which in addition to the lack of predators and ample supply of food, is why so many pigeons are found in big cities.

- *King of the Prairie*

“Keystone,” a puppet prairie dog, is an assistant to an artist that paints the animals of the prairie. However, the animals in the painting keep disappearing because the painter is not including prairie dogs in the paintings. Keystone teaches the artist, as well as the audience, that prairie dogs are a keystone species of the prairie; a species on which all other animals depend.

## Sample Acorn Shows

- *Pond Town*

Written in the style of film noir, this play explains how nocturnal animals sleep during the day and are awake at night. Franky the frog has “important nighttime obligations” on the other side of the pond where Big Owl is waiting for him. The narrator, anxious for a “big break,” tries to prevent Owl from eating Franky. With the help of the audience, the narrator changes the story from a daytime story, in which Franky and Owl fall asleep, to a nighttime story in which they both wake up, and back again.

- *Animal Sounds*

This show, which is sung or rhythmically recited to background music, uses animal puppets and describes the different sounds made by domestic animals.

- *Croaking in the Night*

A recurring character in Wildlife Theater productions, Franky the Frog explains in this show that the noise he makes is used to attract girl frogs. This show includes a song in which the audience repeats the “jug-o-rum” sound that bullfrogs make.



*Animal Sounds*



*Croaking in the Night*

- *Shaped for Success*

Using a magnetic bulletin board and magnets in a variety of shapes, actors recite poems, each about a different animal, to rhythmic background music. While describing an animal in terms of the shapes that make up its body, the actor moves the shapes on the board to create a picture of the animal. Each verse ends with, “what’s my name?” as the actors invite the audience to shout out the name of the animal they are describing. Each

company performs this show, but some of the animals described are different for each facility. In every case, the last animal described is a person.

### Sample At-Habitat Performances

- To describe the colors of the stripes on two types of turtles found in local wetlands, the character of Lily Marsh pulls out two sticks, one yellow and one orange. The character of Pete Bog runs over and thinking the orange stick is a carrot, takes a bite out of it, hurting his tooth. This turns into a lesson about how trash in wetlands can harm the animals that live there. The sticks are then used as rhythm sticks to accompany a song about how children can help by picking up trash.
- To explain how water flows off a duck's back, the character of Rudy Duck rubs Chapstick on the back of a visitor's hand, and then pours water on it. He points out the beads of water that form over the oily Chapstick instead of wetting the hand, similar to what occurs with duck feathers.
- To demonstrate how wetlands retain water, the character of Ally Gator uses a magician's vase with an inner chamber. She pours water out, but holds her finger over the hole of the inner chamber each time she does, so that the vase appears to keep filling up with water.



*Shaped for Success*



*At-habitat performance at the Queens Zoo.*

## Outreach Programs

After a proposal by an individual zoo employee, Wildlife Theater began offering outreach performances, or performances at schools or other venues, in 2000. The outreach program had been proposed as a means to generate revenue by charging fees to the party booking the performance. With that in mind the position of Off-site Theater Manager was created, but the program was not initially financially successful. According to the current Off-site Theater Manager Alison Saltz, a possible reason for the program's initial struggle is that the previous manager was also a performer, and therefore did not have adequate time to complete administrative duties or conduct marketing efforts.

Saltz estimates that she attends approximately 30 percent of the outreach performances. The rest of her time is spent booking performances, repairing props and conducting marketing. Since she has assumed the role, the Wildlife Theater Outreach program has expanded greatly. After a school year of almost zero performances (from September 2004 to June of 2005) Wildlife Theater performed 117 outreach sessions in the year between September 2005 and June 2006, reaching over 6800 people, most of them children.

Although the outreach program has no budget for advertising, Saltz uses a variety of methods in her marketing efforts. Flyers (designed in-house but professionally printed) are placed at every stage in each facility. Parents may pass on the flyers to teachers, or the teachers themselves might be visiting the zoo either with their families or with a field trip at either end of Wildlife Theater's public performance season. A dedicated page on the WCS website lists all of Wildlife Theater's outreach offerings. Both the flyers and the web page list Saltz's telephone number and email address. Wildlife Theater performs at each facility's open house held for teachers and community group leaders, and also attends teacher conferences and seminars. For example, Wildlife Theater hosts a booth at the New York Public Schools' annual new teacher fair.

Teachers wishing to bring a Wildlife Theater outreach program to their school have a variety of options:

- Auditorium Series (30 minutes) – in which actors perform a play and two or three additional activities to create a complete lesson on a topic. For example, a program titled Cool Rainforest Connections begins with a skit, then involves the audience in the telling of an interactive poem, and culminates with a performance

of *The Adventures of Captain Cocoa*. These programs are generally geared towards students in kindergarten through third grade. Currently there are three different 30-minute auditorium shows available on an outreach basis, including *Cool Rainforest Connections*, *Migration Sensation*, and *Butterfly Boogie*.

- Auditorium Series (45 minutes) – in which actors perform a 30-minute play with a brief introduction and a processing session afterwards. There is currently only one 45-minute auditorium series program offered, *The Rescue of Great Blue Heron Marsh*, which explores wetland protection and is recommended for grades two through five.
- Classroom Experiences – (45 minutes) in which actors conduct a series of activities with a single classroom of children from Preschool through grade one. The development of these programs was guided by the WILD Achievement (Wildlife Integrated Language Development) program. Two of these programs are currently offered: *Youcan the Toucan's Rainforest Adventure*, which is aimed at developing deductive reasoning through the use of one's senses, and *Petunia the Penguin Goes to School*, which focuses on literacy skills.

The Wildlife Theater outreach program has attracted a large amount of grant funding. During the 05-06 school year, 37.6% of Wildlife Theater Outreach performances were financed by grants and thus were free or discounted to the site they visited. Grants come from a variety of sources, including corporations and foundations. Grants often require that the performances occur at Title 1 schools, or at community centers in each of the five boroughs, or within a certain time frame. Saltz manages the implementation of these grants so that the programs meet all of the requirements and fulfill all of the “promises” made in the grant proposals. WCS employs grant writing personnel at the Bronx Zoo who are responsible for finding the grants for Wildlife Theater. Because professional theater has occurred at the zoo regularly since 1996, the development team is familiar with the program and is therefore committed to finding funding for these grant-financed performances. When necessary, the Curator of Education at the Central Park Zoo will advocate for the writing of proposals to fund the theater program. Some of their grants are renewed every year.

Although Wildlife Theater predominantly visits schools, occasionally they will be asked to visit libraries, camp programs and private events in communities and parks. Because WCS has



mandated that Wildlife Theater be educational, Wildlife Theater will not typically perform at birthday parties, though a few exceptions have been made. For three years Wildlife Theater has started working with a hospital. Started through an initiative by the Bronx Zoo, every other week members of the WCS staff visit the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, alternating between education programs and Wildlife Theater performances. When a distance learning component of the agreement failed to materialize, the hospital requested additional Wildlife Theater performances. The program's success has led to a second potential hospital partnership with the Mount Sinai Children's Hospital.

Outreach performances are scheduled three days of the week and anywhere from two to five actors are needed for a day of outreach sessions. For a visit with one session of a Classroom Experience, two actors would be needed. If several sessions are scheduled for a single visit, additional actors will be used. An auditorium show requires three performers because each play is written to be performed by three actors, and if possible Saltz will send an extra person to serve as a stage manager. In the case of *The Rescue of Great Blue Heron Marsh*, five actors are needed because the play itself requires four actors to perform it and so much equipment is used in the performance. A variety of systems for securing actors have been tested, from having a pool of actors to call when performances are scheduled to bringing in actors on a set schedule whether there are performances or not and using down time for rehearsals. During the last season, Saltz used the latter, and because a performance occurred almost all of the time actors were scheduled, this method is likely to be used in the future.

