



From Story to Stage

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Geoff Fox on an inspirational story-telling project

Fresh from a storytelling and theatre project with primary schools, **Geoff Fox** describes how the power of the spoken word can inspire and excite children's imagination.

'What happened to Grey Wolf?' asked Chris. He's a Year 7, and as he's on the autism spectrum, they held him back a year at our local primary school. I had just told the story of **The Firebird**, the first step in a project which would culminate in ten local schools performing new pieces of theatre in the Square of our Devon market town.

When I arrived in the classroom, Chris was at the back, sitting with his TA away from everyone else, concentrating on his drawing. He didn't look up. Pity, I thought, they've decided performing in front of a couple of hundred people might be too much for Chris. Lasting about forty minutes, **The Firebird** is one of the most complex stories I've ever told. So many adventures, so many characters; Tsar This and Tsar That, Tsarevich Ivan, the Golden Apples, the thieving Firebird, the Horse with the Golden Mane, Yelena the Beautiful. Through it all lopes mysterious Grey Wolf, with his wisdom and his ironic take on young Ivan. In the end, Grey Wolf says, 'Right, Ivan, you're on your own. I'm off' and vanishes. Lost in his drawing, Chris hadn't looked at me once as I was telling. Then, loudly, 'What happened to Grey Wolf?' As I told him, 'The story doesn't say'; it's the question the early tellers chose to leave unanswered.

I had misread everything, it turned out. Chris was concentrating all the way, on his drawing and my story. His teacher knew that's how it worked. Eight weeks of hard work later, the children are running through the dress rehearsal on the Festival Stage. Huge puppet heads depict many of the characters. Chris is not only one of the narrators, he's also right on cue with the coco-nut shells each time the Horse with the Golden Mane gallops through the story. He even has time to insist that Miss sorts out Ivan who's forgotten (again) to tell Yelena to wait under the tree while he tricks Tsar Kusman.

Chris's question illustrates one of the reasons we begin the project, now in its third year, with oral versions of different stories the schools choose to develop into theatre. Asking questions of the teller helps the story become a kind of gift, passed on by the teller from the original makers of the tale. Now it is the children's turn to own it; and play with it.

I'll pause there. Before I explore the reasons for beginning with oral storytelling more fully, it may help to describe the start and finish of one school's journey to performance.

Guernica

At the outset of the project a couple of years ago, the schools agreed to share an umbrella title of Heroes and Villains. A week or two later, a teacher called me to say she had chosen the historical story of Guernica. 'Really? With Year 6?' 'No, Years 5 and 6 together. I want them to know what happened the day the town was bombed; and I'd like something on how Picasso came to paint the picture. Don't worry. I'll have done some work with them on the painting first.' Fine. We storytellers are there to tell whatever the teachers ask us to tell. And I had always meant to find out more about Guernica - a bit like meaning to read Proust.

I needed more preparation than for a conventional story. I read around the subject, including Dave Boling's novel **Guernica**. In a book about the genesis of the painting, I read about Picasso working in self-imposed exile in Paris when he was approached by the Spanish Republican government to mark the destruction of Guernica, and how he responded. I talked things over with Peter, one of my partner storytellers, and we ended up with a four stage role-play, rather than a single narrative. I introduced myself as Justo (a character borrowed from the novel), a farmer, a champion in Basque sports. That day, I told the children, I was working on my hillside overlooking the town, where my wife and daughter were making their weekly trip to the market. Then came the drone of the German bombers. Switch to Peter, playing Wolfram von Richthofen (nephew to the Great War ace, the Red Baron), the officer in charge of the Condor Legion's aircraft. This raid would destroy the resistance of the enemy throughout the Basque region by reducing an entire town to rubble. Back to me as Justo, racing down to the town as the bombs fall, desperately hunting for my wife and daughter. Carnage, screams and bodies everywhere, the scorched smell of death. Nothing spared but no melodramatics either? that's what the teacher asked for. Back to Peter, now sporting a beret. Picasso tells of his hatred of Franco and his atrocities, how he had thought it all through and then set to work on the painting. He shows them a print; it's clear the children know it already. On their tables, we see that some already have single images which they have been recreating before we came.

We stop after about half an hour. Silence. I ask, "Anyone got a question for us? Justo, von Richthofen, Picasso?" Almost at once, "This one is for Mr Picasso." Jamie speaks slowly, looking down, finding his words. "What I want to know is, Mr Picasso, when you are painting one of your, um, images, do you know what it's going to look like before you start or do you, kind of, find out while you are going along?" Mr Picasso, who doesn't actually know the answer, does his best and goes mostly for the second option. Asking the question seems as valuable as hearing an answer? especially if Jamie and his classmates go on finding their own answers through these next weeks and beyond.

