

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Minneapolis, Minnesota, showing a wide river (the Mississippi) flowing through it. In the foreground, a large, curved parking lot is filled with cars. To the right, there are several large, multi-story brick buildings, possibly a university campus. In the background, a dense urban skyline with various skyscrapers is visible under a blue sky with some clouds. A bridge with a red railing spans the river in the middle ground. A barge is visible on the river in the lower left.

# ISSUE SIX : SPRING 2017

## OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

# PROVOCATIONS

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is aerial view of University of Minnesota East and West Bank campuses and the Mississippi River. Photographer Patrick O’Leary. Image via University of Minnesota.

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IN REVIEW

# ONE RIVER: TELLING STORIES OF THE ST. LOUIS RIVER

By Phyllis Mauch Messenger

In northeast Minnesota, the St. Louis River winds for 192 miles from Hoyt Lakes to St. Louis Bay, where it empties into Lake Superior. Along the way, people paddle on the river, they use its waters, they enjoy its beauty, and sometimes they fear it. People tell stories; legends are passed down. In fall 2016, some of these

stories and legends were woven into a play called *One River*, written by theatre professor Tom Isbell and performed by a student cast from the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD).

The play grew out of “*One River, Many Stories*,” a year-long initiative launched in fall 2015 by UMD



*Scene from production of "One River" at University of Minnesota Duluth.  
Image courtesy of Mueez Ahmad and Brett Groehler.*

journalism professors John Hatcher and Jennifer Moore. The project was an homage to the late journalist Mike Simonson, who had intended to produce an epic radio documentary about the St. Louis River in his retirement. Instead, with his widow's blessing, they invited journalists, poets, artists, and other river lovers to share their own stories about the river. The program recently published their final report available [here](#).

Tom Isbell was drawn immediately to the idea of capturing the essence of the project in an evening of theatre as another way to tell river stories. When he set out to write the script for the play, Isbell's challenge was to sift through millennia of history and hundreds of stories, told by dozens of narrators, both human and nonhuman. The resulting documentary theatre adaptation succeeded by channeling narratives about the river's past, present, and future using short stories, vignettes, and quotations delivered by the 11-member cast. The setting was spare, but evocative. Each scene was performed with minimal props (paddles, beaver hats, lanterns, newspapers) and creative use of movable stage blocks, which transformed into kayaks, river banks, or Duluth street corners.

The river was established as the central character in the play through the opening portrayal of Anishinaabe Water Walker [Sharon Day](#), whose message is, "Water, we love you." Journalist Mike Simonson and his unfulfilled dream project were portrayed with a palpable sense of loss, yet the trajectory of the storyline did not allow the audience to wallow in sadness. Instead, a rowdy all-hands-on-deck "One River Rap" was a musical telling of the project's evolution, as Simonson's colleagues and friends brought it to life.

Other scenes varied from humorous to dramatic, light to raucous. The geologic history of the river was told with actors' bodies illustrating glacial drift and structural geology. "Isn't geology cool!" they announced. Local poet Sheila Packa, Duluth's Poet Laureate, was portrayed through a reading of her river poem. Laura Erickson, the



*Map of Minnesota and the St. Louis River showing the location of Duluth (MN) and Superior (WI), marked in orange. Map after Alexrk2 and GeoTools. (CC BY 3.0)*

"Dr. Ruth of Ornithology," was the embodiment of true bird lovers everywhere. The epic story of the 1871 digging of the Duluth shipping canal was portrayed with comic satire, complete with heroes and villains seeking to outwit each other as to which of the Twin Ports, Duluth or Superior, would be able to create the more accessible harbor. Legend has it that citizens banded together to dig the canal overnight; the audience was left to ponder a more nuanced interpretation of both places.

Animals also told their stories of life on the river. Two beavers narrated (in exaggerated Canadian accents) their love story and mating rituals. Eagles, loons, and songbirds evoked the wild nature of the St. Louis and the fragility of the ecosystem, both past and present. Wendell Barry, A.A. Milne, and other river philosophers and

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writers were represented by short narrations in contemplative moments between scenes.

Actors garbed in plastic rain ponchos and carrying stacks of newspapers called out an hour-by-hour narration of the devastating Northland flood of June 19-20, 2012. Over 24 hours, a record 10 inches of rain had roared down the hills and rivers above Duluth and along the North Shore, washing out sewers, roads, and bridges. “10:39 pm: Manhole covers blowing out on Main Street.” Whap—newspapers hit the floor; actors stomp to next position. “12:52 am: car falls into sinkhole on Skyline Parkway, 4 occupants escape.” Whap! “2:40 A.M. Raging Kingsbury Creek floods Lake Superior Zoo. Polar bear escapes its enclosure! A seal is swimming on Grand Avenue!” Whap! The

scene might have been a tad too long for some, but for those who experienced the 16.6 foot “flood of record,” it was a visceral reminder of the hours of terror and years of rebuilding.