The actors used for outreach are the same actors that work at the zoos during the summer, cutting down on training time because the actors will already know many of the performance components and are already familiar with Wildlife Theater's performance style. The pay for outreach performances is the same as that during the summer and a typical day is six hours long. Bricken Sparacino, the Senior Theater Staff member from the Bronx Zoo, currently serves as the lead actor at outreach performances and reports back any necessary information to Saltz and Ellers. Additional supervision has so far been unnecessary, though Saltz does like to observe programs every so often and will attend performances of *The Rescue of Great Blue Heron Marsh* to help carry the equipment.

The actors and all the props, costumes and equipment needed for programs are transported to the off-site locations in a large van. Typically the actors will meet at the zoo and

travel to the location together. For visits to schools, actors might meet at the zoo as early as 7:30 AM. The actors then return to the zoo together to unload the van. Saltz will typically never schedule more than four sessions in a single outreach visit.

### Future Projects

Wildlife Theater is currently rehearsing a new mainstage production titled *Bright Lights, Bug City*. This show, starring a cockroach from New York and a cockroach from Rio De Janiero, is designed to highlight wildlife that residents of New York City could observe in their neighborhoods. The cockroaches discover all of their unique and interesting adaptations, including their second brain that senses danger and their ability to flatten to fit into small spaces. The cockroaches teach the audience about these adaptations through a rap song with accompanying hand gestures.

The Bronx Zoo is currently designing and constructing a new exhibit on Madagascar. A positive sign that theater is becoming more fully integrated into the new facilities, the Madagascar exhibit team approached Ellers about developing interpretation for the exhibit. Ellers provided the exhibit team with a list of ideal requirements for live interpretation to succeed in the new exhibit, including plenty of space and two interpreters at the same time. However, the final plans did not include adequate space and the proposed budget only supports one interpreter at a time. For these reasons, Ellers is concerned about the success of the at-habitat programs in the new exhibit, and funding for live interpreters has only been secured for the first two years that the exhibit is open.

### Analysis and Observations

On many accounts Wildlife Theater can be described as a successful program, and many factors contribute to its success. Perhaps the most important factor is institutional buy-in. Every year's operating budget includes a line-item for Wildlife Theater, the development department continually seeks (and receives) grants and donations for the program, and the program continues to expand at facilities other than the Central Park Zoo where the program originated. While this may not have always been the case, high-level employees are now very supportive. Tom Hurtubise, the Education Curator at the Queens Zoo, describes himself as a convert. At first he was very skeptical and would never have considered theater programming on his own, but after

about a month of watching the program in action in his facility, he now says he would fight to keep the theater program. He considers theater to be the most effective education program in the zoo (not in a classroom).<sup>33</sup> Despite the Bronx Zoo Education staff's continued resistance to including Wildlife Theater in their department, the fact that the Exhibits department initiated the use of theatrical programming in a major new exhibit is a very positive sign.

Besides the operating budget, WCS has been successful at securing outside funding to supplement the Wildlife Theater program. This is due in large part to the institutional buy-in that keeps Wildlife Theater on the priority list for writing proposals. At the Queens Zoo, Hurtubise was successful at securing community funding to lengthen the performance season. Because the population of New York City is so dense, there are many potential funders available to them, both individuals (and the greater New York area is home to many wealthy individuals) as well as the headquarters or major branches for many large corporations. According to Ellers, Wildlife Theater will physically travel to meetings with funders in order to perform for them. This innovative technique clearly demonstrates the program's quality, purpose and effectiveness for the potential funders, often resulting in a gift or grant.

The Wildlife Theater staff is also allowed a vast amount of creative freedom, which ultimately leads to more creative and interesting productions. Ellers describes how the company has been given the opportunity to rewrite and re-work shows until they get them right, sometimes performing them in different versions for four years or more until the staff is able to figure out the audience. The ability to work through challenges provides intellectual stimulation for the actors and any individuals working on the script. Resources are sometimes available to workshop new scripts during the off-season, which can result in a stronger script before it is ever performed in front of an audience.

New York City is unique in the large number of actors living close enough to the zoo to consider a job there. A larger percentage of the actors in New York are highly talented professionals with large amounts of training and experience. Many of them are trying to earn their livings through their craft and even the most talented actors are always looking for work. This gives Wildlife Theater the ability to be extremely selective when hiring their staff, and results in a very high level of talent that is not readily available to zoos and aquariums in other areas.

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<sup>33</sup> Tom Hurtubise, personal interview, 11 June 2006.

The actors that do work at WCS describe the job as very satisfying. Many of them commented on the excellent salary and the attractiveness of a “day job” that is still within the field. In order to accommodate the reality of working with actors, the schedules are flexible enough to allow actors to attend auditions and take time off if they are cast in other projects. The actors also describe the job as a welcome challenge, commenting that there is a large amount of material to learn and retain. They also comment that working with children keeps them on their toes, because you never know what they will say or do, and the interaction with the audience before, during and after the performances is always different and interesting.

In addition to New York City’s abundance of talented, out-of-work actors, New York is home to a vast amount of high quality theater resources. Musicians, puppet-makers, prop-makers, and costumers can all be hired to make quality professional products to supplement the program. Because New York audiences are accustomed to Broadway-quality productions, even the zoo must deliver the high production and performance standards that the audiences expect.

Wildlife Theater has also benefited from its many years of continuous existence. Because of its tenure the zoo has been able to cultivate the staff. All three full-time employees began as performers. Many years of existence also means that the company has a large amount of material to use. This allows them to have different performances at the different facilities or to pull out an old favorite for a special event. Over the years the theater program has developed a reputation of quality theater programming within the organization, the city, and the fields of zoos and aquariums and museum theater. A long tenure also cultivates audiences, bringing repeat visitors to the zoo and word of mouth adding to the business of the outreach program. Because the program has existed for so long the staff has also benefited from trial and error – after ten years they admit they have worked out most of the kinks to develop a streamlined and successful system, with enough time to have evolved into a fantastic product perfectly suited to its audience that it also has had plenty of time to figure out what it wants. As the program expands, the company will continue to figure out the details of the logistics and the audiences at the other facilities.

#### Wildlife Theater Visitor Survey

Short visitor satisfaction surveys were distributed to audiences at Wildlife Theater performances at the Prospect Park Zoo on June 9, 2006 and at the Queens Zoo on June 10, 2006.

Surveys could not be collected at the Bronx Zoo or the Central Park Zoo due to inclement weather. The audiences surveyed had attended a performance of either *King of the Prairie*, *Look Homeward Pigeon*, or a collection of Acorn shows. A total of 54 surveys were collected, almost all from adults. Almost all of the respondents were visiting the zoo with family groups. Because it is known that the zoos at which the survey was distributed attract similar audiences, and that those audiences are different from the audiences at the zoos that were not surveyed, the data must be viewed as representing only certain type of visitor. In addition, the sample size is too small to yield any significant results, but the feedback from these surveys can give us a general idea of the opinions visitors have about theater in zoos and can substantiate a need for further research on this topic.

Visitors were asked to fill out a half-page handout that asked them to respond to a variety of questions. First, they were asked to write in a response to the following question, “Why did you decide to attend today’s performance?” To respond to the question, “How much did you enjoy the performance?” they were asked to circle a number on a five-point scale with “1” labeled “Not at all,” “3” labeled “indifferent” and “5” labeled “Very much,” followed by the question “Why or why not?” with a space for visitors to write in responses. The next question asked, “To what extent would you like to see more performances like this at New York City zoos?” followed by another five-point scale labeled the same as above and also the question, “Why or why not?” with a space for answers. The final question asked visitors to write in a response to the question, “What would you say is the main message of the performance?”

No visitors reported that they did not enjoy the performance. While a few reported that they felt “indifferent” about the performance, 68.5% of respondents reported that they enjoyed the performance “a lot,” and 81.3% reported that they enjoyed the performance “somewhat” or “a lot.” 88.9% of respondents reported that they would like to see more performances like this at the zoo.

