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# Troupe focuses on the forgotten

**By Lucia Mauro**
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When local actress Betsey Means was invited to talk about visual art to her daughter's kindergarten class, she had no intention of going the well-worn podium-and-slide-projector route. Instead Means, who has performed with Chicago Shakespeare Theater and Shakespeare on the Green in Lake Forest, decided to "become" 19th Century American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt — complete with costume, proper elocution and sketches.

She then carried the idea several steps farther and, almost one year ago, established WomanLore, a professional performance company dedicated to illuminating the accomplishments of historic women. For it, Means teamed up with her acting coach, Eileen Vorbach of The Actors Center, who directs the one-woman pieces. You can see their work Dec. 15 at the Newberry Library in WomanLore's presentation of "Fish & Fetish: A Lecture by Mary Kingsley."

Means will portray Kingsley, a Victorian adventurer who — after spending most of her life caring for her mother in England — set out for West Africa where she discovered new species of fish and wrote enlightening tomes about the culture. The actress aims to capture the tenacity and humor of a woman who was quite popular on the lecture circuit. Therefore, "Fish & Fetish" will be structured as a speaking engagement, with Means sharing her characters' adventures and accomplishments — not delivering a dry catalog of Kingsley's life. She even does a Q&A in character.

"It's like a living book club or a human newspaper," said Vorbach of the show's format. "We don't try to put any political slant on the performance. We use these women's original words, including excerpts from their books and journals, as well as periodicals of the time."

While education is a goal, both women stressed that they approach these pieces from a theatrical viewpoint, with special attention to dramatic adaptations and authentic costuming and scenic design. "We definitely want to give the audience a piece of these women's reality," Vorbach added.

WomanLore focuses on women who have been forgotten or overlooked by history.

"When you think about someone like Mary Kingsley," explained Means, "she led an extraordinary life and, in a relatively short period of time, made an impact on the world. Imagine how she must have been ostracized or viewed as an eccentric during her time. I've learned a lot about courage from Mary Kingsley."

They also pointed out that, while most people are familiar with Susan B. Anthony or Mother Jones, they may not have a deep understanding of these women's revolutionary achievements.

"In history class," said Vorbach, "you tend to get the big moments, involving FDR or JFK, and the others are like sidelines. Yet all of these efforts, from Mother Jones' influence on labor laws to the whole women's suffrage movement, led up to those larger moments."

Means also has created "The March of the Mill Children: A Lecture by Mother Jones," which chronicles the American labor leader's efforts that included walking with scores of child laborers from Kensington, Penn., to President Theodore Roosevelt's home in Long Island to publicize the atrocities of government-sanctioned child labor.

Next spring, Vorbach will adapt and perform as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Women's Suffrage leader and Susan B. Anthony's speech writer, who encouraged women to "have a sense of self." WomanLore's larger goal is to establish a full repertory of one-woman shows, performed by a large pool of actresses, about historic figures stretching across the centuries.

In addition to performances in traditional venues, WomanLore offers "soirees" in people's homes. So, with a discreet wink to an era when parlors served as intimate stages, Mary Kingsley would be thrilled to share her tales of plowing through the African bush and taking part in tribal ceremonies with guests at a brunch or afternoon tea.

*WomanLore's "Fish & Fetish: A Lecture by Mary Kingsley" will be performed at 11 a.m. Dec. 15 at the Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton St., 312-255-3700. Tickets: free-$10.*