***INTERVIEW WITH THE 2007 IMTY AWARD WINNER:***

***Jeff Patchen, The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis***

*By Jillian Finkle, Manager of Theatre and Early Childhood Programs, National*

*Children’s Museum*

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Jeff Patchen is the President and CEO of the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis in

Indianapolis, IN. The museum employs ten full-time actor-interpreters to perform plays

and characters in their galleries and to present professional children’s theatre productions

in their Lilly Theatre. The museum also utilizes first and third person interpretation. Mr.

Patchen joined the staff of the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis in 1999 after serving

as the senior program officer for the Getty Education Institute for the Arts, a program of

the J. Paul Getty Trust, for four years.

Jillian Finkle: As a museum director, why do you support museum theatre?

Jeff Patchen: In the broad sense, theatre in museums is important because it provides a

context and reveals the human stories behind objects, artifacts and ideas . As one of the

few children’s museums with a large collection, the theatre program at the Children’s

Museum of Indianapolis strives to bring to life the stories of our objects and artifacts,

connecting visitors to different places and times. Our museum explores a range of

disciplines, including the sciences, arts and the humanities, and we try to integrate theatre

into the entire visitor experience.

JF: Your mission is “to create extraordinary learning experiences that have the power to

transform the lives of children and families.” How does museum theatre advance this

mission?

JP: While extraordinary experiences are key to our mission, they are also key to an

extraordinary visitor experience. All of the components of our theatre program help

define that extraordinary experience. A museum can have great spaces, but they aren’t

extraordinary without interpretation, and theatre plays a very important role in that.

Theatre can also take a static space and make it come alive. One example is the character

of “Sherlock Bones,” who explains what fossils are and why they are important in our

*Dinosphere* exhibit. A glassblower character describes the tools used in the process of

blowing glass at a cart by our Chihuly sculpture, while another character interprets the

Rueben Wells locomotive. In these ways, theatre makes these things real for children and

families.

JF: How would you describe the value of museum theatre to other museum directors?

JP: Using museum theatre contributes to our programming philosophy at the Children’s

Museum of Indianapolis, taking interpretation to the next level. Our goal is that visitors

will never know who they are going to meet or when, where and how they’ll be

transported via a theatrical experience. Young visitors can be just as excited about whom

they met during their museum visit as they are about what they saw. Visitors expect this,

and in this way theatre drives attendance at the museum. Theatre also contributes to our

strategy of family learning, reaching those visitors who learn in ways other than reading

and observing.

JF: What do you say to the argument that museum theatre is too expensive?

JP: We don’t think of theatre as expensive because we don’t think of it as an add-on.

Because we know that theatre drives attendance and repeat visitation, it has become part

of our bottom line and part of our earned revenue strategy. 30,000 families return to our

museum an average of 5.9 times per year, due in large part to the ever-changing museum

theatre program. Also, when we think about making improvements to the museum and

the exhibits, we think about museum theatre and how it can be used to improve the visitor

experience.

JF: Do you face any internal opposition to using museum theatre from your senior staff or

board?

JP: No, our board is committed to the use of museum theatre. In fact, they not only want

more dynamic theatre programs to promote and enliven older spaces, but also for new

exhibits. For example, we are currently developing an exhibit titled *The Power of*

*Children*, which will include three immersive theatres interpreted by live actors. From the

beginning, the plans have called for half of the money raised to be used as an endowment

to support interpretation, programming and exhibit maintenance. While we could have

chosen to use media exclusively, live actors will transform the gallery and the visitor

experience; and museum theatre is the best way to do that.

JF: Was there an experience in particular that convinced you that you wanted to use

theatre in your museum?

JP: The museum theatre program was already in place when I arrived at the Children’s

Museum of Indianapolis, though not to the extent that it is now. Growing up, my parents

took me to living history sites like Williamsburg and Fort Henry, as well as theatre events

such as the Lost Colony in North Carolina. These experiences greatly influenced my

childhood. I also had the opportunity to work on the Indiana State Standards for Theatre

while working at the Indiana Department of Education in the 1980’s. That experience

convinced me that theatre needs to be integrated into the general education of all children

in grades K-12 in this country, not just in school, but also in their experiences at informal

learning organizations. I’m not an actor, but I’ve always loved being around theatre and

have enjoyed it my whole life. Now I wonder how a museum can survive without theatre

to engage and immerse visitors and enhance the overall museum experience.

JF: Anything else you’d like to add?

JP: I’d also like to mention that our museum is very fortunate to have a museum theatre

professional leading our efforts. Tessa Bridal came to us from the Science Museum of

Minnesota. Her experience is a very good fit with our museum.

JF: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us.

JP: There is such a great network of museum theatre professionals who are greatly underleveraged

in the museum field, and I hope that this award will help to influence other

CEOs and other museums, and help them to understand what theatre can do for them.