The responses that visitors wrote in the allocated spaces give us an even clearer idea of their opinions about theater in the zoo. Of those visitors that felt “indifferent” about the play, their comments typically addressed a physical aspect of their experience, such as “the music was too loud,” or an aspect of their group, such as “my children were too young [for this experience].” Several visitors left the response lines blank, but almost all answers given were positive. Many comments consisted of single words that described favorable elements of the

performance, such as “fun,” “educational,” “informative,” “entertaining,” or some combination of such words. One visitor wrote that she would like to see more performances at the zoo because “A performance makes information more accessible and besides, it’s fun!” Another wrote, “[Theater] makes the day fun for the kids and they learn, too.” Some respondents commented on the high quality of the performance (“good music!”) or the talent of the performers (“Very professional,” “Actors are great,”) and others admitted that they needed a break (“it keeps the kids busy for a moment,” “especially on hot days – under the shade of the tent is good.”) In addition, of those who responded to the final question asking for the performance’s message, 70% mentioned some kind of conservation-themed message. Forty-five percent of those answering (37% of the total) supplied a correct or “near correct” response based on the play they had seen, such as “don’t underestimate the ecological value of even the smallest species,” for *King of the Prairie*. An additional 25% of those answering (20% of the total) supplied a general conservation related response, such as “nature is a treasure to be cherished and preserved,” or “protect our environment.”

Though small, the survey clearly suggests that visitors enjoy theater in the zoo and view it as a learning opportunity, especially for their children. While the results seem to indicate that visitors are recognizing conservation messages embedded within the performances, more thorough studies are needed to obtain truly representative samples of zoo visitors. Comparisons between visitors who attend performances and those who do not are also needed to understand the effects of the theater program itself as opposed to the experience at the zoo as a whole. In future studies, interviews instead of surveys are recommended to avoid the large numbers of unanswered questions received here that may have skewed the results.

#### Responses to Questions with a Five-point Scale

How much did you enjoy the performance?	1 not at all	2	3 neutral	4	5 very much	No answer
Prospect Park Zoo	0	0	2	3	8	0
Queens Zoo	0	0	4	4	29	4
Total	0	0	6	7	37	4

How much would you like to see more performances	1 not at all	2	3 neutral	4	5 very much	No answer

like this at the zoo?						
Prospect Park Zoo	0	0	1	5	7	0
Queens Zoo	0	0	1	4	32	4
Total	0	0	2	9	39	4

Responses to Open-ended Questions (Both Zoos Combined)

Why did you attend today's performance?	
Non-specific response ("Happened upon it," "was walking by," etc.)	17
Positive educational or child-centered response ("I thought my kids would like it")	16
Positive descriptive response ("sounded interesting")	8
Part of special event occurring that day ("Buffalo Quest")	3
Repeat visitor ("We liked the shows from last year")	3
No Answer	10
Total*	57

Why or why not? [After, "How much did you enjoy the performance?"]	
Fun/Entertaining	12
Quality of the performance or talented performers	13
Constructive criticism or comment ("needs more singing")	3
Educational and/or interactive	9
Positive child-centered response ("it is good for kids")	8
No Answer	17
Total*	62

Why or why not? [After, "To what extent would you like to see more performances like this at New York City zoos?"]	
Fun/Entertaining	9
Quality of the performance or talented performers	3
Improves overall experience (including rest)	3
Constructive criticism or comment ("needs more singing")	1
Educational and/or interactive	16
Positive child-centered response ("it is good for kids")	21
No Answer	20
Total*	73

What would you say was the main message or the performance?	
A correct or “near correct” answer	20
General conservation response	11
Education or “about” something	9
No Answer or an unrelated answer	14
Total	54

\*Totals equal more than total sample size because some responses are counted in more than one category.



*Author's Note: 2008 Update*

*As of March, 2008, Jonathan Ellers has resigned from WCS and Nicole Greevy has taken over as interim Theater Coordinator. Bricken Sparacino is assisting Greevy and Outreach Coordinator Alison Saltz on a practically full-time basis. Due to an undisclosed reorganization of the WCS Education department, Wildlife Theater will not perform at the Prospect Park or Queens zoos for the immediate foreseeable future. Due to the smaller total number of actors, both remaining casts will rehearse together and perform the same material in the summer of 2008. New shows are still being developed, including the single-person interpretation for the new Madagascar exhibit at the Bronx Zoo and mainstage shows to complement the new Cats exhibit. A grant from Fisher Price has allowed Wildlife Theater to perform every Tuesday all year long and every day during Earth Week in the children's area of the Bronx Zoo. While there was no holiday production at the Bronx Zoo in 2007, an original production is being discussed for the holiday season of 2008.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> Nicole Greevy, telephone interview, 4 March 2008.

## Part Four: Where We Are Going

### The Loss of Existing Zoo Theater Programs

In recent years, three prominent and well-respected theater programs in American zoos and aquariums have been essentially lost. The Treehouse theater program at the Philadelphia Zoo was dissolved in 2002 when the entire theater staff was laid off, including the program's director. In 2004, the John G. Shedd Aquarium ceased producing plays in its auditorium and roaming characters in its exhibits. In 2005 when the New Jersey State Aquarium reopened as the Adventure Aquarium, the theater was closed and the theater programming was downsized and significantly altered. While one could fear that these events signal a trend away from the use of theater in zoos and aquariums, the number of active programs listed earlier in this paper suggest that this is not the case. However, the situation still raises the question, why did these programs close? What are the challenges to using theater in a zoo and how can they be overcome?

Existing theater programs in zoos and aquariums can be cut for a number of reasons, and cost is a likely culprit. Personnel of any kind represent a large line item on any museum's budget, and theater, which relies completely on people to present the material, requires personnel. While cost is often cited as a reason for not *starting up* a theater program in a zoo, neither the Philadelphia Zoo nor the Adventure Aquarium cited cost as a factor in their decision to disband or change their existing programs. In fact, both the Treehouse theater program and the Drama Gills earned substantial revenue for their respective institutions. In both of these instances, the theater staff was responsible for the execution of birthday parties and overnights, or "sleepovers," both of which can bring in several hundred thousand dollars in a single year, not only covering the cost of the theater program but also turning a profit. The Drama Gills also earned revenue through outreach performances, another lucrative endeavor if marketed sufficiently. At the Philadelphia Zoo, an entrance fee was also charged for any non-members visiting the Treehouse exhibit, and with theater the primary source of programming in a zoo exhibit with no live animals, it was likely the motivation for the public to visit.

When revenue is down, such as it was for zoos and aquariums after September 11, 2001, any costs not essential to the operation of the institution become targets for budget cuts. In zoos, education programs are more likely to be cut because the health and safety of the animals must take priority. In these cases, theater is especially vulnerable, but if this were the sole cause for its

elimination theater would be reinstated when resources again became available. However, at the Shedd Aquarium, theater programming was eliminated during a budget crisis but theater has not been reinstated now that the crisis is over. Instead, Director of Education Christian Greer describes a “philosophical shift” in educational practices at the aquarium in which theater is no longer used. Instead, the aquarium has adopted the use of “theatrical techniques” in their educational presentations.<sup>35</sup> Greer describes the shift as a result of the reevaluation of every component of the aquarium that occurred during the financial crisis and does not attribute it to the cost of a theater program.

Kathleen Wagner, Senior Vice President of Education and Conservation at the Philadelphia Zoo, also cites a philosophical shift away from the use of theater as the reason for the program’s elimination. She describes a gradual shift in which the management decided to allocate resources towards one-on-one interpretation outside of animal enclosures instead of theater. It is the belief of the Philadelphia Zoo’s management team that more individuals are reached and that these one-on-one interactions with staff have a higher impact than when the same resources are used for theater presentations. The estimates on which this claim were based represent the number of individuals that were served within the Treehouse exhibit, which may be viewed as a skewed measurement because the audience was limited by space and by the additional entrance fee. Other attempts were made to introduce theater in other areas around the zoo, but the facilities for theater performances were poor and while plans to create ideal spaces for theater were in development, they have since never materialized.

