

Revolutionizing the tourist experience In historic district, quite a story to tell

By Howard Shapiro
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In summer, Philadelphia is a theater without walls. It's one of the few places in the United States where every day, in the middle of a living city, actors offer passersby tales of the town, all for free. The story-theater buzzes through the streets of Old City, and has changed the way tourists visit Philadelphia. Sometimes even local citizens, going about their hometown business, will stop to listen.

The actors offer not only well-researched stories but an easy chance to connect with real Philadelphians, even if for only five or 10 minutes. And they do their work in a cityscape packed with narrative: Perhaps no other American place has such a wealth of documented anecdotes about itself and its people, invested here with the idea that Philadelphia gave the modern concept of liberty, in all its bold imperfection, to the world.

It's likely you've never heard some of these tales before — the one about the Philadelphia librarian who secretly helped make revolution possible, or about the colonial Philly girl who danced the night away with the Brits, surrounded by stuff stolen from Philadelphia homes. An actor at a storytelling bench may morph into King Louis XVI, as Tim Gross — just back from a national theater tour — did the other day. Or,

like Temple theater major Brittany Holdahl, she'll describe her forbidden night with the redcoats so vividly that you feel personally offended at the very idea (unless, perhaps, you're visiting from London).

"They really make the history come to life," Linda Stewart, a visitor, said of the actors stationed around the historic district. She had just

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heard Nathan Edmondson, whose last gig was in Arden Theatre's recent *Our Town*, describe the risk-taking involved in signing the Declaration on Independence.

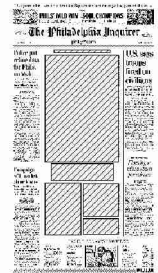
The actors, most of them hired by Historic Philadelphia Inc., are stationed all over the city blocks that contain Independence National Historical Park, whose staff certifies the authenticity of each story. (Grosset & Dunlap this month published 20 of them in a book, *Patriots, Pirates, Heroes & Spies: Stories from Historic Philadelphia*.)

As cars whoosh by, a street musician plays and Philadelphians pass within feet of the Liberty Bell without noticing (because it's always there), these actors spin their yarns — each has a repertoire of half a dozen — four or five times an hour. The stories are set in Philadelphia, with Philadelphians as characters, but like so much of the city's historical endowment, they end up being about what makes Americans Americans.

Every little piece has tension, conflict and plot. "I treat them as five- to seven-minute one-acts," says Historic Philadelphia's artistic director, Geoffrey Berwind. "There has to be a clear thread. What is



Street theater is revitalizing the historic Phila. experience. "It's one of the nicest things in the city," a tourist said. Above, actor Mark Sherlock.



this performance about? What are these performers' individual gifts? What's the point of the story, and how can we make it jump? We use a lot of mime, and interaction, and a bench may become a ship."

The storytellers meet face to face with those who come to the city for the chance to explore America's roots. (More than a million summertime visitors typically sample the historic district, and this year, the National Park Service says, numbers are trending even higher.) They appear to be channeling the spirit of a gentleman who pops up as a character in a number of their anecdotes: quintessential Philadelphian Benjamin Franklin, who himself had a way with a story or — when he was ambassador to France — at least a decent *bon mot*.

This the fourth year of Historic Philadelphia's Once Upon A Nation program, which employs the actors to tell a total of 80 stories at 13 half-circle benches in Center City, and four at Valley Forge, where many visitors experience the program on their way into town. Observers often express delighted amazement at the program, which is live, informal, continuous and — best of all — free.

"It's one of the nicest things in the city," said Kim Daquilante of Williamstown, N.J., who with her family had just heard an account of George Washington's personal travails rendered by Mala Wright, an actor who's also working on a yet-unreleased cable series called *Sister Girl*. "First of all, it's free," Daquilante said, "and they're always great actors, the storytellers."

Wright, in her third summer as a storyteller, is by now used to the heat that comes with performing outdoors, as well as the occasional strange encounters with street people. "We *are* in an urban setting, so that happens," she

says. But there's a clear upside: The actors are the people tourists will remember.

"People say, 'This is the best thing on our trip,'" according to Wright. "There's a lot of one-on-one, and it's such a nice thing to touch people personally. It says to them, 'You're not just a tourist.'"

Indeed, the actors, who ring an old-fashioned handbell to draw people into the start of a story, end up being civic ambassadors, answering questions about everything from the historic to the mundane once the stories are over.

Historic Philadelphia, whose funding comes from government and private sources, also runs the interpretation programs at Betsy Ross House, Franklin Square, the evening *Lights of Liberty* show, and a round of special programs each week. Evening tours and *Lights of Liberty* charge fees, unlike the daytime programming — with the storytelling by actors in light-green shirts, and the open-air programming with costumed actors at Betsy Ross House or along Harmony Lane, off Third Street near Chestnut. The actors make between \$13 and \$16 an hour.

One morning last week, Historic Philadelphia storytellers and interpreters met in their headquarters at Third and Chestnut before fanning out to their posts. It was a typical summer day for typical backstage preparations — although without, of course, a typical stage.

Actors who play colonial roles were busy at racks of costumes. They pulled on tights and put on vests or aprons and bonnets, smoothing out the fabric. In another room, storytellers discussed the strange behavior of two observers who had kept reappearing the day before; supervisors would be tracking them if they showed up again.

The humidity already was building as the storytellers loaded brochures into their packs and Gregory DeCandia — operations manager at Society Hill Playhouse and a Once Upon a Nation supervisor — brought the meeting to a close.

"Stay cool," he told the actors, in a pep talk unlikely ever to be heard in theaters with walls. "Stay hydrated. Stay healthy."

And, it went without saying, stay on top of those stories.

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ERIC MENCHER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Nathan Edmondson, a storyteller with the "Once Upon a Nation" program, entertains a group. Actors perform historical "one-acts" at 13 stations in the Independence National Historical Park area.

