



Stacy Roth, right, performs in a fife and drum duo alongside Lance Peterson at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania.

Photo by John Niemiec

B. David Emerson stands alongside the late Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev at a historical reenactment in April 2005.

Photo by Stacy Roth



EMBOODYING

Icons

Through interactive storytelling,
historical interpreter duo transport audiences to the past

BY DEBRA STEVCO MILLER

If you had an opportunity to have a conversation with a historic figure, what would you ask?

Characters portrayed by seasoned professionals Stacy Roth and B. David Emerson transport guests back in time using learned dialects, quirky traits, era-appropriate apparel and an abundance of knowledge to convince you of being in the presence of famous people from history.

For 30 years, Roth and Emerson have plied their trade for historical reenactments and special events. They began working at living history museums earlier in their careers at places such as the Old Barracks Museum in Trenton and Morristown National Historical Park, where they developed an interest in educating visitors about important aspects of our country's past through first-person interpretation.

The two friends founded History on the Hoof when it became clear that their talents as historical interpreters were in demand outside of museum role-playing jobs. Acknowledged history buffs, they built a successful storytelling business.

Emerson has traveled to many places along the Eastern Seaboard, portraying George Washington for the United States Mint and the 225th anniversary of the Battle of Monmouth. He also leads talks about commanding the troops at age 21; distilling whiskey, fox hunting and the finer points of crop rotation — each geared toward the audience in attendance. He also is a spot-on Benjamin Franklin interpreter.

Factual and engaging, Emerson takes his roles seriously, enjoying the interaction. His convincing portrayals have led to appearances in documentaries and films.

"You never know what you're going to be called upon to use. It is fascinating. You've got to know everything, but you can't," he said about intensely studying a well-known person. "As long as I'm speaking in that dialect, I'm thinking like the character."

Another role he performs is someone whom he's admired since boyhood.

"Other kids wanted to be firemen and police officers," he said about his younger self. "I wanted to be Davy Crockett."



Roth's reenactment approach captures the character's personality, which helps her relate to her audience.

Photo by Vicki Chirco



Throughout the year, you'll find Emerson or Roth telling stories or singing historical songs across the state.

Photo by John Niemiec

Emerson is a spot-on Benjamin Franklin interpreter.

Photo by Stacy Roth



So, he created a program called Tall Tales of Davy Crockett and Lies of the Mountain Men, which allows him to emulate his hero while relating legendary stories of the American West.

Sometimes, several characters of a certain era are merged into one to highlight a folk hero, field of work or historic place. Molly Pitcher is one example.

Roth transforms herself into the well-known lady of the battlefield effortlessly. Her tales of helping the fighting men during the Revolutionary War is engaging — especially when she demonstrates how to load a cannon or encourages participation in artillery drills. Her period speeches capture the character's personality, which helps her relate to her audience as an "old friend; people I want to confide in," she offered.

Her efforts are quite effective.

"I always feel that is the highest compliment that I can get — when, after I've done a program, is for somebody to say 'Oh my gosh. I felt like you were really there, and I was talking to the real thing,'" she said. "That is the best thing anybody can say to me."

As a student of American studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Roth wrote her graduate thesis on the subject by interviewing historical interpreters on their techniques. It eventually became a book called "Past into Present."

"It made the case for why first-person interpretation can be such a wonderful tool in a museum," she said about her book. "It allows visitors to look up the footnotes, the history, by talking to a very well-informed interpreter who's giving their best answers as a person of the past. It's immersive."

Throughout the year, you might find Roth or Emerson telling stories or singing historical songs at East Jersey Old Town Village, Monmouth Battlefield, a local library or outdoor festival, but anyone can invite History on the Hoof to a private function and request a fife and drum duo, enjoy 18th century tavern songs or listen to the tales of a whaling captain or Irish gentleman, for instance.

"A story is a great way to enliven what would otherwise be a dry fact," Roth said. "If you have a story or anecdote that you can trot out to somebody instead of just a set of facts, it will be much more engaging and people will be more likely to remember it, or recall it, or have it connect with them emotionally."

Roth and Emerson aren't limited by only the characters mentioned here and often are recruited to add someone new to their repertoire — another true-to-life person from yesteryear.

Send booking/email inquiries to: HistoryOnTheHoof@verizon.net. For more information, visit: historyonthehoof.com. ❖



Photo by Vicki Chirco