The former director of the Treehouse Theater program did not observe the philosophical shift described by Wagner, but instead noticed a change in institutional support after a new individual assumed a management role. The individual was strongly opposed to the idea of theater in the zoo, and because of the influence the individual wielded, former supporters of theater did not or could not disagree for fear of retribution. Although every attempt was made to satisfy the individual and to alter the program to meet his vaguely-expressed expectations, it was not long after the individual joined the staff that the theater program was cut.

Changes in management are often at the core of institutional change in general, including the dissolution of an existing theater program. In these cases, theater faces unique challenges. Because theater is a less traditional form of interpretation, and because theater remains an

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<sup>35</sup> Greer interview.

unusual occurrence in a zoo, it is more likely that individuals will not understand its value and are therefore unlikely to support it. It is possible that this theory is compounded by the fact that individuals hired in management positions are typically older, and given that the change in zoos from research-oriented institutions to education-oriented institutions is relatively recent, it seems likely that older individuals accustomed to the more traditional ways may be less likely to support theater, which is still new and innovative.

To preserve existing theater programs, new managers must be “courted,” though this is a difficult task. In Philadelphia, the new manager was invited to attend theater performances in order to observe the impact on the visitors, but never stayed for more than a few minutes. Cindy Horton, formerly of Zoo Atlanta, describes how the staff there was forced to repeat the uphill battle of proving theater’s worth in the institution each time turnover occurred in the senior management. She would perform each program for the new managers to alleviate their misconceptions until their skepticism subsided and trust in the staff was achieved.

In the case of the Adventure Aquarium, a new management company took over the operation of the institution. The new management did not wish to eliminate theater as an interpretive strategy, but instead held a different opinion of what constitutes a theater program. Instead of performing the exceedingly creative productions that visitors had grown to expect in the small theater space, the staff was asked to portray characters on the exhibit floor. The previous manager of the Drama Gills was asked to remain on staff, but has since chosen to resign because in his opinion the new programs were not theater. After his departure, even the new managers admit that the programs they are doing are “not very good,” but they are not yet sure what the program should be within the structure of the new organization. The current staff at the aquarium describes the theater program as “floundering.”<sup>36</sup>

One of the most often cited reasons for the loss of an existing zoo theater program is the loss of the champion, or champions, of the program. This occurrence is probably not unique to theater programs, but again because theater is still unusual it is even more vulnerable when this happens. Zoos and Aquariums tend to staff their institutions with a high percentage of individuals with a great deal of content knowledge. Because those with science backgrounds do not typically also possess expertise in theater, zoos and aquariums tend to have few individuals on staff with interest, knowledge or skills in theater. Because individuals without theater

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<sup>36</sup> P. Taylor interview.

backgrounds can be easily intimidated by theater, they will be less likely to pursue theater pursuits without encouragement. For these reasons, an individual champion is usually the driving force behind a theater program at a zoo or aquarium. For example, Zoo Atlanta boasted a thriving and expansive array of theater programs in the late 1990s, including the popular and highly acclaimed *Poacher's Trial*. However, when the three individuals who had been the driving force behind the theater programs accepted positions at other institutions, unfortunately all around the same time, they left behind no one with the necessary skills to confidently continue the program or to advocate for the hire of someone with the skills to do so, and the program no longer exists.

The theater programs at the Philadelphia Zoo, the Adventure Aquarium and the John G. Shedd Aquarium ended for a variety of reasons, including change in management, financial stress, loss of a program champion, and organizational philosophical shifts in interpretive strategy. These issues represent some common challenges to using theater in any cultural institution. However, zoo theater often encounters a variety of other obstacles and faces unique challenges due to the specific nature of the institutions involved.

### Challenges and Obstacles to Using Zoo Theater

While theater in museums appears to be growing and becoming more universally accepted, the use of theater in zoos and aquariums remains uncommon and broadly undervalued. Many reasons exist for this, including the philosophical disagreements about living collections, institutional identity and public perception of zoos and aquariums, internal resistance from staff, and physical challenges.

Many people believe that animals should not be kept in captivity, and that zoos and aquariums are hypocritical for housing captive animals while at the same time preaching conservation.<sup>37</sup> The debate about the existence of zoos at all has raged since zoos began, especially considering how zoos were first open to the public purely for recreation and entertainment. As zoos evolved, biological research became a major component of zoos' missions, as did conservation as more animals became endangered and threatened. In the past thirty years, education has been added to the many tasks already undertaken by zoos and

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<sup>37</sup> Jill Stein et al, eds., *Insights: A Museum Learning Resource* (Annapolis, MD: Institute for Learning Innovation, 2006) 15.

aquariums. While zoos struggle with their identity and priorities, the role of theater in the educational component of the mission adds to the confusion because theater is essentially entertainment. When you factor in the motivation of the audiences visiting zoos the situation becomes even more complex.

Zoos and aquariums are currently grappling with their identity in the face of the public. In surveys, visitors report that they come to a zoo or aquarium for recreation and to have fun in their leisure time. Often zoo visits are social experiences, something to do while spending time with family and friends. Occasionally visitors will report that one reason they visited the zoo was for education, usually of their children. Few visitors seek information about conservation, nor do many of them view zoos as conservation-minded organizations.<sup>38</sup> Most of all, zoo visitors come to see animals.<sup>39</sup>

Critics of zoo theater might argue that if visitors have come to see animals that they would not expect or enjoy a play in which only human beings are the performers. If animals are included in the performance, anything more than a basic demonstration with facts could resemble a circus, the very image zoos are trying to avoid. The presence of a theater program at all contributes to the image of the zoo as a venue for entertainment because theater is entertaining, and visitors are already unfamiliar with zoos' educational purpose. Theater about animals could be viewed as disrespectful, perhaps simply because it detracts focus from the animals.

Some people feel that anthropomorphosis encourages inaccurate understanding of animal consciousness and therefore do not approve of its use in zoo theater. Anthropomorphosis is actually very appropriate for young children, and in fact is the very means by which they are able to form connections with animals and begin to care about them. Because zoo theater audiences tend to be comprised mainly of children, it would seem this technique is absolutely appropriate. Knowing that this dichotomy exists, this fact must be communicated to the public as well as to the rest of the zoo staff. Similarly, debate exists as to how best represent animals in a theater program: through costumed actors, puppets, or the actual live animals, or whether they should only be referred to within a performance. This choice must be made within each institution based on its culture and philosophy. Another question involves the language that should be used to describe performances. Are they "shows," "plays," "performances" or "educational programs?"

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<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Hyson, "Education, Entertainment, an Institutional Identity at the Zoo," *Curator*, July 2004: 248.

<sup>39</sup> Vicki Croke, *The Modern Ark, The Story of Zoos: Past Present and Future* (New York: Scribner, 1997) 95.

How does a zoo communicate to its visitors the difference between theater program performances and keeper chats, feeding and other live animal demonstrations, and any educational tours or presentations? And while visitors seem to enjoy all programs that involve staff, little is known about which types of live programs zoo visitors would most prefer.

Because the public views zoos as destinations for families, typical visitors assume that theater performances are “for kids.” Locations of zoo theater programs are often within or near to children’s zoos, subject matter is often limited in scope to young audiences, and even zoos without developed theater programs will bring in guest artists for “family day” events. All of these actions perpetuate the image of zoo theater as children’s theater. While most visitors to zoos will have brought children, the rest of the visitors may not attend a performance if it appears to be “just for kids,” though if they had they might not only enjoy it but would also be exposed to the zoo’s conservation messages. Even if adults have brought children, they might not watch the show, pay attention, or take the messages seriously if the theater appears to be geared towards children. Although reaching children is important, reaching adults can have a more immediate effect on household conservation behaviors. To battle these perceptions, the term “family theater” is an alternative to consider.