As they explored the intertwined ideas of “story” and “sense of place” throughout *One River*, the players evoked the Department of Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy, and other agencies and advocacy groups. The characters invited all to enter into the stories and to participate in shaping the narrative. The story would not have been complete without attention to the conflict that grips the region today. Communities throughout the North Country and the region are debating the pros and cons of copper-nickel mining: a promise of renewed mining jobs on the



*Kayaking on the St. Louis. Scene from “One River.”  
Image courtesy of Mueez Ahmad and Brett Groehler.*

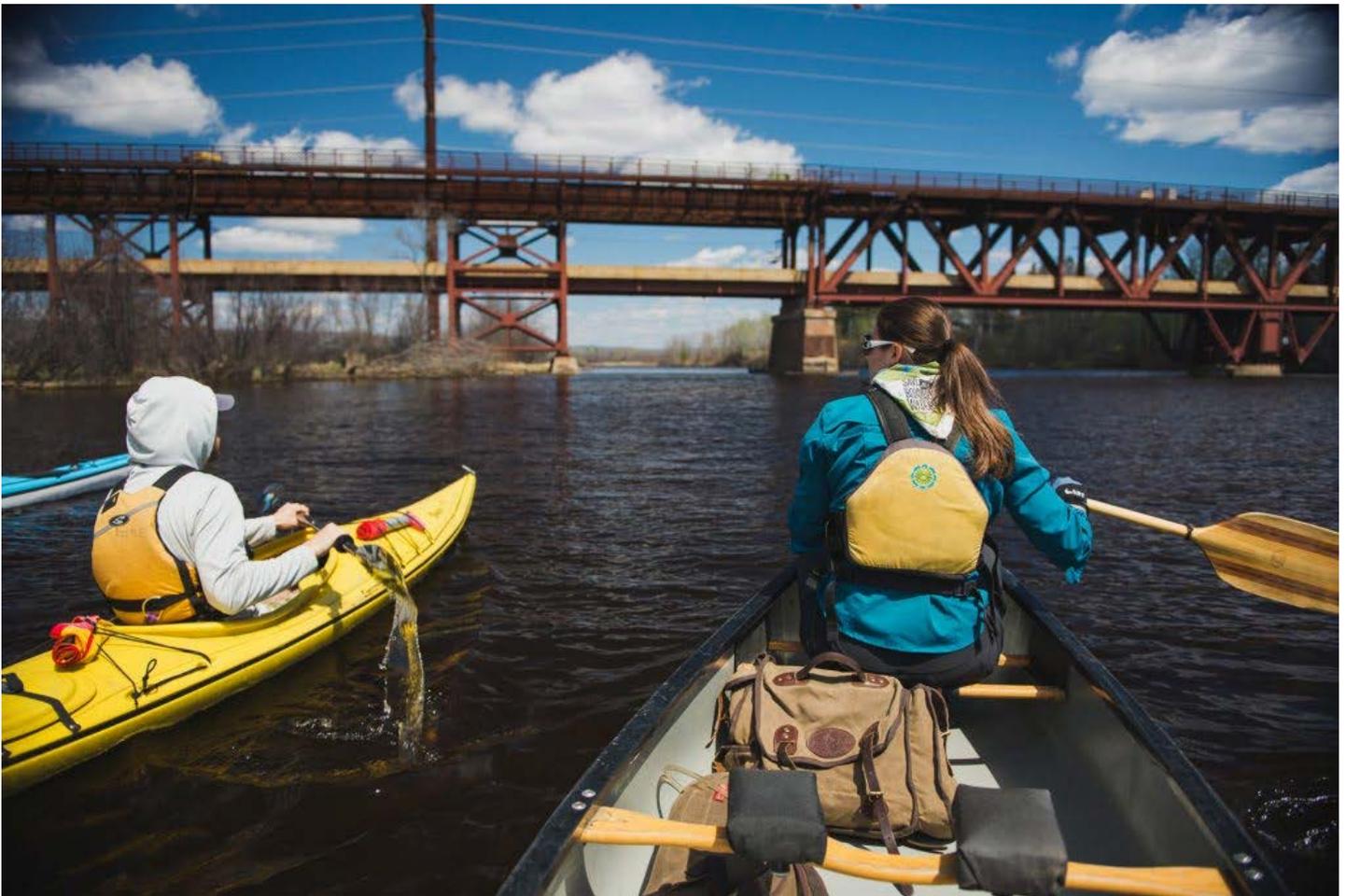
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Iron Range versus the potential for long-term damage to the river and its watershed, as well as Lake Superior. Sara Thomsen's folk song, "Precious Water," hauntingly told one side of the debate, evoking a plea for preservation of the environment and the river. Seeking not to become preachy or one-sided, the cast also presented the perspective of miners and the need for economic development in depressed communities.

What was the takeaway from *One River*? No matter what story was being told, or whose voice was telling it, the overarching message being conveyed was one of appreciation and caring. "St. Louis River, we love you," each player seemed to be saying. It was a local story, locally told.

So when the UMD Theatre Department was invited to perform *One River* at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Region V Festival in Des Moines, Iowa in January 2017, Director Isbell wondered if the stories so particular to the St. Louis would speak to wider audiences. Apparently they did. The performance received standing ovations at all four performances, and audience members, whether they knew anything about the St. Louis River or not, reported that the play spoke to them, "because they substituted the rivers from their own lives," reported Isbell. "We loved that."

In addition, the Theatre Department received four national awards: Outstanding Production



*Paddlers make their way down the St. Louis River Estuary near the Oliver Bridge, just south of Duluth, MN. Paddlers in the area are currently working to earn the St. Louis River National Water Trail status. Image courtesy of [Alex Messenger Photography](#).*

of a New Work, Outstanding Director of a New Work, Outstanding Ensemble, and Second Place, the David Mark Cohen Playwriting Award. The

awards were presented to Tom Isbell at a national awards ceremony at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. on April 21.

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## About the Author

Phyllis Mauch Messenger is grants consultant for the Institute for Advanced Study and administrative editor for Open Rivers. She has edited, co-edited, or co-authored five books on archaeology and heritage, and is currently editing two volumes of essays on the pedagogy of heritage. She has worked on archaeological projects in Mexico, Honduras, and the U.S. and led study abroad programs to Mexico, Peru, and Southeast Asia.