A couple of months later, on the stage in the Square, the children bring the market to busy life in **Guernica**. They hear the approaching bombers, show us the raid through movement, word, music and costume. Then, in pairs, they bring forward huge papier mache images? the agonised horse, the grieving woman and her dead child, the light bulb. As each pair reaches the microphone, they hold up their image and tell us what it means to them; and then move to their place across the stage. Before our eyes, Picasso's **Guernica** is recreated. Finally, the children call out, "But we have our own image!?" Two of them carry a massive orange sun and settle it among the greys, whites and blacks. "Ours is called HOPE!?" A girl comes to the microphone and, with a ten year old's purity of voice, she sings **Here Comes the Sun**. It could have been such an anticlimax. But it wasn't. She sings it again, insisting we all join in. Not a dry eye in the house. No Justo, but his information is there. We saw von Richthofen on the radio to his pilots. And there was **Guernica** itself.

On the same evening, we watched **Beowulf** (a great Grendel head) and a documentary piece about Sir John Hawkins, the Plymouth sailor. He was one of the first slave traders and yet ended up playing a crucial role in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, providing the fleet for his cousin, Francis Drake. Was he a hero, or was he a villain? In game show style, the children demanded we vote. Neither play suffered in comparison to **Guernica**.

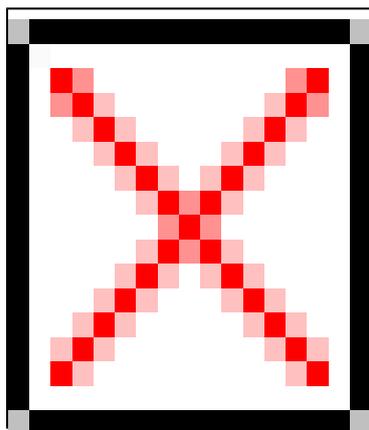
Why told stories?

Belief in the told tale is often absolute. In a nearby seaside town school, I was once an oarsman in Aeneas's crew, escaping the burning towers of Troy since the gods had a greater destiny in mind for our captain. Starving and parched, we'd arrived at the harpies' island and stolen their roasting goat meat. Then the monsters surprised us. I'd swum for the boat and just made it? my best friend hadn't. One harpy had clawed a gash across my chest? if it were not too frightening, I said, I would have let Year 6 see the scar. A boy stayed behind at lunchtime. He weighed me up for a moment. "You were really there, weren't you?" I am never quite sure how to play this one, but I know it's best to find out more about what's in a child's mind. "Mmm," I said. "Please," he said, "show me the scar." This was not a disbelieving challenge? it was genuine curiosity. I'm always struck by the sheer power of this kind of belief? perhaps it is a tacit invitation across the generations to play "let's pretend". He knows I'm wearing ordinary clothes other than my modern seafarer's guernsey. He knows we're in his classroom and that his lunch is waiting. Children's relish for this kind of belief is fertile ground for the work ahead.

Then there's memorability. Oral telling commonly leaves sharp and detailed memories. I returned to a school to see a student on Teaching Practice a year or more after a storytelling visit. I was just through the door when I was stopped with, 'You're the man who told us about the fox tied by its tail upside down above the throne and its blood was dripping onto the seat drop by drop'. They've learned implicitly that it is detail which captures the memory. Usefully, in the context of our all-class project, this has little to do with academic ability. Time after time, storytellers say that children who find understanding and retention of the written word tricky have no problem recalling the detail of a told story.

Sometimes, the initial stories provide oblique means of invention. This year, one school used an ancient creation story to evolve 'Who Stole the Sun?', a new myth for our climate-changed times. Having told the tale, I watched a gifted teacher listening, prompting, encouraging, laughing, listening some more, as twenty-odd Year 4, 5 and 6 children worked away from my story to find their own tale. They trusted their teacher absolutely, they knew they could make a myth, and they did.

Oral tellings help to bind classes into communities. They provide a common 'heritage', a store of insights, just as they did for Native Americans or Aboriginal Australians; as any director knows, that is vital for a cast for whom the play, not the individual, is the thing. From shared ownership of the story, and from responsive teaching, comes children's confidence to help each other develop theatre through language, movement, costume, music and visual art. This year, using all of these means, one school created a twenty minute piece of theatre from a version of the Aztec tale of the Creation of the Fifth Sun; two gods, one proud, one humble, sacrifice themselves in the dancing flames to become the Sun and the Moon. Until I met this story, I'd naively thought those marks you see on the Moon were mountains, if not green cheese. The truth is, they are the scratches left by a luckless rabbit clawing at the Moon's surface when a god on a short fuse finally snapped, picked the rabbit up as the nearest thing to hand, and hurled him there all the way from Earth.



Geoff Fox taught in schools and universities in the UK and abroad. He has written extensively about literature and drama, including reviewing regularly for **Books for Keeps**. In retirement, he works in schools as an oral storyteller and role-player as well as helping to run an Arts Centre in his local town in Devon

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