While select members of the general public will disapprove of the use of theater in a zoo, much of this discomfort with theater in a zoo comes from within the zoos themselves. The scientists and animal keepers that are sometimes referred to “animal people” possess the reputation of caring only about the animals. They have been described as being “happy if there were never any visitors at all.” Whatever their true feelings are, this group as a whole has not historically shown itself to be overly supportive of any new, innovative, or visitor-centered educational endeavors in their institutions.

One cause of internal resistance is that those who have not worked with professional actors are likely to believe negative stereotypes that surround them, and biologists are less likely to have worked with many actors. Throughout history, actors have had terrible reputations. The stereotype of the irresponsible, lazy, hedonistic, self-obsessed diva has plagued actors to this day. While perhaps deserved in the distant past, most professional actors these days take pride in their craft and engage in serious study, often at great expense, for many years. Even subconsciously, a zoo’s scientifically-inclined staff does not wish to work with actors because they fear the actors will live up to these negative stereotypes, possibly giving out incorrect information or

endangering the health of the animals, and as perceived authorities on animals and sources of conservation information, zoos must be very sensitive not to give out incorrect information.

Zoos may choose not to use actors for their theater programs. Staff with theatrical tendencies, some of which might have some degree of theater background, can be used instead. The education staff at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore performs all of their puppet shows. Puppet shows are an attractive choice when using non-actors because presenters tend to feel more comfortable on stage when their faces are not visible and scripts do not necessarily need to be memorized, allowing for greater flexibility in scheduling and training. However, the use of non-actors in zoo theater programs is likely to result in an overall lower quality program than if actors were used, and due to staff comfort levels programs are likely to evolve over time back into “educational presentations” as opposed to theater.

Previous negative experiences are often cited as a reason why theater programs are not more common in zoos. This suggests that zoo staff can be convinced to try it once, but that if that experience is bad, their opinion is clouded forever. This occurred at the Denver Zoo. When Brad Parks arrived at the zoo in 1998, he brought with him a wealth of theater experience from his previous position at Zoo Atlanta. He was so eager to introduce theater into zoo programming that he acted too quickly, rolling out a program that was not quite ready. This soured the staff on the use of theater, and has been reluctant to include much of it ever since. The success of a theater program also rests very much with the talent of the individual or individuals involved with each aspect of the project. If the individual actors are talented, enthusiastic, and charismatic, the program is more likely to be a success. One “bad egg” can hurt the reputation of a fledgling theater program enough to prevent its future success.

Persistent communication with all staff and clear demonstration of theater’s effectiveness are one’s best tools in winning over coworkers. If a zoo theater program is granted the ability to hire talented professional actors that are well-suited to the style and environment of zoo theater, quality work will likely be produced that will help the rest of the staff overcome any prejudices they might have towards actors or perceived notions about theater itself. However, even if an entire zoo’s staff is completely in support of a theater program, funding it is a persistent challenge.

The expense of starting a new program prevents many zoo theater programs from existing in the first place. With any new program, funds have not been specifically allocated and



must be taken from other areas or acquired from outside sources. Grants are competitive and the individual who desires a theater program might not possess the job title or the skills to craft a winning proposal or the authority to request that someone else construct a proposal on their behalf. Because funding is a challenge, many new theater programs turn to interns, volunteers, or teenagers to write and perform, which may or may not result in a quality product. In cases when the product is not of high quality, there is little incentive to continue the program. When successful, these starts can lead to professional theater programs. Both the Central Park Zoo's Wildlife Theater and Philadelphia's Treehouse Theater began with interns and evolved into professional companies.

As opposed to museums, zoos face unique physical challenges when using theater. The first issue is the large size of most zoos compared to most museums. With large size comes a more dispersed audience. Often the majority of visitors attending museum theater performances do so because they happen upon it. The Monterey Bay Aquarium found that most of their visitors that attended performances of *¡Basta Basura! Enough Trash!* during the summer of 2007 did so because they were "in the area when it started."<sup>40</sup> Because of the large size of most zoos, fewer visitors are likely to happen upon a performance that is occurring at any given time. Even visitors that are trying to find the location of a theater performance may have trouble locating it, and because museum theater programs are typically short (under fifteen minutes) the show might be half over by the time the visitor arrives if they have even slightly misjudged how long it would take to travel to the location of the performance. Clear communication of the time and location of performances increases attendance, and because zoos often do not have a public address system as a museum might to announce the start of a program, zoo audiences might need to be reminded and gathered for each performance.

Other physical challenges zoos face exist because zoos are mostly outdoors, and as is true with overall zoo attendance, weather has a huge impact on visitor numbers, dwell time at exhibits and programs, and satisfaction. Unless a performance area is shaded by trees or covered in some way, visitors will not want to sit in the sun on hot days. Likewise, even if a performance area is covered, rain can cause problems with sound systems and visitors might not want to attend a performance in the rain. In the case of the Queens Zoo, performances must be canceled in the event of any thunder because the performance area is under a tent with metal poles and it

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<sup>40</sup> Mortan interview.

is unsafe for visitors to be underneath it. The Queens Zoo has no indoor location where performances could occur in the event of bad weather.

Many zoos do not have formal performance areas and those that do might present challenges beyond bad weather. When zoos do not have structured performance areas, a lack of seating will result in lower attendance or retention rates. While children do not mind sitting on the ground, parents often do and might not even stop to see a show if seating is not available. A performance space in the middle of an open park is prone to distractions of nearby exhibits. If the audience can see or hear a nearby exhibit, the audience may abandon a performance if an animal suddenly does something interesting. Even mundane ambient noise can prevent audience members from focusing on the show, especially young children. A performance space located too close to an animal enclosure can limit the capacity of the program to be presented in it. Only after renovating the Nature Stage to become a permanent performance space did the Brookfield Zoo staff realize that its proximity to the elephant enclosure drastically limited the length and volume of any sound that could be amplified through its new speaker system. Because animals are the first priority in a zoo, their safety must be carefully considered by a zoo theater program, and even props and costumes must be approved by animal care staff in case any item accidentally ends up in an animal enclosure.

Although aquariums are usually indoors, they still struggle to find performance space in their facilities. Because aquariums are often designed with long, narrow passageways along tanks, there is rarely enough room for a performance in a gallery without creating a bottleneck of visitors. Perhaps more than other types of museums, aquariums' classrooms, formal theaters, and other gathering spaces seem to be located further from their exhibits and closer to entrances. Also because many aquariums are designed as linear experiences, it is more difficult for their visitors to attend a program in the middle of their visit. This might be why some aquariums, including the National Aquarium in Baltimore, have started recommending their visitors see the dolphin show at the very beginning of the visit.

Not only is adequate performance space required for a zoo or aquarium theater program, but space is also needed for rehearsals, storage, costume changes, and performers' breaks. Wildlife Theater lacks rehearsal space at the Bronx Zoo, and rehearsing on the actual stage, which is necessary, is difficult to schedule. Evening events often occur whenever the zoo is not open to the public and rehearsing in front of visitors is never ideal. Storage space for costumes

and props can be difficult to find in buildings that are already cramped and full. Locating a space near the stage is desirable because transporting items needed for performance across long distances is an inefficient use of staff time. With outdoor stages, a solution might require the storage items outdoors, which might leave them susceptible to theft, insects, and water damage. Space near the stage is also needed for performers to change costumes, as actors walking long distances across the zoo in costume might be uncomfortable in hot weather, and although it might serve as publicity for the performance, attention from visitors might delay the performer's arrival to the stage. One solution employed by Wildlife Theater is to use costume pieces that are worn over the performers' zoo uniforms. Like any staff, actors also require down time and thus must have access to an area where they can take breaks out of sight of visitors, which might require another department to share their break room.

