

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

Gretchen Murray Sepik performs as Surly Sal for the Young Audiences of Western New York.

Young Audiences brings canal history to life for kids



BY COLIN DABKOWSKI

NEWS ARTS WRITER

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For the typical fidgeting sixth-grader, learning about the history of the Erie Canal from the pages of a textbook or the monotonous drone of a teacher's voice holds all the appeal of a trip to the dentist.

That's something Gretchen Murray Sepik, a storyteller, playwright and actress from Rochester, knows well. So she wraps up the dates, facts and stories about the canal's history in a palatable package that's hard for kids to ignore.

Sepik's self-invented character, "Surly Sal," an outspoken Irish woman serving as a cook on an Erie Canal boat in the 1840s, will headline an evening of family-friendly activities produced by Young Audiences of Western New York next Friday in the Albright- Knox Art Gallery.

"She's missing her front tooth and she's a little bit grouchy," Sepik said of her character. The heavily interactive performance, which Sepik has toured around to dozens of schools and groups throughout Western New York, weaves Irish folktales together with insights into the long and storied history of the canal.

"I erase that imaginary line between the performer and the audience. There is no imaginary line," Sepik said. "It's a very powerful way to teach and for

children to learn."

It's an approach embraced by Young Audiences of Western New York, which devised and invited Sepik to perform in "Journeys and Journals: Traveling on the Erie Canal," a school-based residency focusing on Erie Canal history. Next Friday's version of the program marks one of the more public projects of the educational organization, which has long been known in schools but remains largely beneath the radar of Buffalo's cultural community.

The original intent of the organization was to build audiences for the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in 1962. But that mission, said recently appointed executive director Cynn timer Gaasch, has since broadened to include all art forms and a focus on the use of arts as an educational tool.

"We want to ensure that we have future audiences," Gaasch said. "But it's actually more complicated than that, in that the educations that our young people receive don't necessarily integrate the arts as much as they really could."

Next Friday's event will feature performances by musicians Doug Yeomans and Geoffrey Perry, who perform and discuss songs from the heyday of the Erie Canal as The Stringmen. It also includes a creative writing component led by poet and singer/songwriter Melissa Kate, and visual arts activities led by artists Helga MacKinnon and Gerald Mead.

As the funding outlook for nonprofits remains bleak, groups like Young Audiences are increasingly trying to raise their public profile in hopes of attracting attention and funding, both from individuals and foundations. Gaasch said she hopes this collaboration with the Albright-Knox, which will repeat at least twice yearly, will have that effect.

"Young Audiences is this secret, because we do most of our programming in schools. We don't do public programming, we don't have a venue. The idea is really that we need to get our programs out there into the public more so that people know what we're doing," Gaasch said. "I look at the people I see out on the weekends, and I just know that these people don't know who we are. Those are the people I want to touch."•

## PREVIEW

WHAT: "Journeys and Journals: Traveling on the Erie Canal"

WHEN: 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. next Friday

WHERE: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1285 Elmwood Ave.

TICKETS: Free INFO: 882-8700 or

[www.albrightknox.org](http://www.albrightknox.org)