Equipment can pose a problem to zoos or museums that are hoping to start a new theater program. Especially if a performance is to occur outdoors, actors' voices must be amplified for them to be heard. An investment in a sound system may represent too great an investment for a new program, especially one that is temporary or only produced on a trial basis. Sharing equipment, such as with a special events department, is an option but might become complicated when charging different budgets for repairs and replacements, and communication about where equipment is stored or who is using it when must be clear to avoid conflicts.

Physical challenges to zoo theater programs can usually be easily overcome if the zoo's senior staff is willing. Grants can often be acquired for equipment, shade covers and seats can be built, and performance spaces can be clearly marked on maps and with signs. However, institutional support, often from a high level, is needed to overcome these challenges.

Institutional support and commitment is essential for any museum program to succeed. As evidenced by the cases of the Philadelphia Zoo, the Adventure Aquarium, and the Shedd Aquarium, a lack of institution support in whatever form it embodies will lead to the end of the program. Zoo theater programs must promote themselves to their coworkers and superiors, communicating anecdotal success stories as well as providing hard data and evidence that a program is attracting audiences and accomplishing its goals. Proof of effectiveness is necessary to secure external funding, and a program that has funding, or at least is perceived as fund-able, is likely to be supported by the institution. Unfortunately, the field of zoo theater is lacking this evidence.

Some zoo theater programs have conducted little or no formal evaluation and those that do rarely get beyond demographics and whether or not they “liked it,” which is not enough. Reasons for this lack of research might include the fact that theater staff is not always adept at or excited about program evaluation and that few organizations have in-house evaluation teams or have one that is too small to thoroughly evaluate all programs on a regular basis. Advocacy for quality research within individual institutions and partners such as universities and museum research groups is needed to communicate to stakeholders what practitioners already believe: that zoo theater is uniquely effective in accomplishing the zoo industry’s shared conservation-related objectives.

### A Case for Zoo Theater

Zoos have changed significantly since the days when animals were exhibited as specimens in bare wire and cement cages. According to Dr. George Rabb, President Emeritus of the Chicago Zoological Society, “the evolution of zoos and aquariums into conservation centers is an ideal generally accepted by those managing or operating such facilities.”<sup>41</sup> Within the last ten years, AZA has embarked on a branding campaign that included an education initiative, unifying the zoo and aquarium field under the common purpose of conservation education. According to the 2008 AZA Accreditation Standards, both “conservation” and “education” must be key elements in an institution’s mission for it to be accredited by the AZA.<sup>42</sup> Theater can be very beneficial in accomplishing zoos’ conservation education missions, advancing institutional goals while meeting the audience’s needs, thus allowing for communication of messages that will be received, remembered and acted upon by the visitors.

People need to physically come to the zoo to receive the educational messages the zoo is trying to communicate. While virtual experiences on the internet are available, they will not have the same impact as physically being in the presence of live animals. While research is needed to understand the exact statistical impact that theater programs have on visitor attendance, theater programs appear to attract visitors and get them through the door. Visitors know that theater is dynamic and that one can only experience it if they are present when it occurs, which entices them to make the trip. Regular theater programming can be good fodder for press releases, and

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<sup>41</sup> George Rabb, “The Evolution of Zoos from Menageries to Centers of Conservation and Caring,” *Curator*, July 2004: 237.

puppets or actors in costume tend to make good photo opportunities.<sup>43</sup> Because a performance can be considered an “event” whereas the zoo itself cannot, theater programming can keep a zoo listed in the local newspaper’s calendar, which amounts to regular free publicity and keeps the zoo constantly in the public consciousness. As was the case at WCS, once a theater program has been well established, people will return just to see theater, not just to see each new show, but, as is developmentally appropriate, young children will want to come back and see the same shows over and over.

Like more traditional museums, zoos aim to cultivate repeat visitation and build a membership base. A theater program allows for zoos to remain fresh and provide something new for repeat visitors. Because it predominantly involves people, a theater program can be changed much more easily and at a much lower cost than an exhibit. Its innate flexibility provides a vehicle for a zoo to easily respond to current events. New performances can also be developed to complement new exhibits, highlight specific animals and supplement festivals and special events. Theater also diversifies a zoo’s program offerings, providing something more for the repeat visitors that have already seen the animal feeding and heard the keeper talk. A more diverse menu of programs will appeal to a broader range of people, hopefully building a larger and more diverse audience. Even within a theater program, different kinds of shows can bring in different audiences, as was the case with *¡Basta Basura! Enough Trash!* at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

The presence of a theater program encourages longer visits. At the Monterey Bay Aquarium, one study revealed that visitors who had attended a program (in this case theater was one of several different programs that a visitor could have attended) tended to stay at the aquarium approximately one hour longer than those who did not attend a program.<sup>44</sup> A study at the St. Louis Zoo found that theater programs lengthened visits by 20-30 minutes.<sup>45</sup> A phenomenon called “museum fatigue” suggests that many visitors can only sustain the concentration required for reading labels, interacting with exhibits, and viewing artifacts, or in this case, animals, for a finite amount of time before they are mentally tired, as well as physically tired from walking and standing. Especially in zoos that often cover large areas where much

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<sup>42</sup> AZA website.

<sup>43</sup> Maloney & Hughes 6.

<sup>44</sup> Mortan presentation.

<sup>45</sup> Louise Bradshaw, personal interview, 8 Feb 2007.

walking is required, theater performances provide a welcome break. Parents of young children especially appreciate the chance to sit and rest for a period of time in which the child is engaged in something else, especially something that is viewed as worthwhile and educational, as is the case with theater (see below). After resting at the performance, visitors are refreshed and able to continue with a longer visit. Some visitors, often the tourists who will only be visiting a given institution once, are motivated to see everything there is to see and might attend all of the different performances that are offered on a given day, thereby staying at the zoo longer. Ultimately, longer visits provide the zoo with more opportunities to communicate conservation messages to visitors. With longer visits, individuals will hopefully learn more, increasing the chances that the experience will have a greater impact on his or her conservation behavior. Longer visits also result in increased food, beverage, and retail sales, a revenue stream on which many zoos depend.

Revenue is essential in accomplishing an organizational mission, and depending on how an institution chooses to run its program, theater can generate substantial revenue. Some institutions choose to charge an additional fee for live performances, the success of which varies by institution. Other institutions use theater performances to add value to a visit. WCS, believing that theater added significant value to the experience, has expanded its theater program in order to justify higher admission prices. Theater departments taking responsibility for high revenue-generating programs such as birthday parties and overnights, which are typically unpopular with education staff, bring in large amounts of money. This was the case with the Treehouse theater program at the Philadelphia Zoo and at the New Jersey State Aquarium. Alternately, theater performances can be add-ons at additional costs for these or other corporate or special events, thereby increasing revenue in situations where the client is already inclined to spend money and could be easily convinced to spend more. This is the case at the San Diego Zoo where the theater-based *Night Prowl* program has been successfully added on to evening special events for many years.

Although skeptics argue that theater programs are too expensive, theater is actually a very efficient method of providing staff-led educational programming. While staff is expensive, zoos try to deliver programs with live people because visitors crave these social and interactive experiences, especially today's parents who are concerned that their children spend too much time with television and computer screens. A single zoo theater performance can serve up to 200

visitors or more at one time, depending on the available space. A single actor can perform multiple times in one day; the Wildlife Theater actors each perform five or six times each day. Considering how highly visitors rank the quality of their zoo theater experiences and how much they report to enjoy them as well as how effective theater can be in communicating zoo messages, other types of staff-led programs cannot deliver as highly-regarded a program with as much impact to as many people for the same cost to the institution.

Zoo theater contributes to increased visitor satisfaction in many ways, including by aiding in crowd control. Large crowds negatively impact visitor satisfaction, and theater can decrease crowds by encouraging visitor distribution throughout a facility. By advertising scheduled showtimes, a certain number of visitors will migrate to the specified area at the specified time. Regular performances can guarantee continuous audience distribution, and multiple performances in different locations can encourage additional traffic circulation. Theater performances can also draw visitors to less popular areas or exhibits and increase the length of time spent in a particular exhibit, especially those where visitors typically do not stop for very long or do not stop at all. The WCS at-habitat performances have been located intentionally within the wetlands exhibits where visitors do not spend very much time unless actors are present.

Theater can improve visitors' perceptions of zoo visits. It is a reality in zoos that animals often sleep during the day while visitors are present. In addition, the growing tendency for zoos to exhibit animals in large, realistic habitats, often with hiding places for the animals, while beneficial to the animal's well-being means that the animals are more difficult to see. Although visitors prefer these naturalistic habitats, they complain if the animals are hiding, out of view or too far away. An enjoyable theater performance can start to make up for disappointment that they could not see a certain animal or if that animal "didn't do anything." This has been especially true while theater has remained an unusual occurrence in zoos; it is a pleasant surprise because visitors are not expecting it. Either because it is not expected in a zoo visit or because it represents a totally different type of activity within their day, visitors perceive theater as a positive component of their visit.

Visitors of all ages are ultimately coming to the zoo for recreation. While visitors enjoy observing animals, they also report that they enjoy theater performances and perceive them to be fun. In fact, more than 80 percent of respondents to the WCS study discussed earlier in this paper

reported that they enjoyed the performance they had seen and almost 93 percent of respondents to a 2007 study of a theater program at the Chicago Zoological Society's Brookfield Zoo either "somewhat" or "strongly" agreed that they had fun during the show they saw. When visitors are enjoying themselves, not only are they satisfied with their visit, but they are more likely to be open to learning new information, and therefore more likely to receive the conservation message embedded not only in a theater program but in the rest of their visit.

Visitors enjoy zoo theater because it often uses humor. While science museums have experimented with serious drama, most zoos that use theater try to remain light-hearted even when confronting difficult or controversial issues. There is not a show in WCS's Wildlife Theater repertoire that cannot be considered lighthearted and funny, and they report that a major reason their program is successful is because it is not heavy handed, so the audience does not feel "preached to." Zoo Atlanta's *Poacher's Trial* program confronted some controversial issues by examining the poacher's economic motivations and encouraging the audience to debate a solution. At the same time, former Zoo Atlanta employee Cindy Horton described the program as "funny," citing that as a reason for its success.

The majority of zoo audiences are families with young children, and when asked why they have attended a museum or zoo theater performance, parents often report that it is for the education of their children. Parents see theater as a worthwhile and valuable educational aspect of their zoo visit. Sixty percent of visitors responding to the Wildlife Theater visitor survey wrote in a response indicating that the reason they enjoyed the performance or would like to see more theater at the zoo was because it was educational for children. Comments included: "It's educational for the kids," "It helps children learn in a fun and interactive way," and "It's a good chance to learn about the animals." One reason families visit zoos in the first place is to enhance their children's education,<sup>46</sup> and because theater is also viewed as a means of educating children, it seems theater is a fitting complement to parental objectives for a zoo visit.

Theater is an engaging method of communicating a zoo's messages. Children who cannot read labels are likely to pick up information from live performances. In this way zoos can reach a major component of their audience in an age-appropriate way that will be understood by the receiver. For example, two year olds at the Prospect Park Zoo who were unable to focus for more

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<sup>46</sup> Lynn M. Milan and Mark K. Wourms, "A Zoological Park is Not Just Another Museum," *Curator* April 1992: 132.



than a minute or two on any other activity or animal in the domestic animals area were mesmerized by a puppet show, and sat still, engaged by the puppet for ten minutes or more. Adult visitors are also notorious for not reading signs. Given that truth, theater is a way to ensure that audiences receive the intended messages even without reading anything. Of course, the higher quality the program, the more successfully it will communicate the desired messages.

Theater also appeals to different learning styles more effectively than the more traditional exhibits and animal presentations. Linguistic visitors appreciate hearing spoken language and musical visitors enjoy the songs or such rhythmically-written pieces as Wildlife Theater's *The Great Treasure Hunt* or the New Jersey State Aquarium's *Near the Edge of the Sea*, which is written in the style of a Dr. Seuss poem. Visitors relate interpersonally to the performers, especially if they have the opportunity to interact with them before or after a performance, and intra-personally by imagining themselves in the place of the characters. Performances that incorporate audience participation through creative drama and the acting out of things appeal to kinesthetic learners. Natural learners benefit if the production is outdoors or if animals are used, portrayed or discussed. Visual-spatial learners connect with the sets, the performance space and any verbal imagery used in a production and logical-mathematical learners connect with any abstract concepts or puzzles presented in a show or if a performance's plot involves a question or mystery that must be solved. Addressing all of these learning styles within a single educational program is extremely difficult, but with theater it can be accomplished much more easily.

From a practical point of view, theater can more easily communicate complicated or abstract ideas that are not easily explained on text panels or through interactive exhibits. Because conservation-related topics tend to be abstract or complicated, such as describing the importance of a "keystone" species in an ecosystem, theater can be a very beneficial tool. Theater can also present multiple sides of an issue, such as examining how a farmer in a rainforest might cut down trees so he can feed his family in the Wildlife Theater production *The Adventures of Captain Cocoa*. Interactive theater, as most zoo theater is, encourages the audience to actively consider multiple perspectives of an issue, such as in the *Poacher's Trial* program. Because the bounds of theater are virtually limitless, performances can connect animals to culture, place animals in geographical and ecological contexts, clarify relationships of animals to other animals, and explain how human actions affect animals.

The only way to truly inspire change in conservation behavior is to make conservation ideas relevant and important to the individual lives of zoo visitors. Theater can accomplish this by facilitating connections between the animals in the zoo, overarching conservation ideas and the visitor. Theater can explain how humans fit into larger ecological systems by demonstrating how specific actions that visitors take can harm or help the environment. For example, *The Adventures of Captain Cocoa* explains how consumers in New York City can help protect the habitat of tamarin monkeys by purchasing shade-grown coffee. Visitors may become defensive when they recognize that their current behavior is harmful to the environment or when they are forced to confront the fact that they are not currently taking pro-conservation actions. Theater mitigates this defensiveness because it presents conservation issues and actions in a manner and environment that visitors perceive as non-threatening.

As zoos seek to educate the public about conservation and encourage conservation behaviors, they must form connections between individuals and the animals they have seen at the zoo to encourage “caring.” Caring about animals in the zoo will hopefully lead to a desire to protect wild animals and their habitats, and possibly encourage conservation-oriented action and lifestyle changes. However, as individuals become more disconnected from nature, the zoo’s job becomes more difficult. In a recent book, Richard Louv identifies this disconnection from nature as “nature-deficit disorder.” Young people are overscheduled with activities and are spending too much time indoors, watching television, playing video games or using computers. Modern parents are afraid to allow their children to play outside, fearing abduction, traffic and pollution. The United States is also experiencing a loss of natural areas around residential neighborhoods as well as a loss of rural areas. Children are often afraid of animals at zoos because they so seldom encounter animals of any kind in their daily lives.<sup>47</sup> Theater can ease children into interactions with animals, making them less scary. One parent commented in a former Queens Zoo survey that the performance she saw with her children “eliminates the fear of the animals that they might have.”<sup>48</sup> Overcoming fear is the first step in forming connections to animals.

Theater in a zoo is very memorable. As history (and television) has proven, a narrative is always more interesting to listen to and remember than a list of facts, and theater uses narrative.

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005) 34.

<sup>48</sup> Hurtubise interview.

Memory is also linked to emotion.<sup>49</sup> Theater has the ability to make us feel. Audiences relate to characters, feel sympathy and empathy, and sometimes place themselves in the situations described in a play. Because people are more likely to remember situations and even information when it is embedded within an emotional experience, theater in zoos can increase the amount of information and messages that are retained by visitors. One zoo theater professional recalled that a trip to Colonial Williamsburg in which performers discussing the Stamp Act seemed to be following him around for an entire day. This resulted in an “a-ha” moment when the Stamp Act was introduced to him in school many years later. Zoos can try to recreate these types of experiences with environmental education.

Music has been shown to increase one’s ability to remember information. Incorporating music into theatrical performances in zoos can increase visitors’ ability to remember key messages. Wildlife Theater includes music and songs in almost every performance. When actors at the New York City zoos were asked if they believed their program impacted children, many of them reported that the children would remember the songs and sing them not only throughout the day while they continued to visit the zoo but also when they returned to the zoo on other occasions, even several weeks later. Parents have often reported to the actors that their children sing the songs from Wildlife Theater performances while they are at home, sometimes even incorporating them into their daily routines.<sup>50</sup> As the New England Aquarium has begun experimenting with musical programs, they have received similar comments about children remembering information through song.<sup>51</sup>

Live theater has become an activity for the elite in our society, and so for many zoo visitors, especially young children, seeing a performance in a zoo will be their first exposure to live theatre. Many others might not have seen a live theatre performance in a very long time, or else it is something they do very rarely. Simply because it is a new or unique experience it will be memorable and meaningful. In this way, zoo theater is also beneficial to zoo visitors as an artistic program for its own sake. Zoo theater might even inspire visitors to attend live theatre more often, thus benefiting the entire performing arts community.

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<sup>49</sup> Catherine Hughes, “Drama on the Brain,” International Museum Theatre Alliance Global Conference, Richmond, VA, 12 August 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Ellers, personal interview, 9 June 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Carlisle email.

Theater in zoos is also memorable because visitors view it as a special experience, not just because it is something new, different or rarely done, but because theater audiences understand that the experience is unique. The exact experience theater audiences have during a performance will never be repeated *precisely* as it was for them. Because it involves live people, theater can respond and adapt to individual audiences. Especially because zoo theater is usually interactive, actors respond directly to the audience. When someone speaks directly to you, invites you to respond, asks your name, or answers your specific question, the experience becomes more personally relevant. Visitors are more likely to remember experiences that are personally relevant.

Theater can also prove to be an extremely powerful experience. Jonathan Ellers tells a story about how one day at the Prospect Park Zoo he came across a strange metal contraption near the wetlands exhibit. As he brought it over to where the actors were performing their “at-habitat” bits, he saw a young girl standing there talking with them excitedly about the animals in the pond. According to the girl’s parents, the contraption was a walking aid, and the forty minutes that the child had stood without it while engaged with the actors was the longest amount of time she had ever stood on her own and unaided.<sup>52</sup>

There is some preliminary evidence that theater programs in zoos can directly lead to positive changes in conservation behavior. Wildlife Theater actors have observed children picking up trash around the zoo after watching the “at habitat” bit that relates picking up trash to the health of turtles in wetlands. Also, because there are so many repeat visitors to the WCS zoos, parents and children happily report back to the actors when they have changed a behavior, such as “we only buy shade grown coffee, now!” It is likely that instances like this occur very frequently but have not yet been systematically captured, recorded and shared.

### Is Zoo Theater Worth It?

A group of museum theater practitioners gathered at the International Museum Theater Alliance global conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland in the fall of 2007 to discuss the many pros and cons of theater in zoos and aquariums and to evaluate whether the benefits outweighed the many challenges, thus making it “worth” the effort. The answer was a resounding “yes!”

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<sup>52</sup> Ellers interview.

While the participants in the discussion were predisposed to feel this way, they clearly argued that zoo theater is worth it because “it works.”<sup>53</sup>

Zoos and aquariums wish to communicate messages about conservation, which can be a sensitive topic. Visitors feel safe in a zoo setting and enjoy theater programs as part of their visit, therefore they are likely to listen to and accept the conservation messages within zoo theater programs. Because theater lengthens zoo visits and encourages repeat attendance, theater programs provide a greater number opportunities for conservation messages to reach their intended audience. Because theater in a zoo is seen as a unique and memorable experience and because theater programs encourage emotional connection and involvement, the audience is more likely to retain the messages they hear. When they remember messages that they associate with a positive experience, visitors are more likely to change their conservation behavior based on these messages, thus accomplishing a zoo’s goals.

While those who work with zoo theater observe its impact and can provide seemingly endless volumes of anecdotal evidence, they recognize that statistical proof is needed to convince decision-makers of the value of zoo theater. Administrators and funders often rely on numerical data to understand a program’s outcomes, and so zoo theater practitioners must “speak their language” when presenting the case for their theater programs. Further research is needed to provide this statistical data. Thorough evaluations of existing theater programs represent a beginning, many of which have been conducted but have not been made public. The International Museum Theatre Alliance and/or the revival of the AZA’s theater resource group could provide a platform for sharing existing research, contributing to a bank of knowledge that would set the stage for comprehensive and academic studies of zoo theater. Follow-up and longitudinal studies will provide a solid foundation for funding proposals and rationales. With true evidence of its effectiveness, more support can be obtained for the continuation and expansion of zoo theater programs.

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<sup>53</sup> International Museum Theatre Alliance, “Is Zoo Theatre Worth It?” IMTAL Global Conference, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 23 Sept. 2007.

## Part Five: Conclusion

The term “zoo theater” refers to the regular use of theater as an interpretive strategy or educational program in a zoo or aquarium. While zoo theater was extremely popular during the prosperous 1990s, the economic downturn following September 11, 2001 forced many zoos and aquariums to significantly reduce or cut their programs. After the prominent and well-regarded zoo theater programs at the Philadelphia Zoo, New Jersey State Aquarium and John G. Shedd Aquarium all ended between 2002 and 2004, proponents of the practice feared that a trend away from using zoo theater was developing. However, upon close examination, these programs appear to have been cut due to changes in management and philosophical shifts in program approaches. A recent survey of current theater activities at zoos and aquariums not only reveals that no such trend exists, but suggests that the use of theater in zoos might be on the rise. Even in organizations that have had to suspend their theater programs, there is much hope that zoo theater may one day return to many of the institutions where it has been lost and be introduced into organizations where it has never been used before.

As zoo theater grows and diversifies as it is implemented by a greater number of institutions, model programs become increasingly important as benchmarks of excellence. The Wildlife Theater at WCS in New York City represents the largest and most comprehensive zoo theater program in the United States. While the unique environment in New York provides advantages not available in other areas, Wildlife Theater’s policies, procedures and philosophy provide examples of best practices and an ideal toward which other programs can strive.

Zoo theater faces many challenges, often derived from the presence of live animals, physical limitations unique to zoos and aquariums and lack of communication within an institution. However, the many benefits zoo theater offers an institution and its visitors make the effort more than worthwhile. Theater can add value to an experience, generate revenue, diversify a zoo’s menu of programs, lengthen visits, and encourage repeat visitation. Most importantly, theater can effectively communicate a zoo or aquarium’s conservation messages, thereby advancing the educational component of these institutions’ missions.

While practitioners fully believe in the power of zoo theater to educate and inspire zoo visitors to change their conservation behavior, more evaluation and research is needed to statistically demonstrate these assumptions to funders and other decision makers. With the

lessons learned from past experiences, zoo theater practitioners must be prepared for the next time programs are threatened, and by working together through organizations such as IMTAL and AZA, arm themselves with the necessary proof to retain and expand quality theater programs in zoos and aquariums.

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