

The Lost Story

GLORIA SHAPIRO - LATHAM

There are shadows in our midst following us about and lending us pieces of the past. Storytellers envelop the shadows and pass them through the air to anyone who cares to listen. But, alas, there are far too few Storytellers now, and far too few people who are listening. The shadows are slowly disappearing.

“The Return of the Storyteller”, a Theatre-in-Education programme for nine and ten year olds, attempts to rekindle the art of storytelling and the treasured pieces of the past. Theatre-in-Education experiences allow no audience. All of the participants take on roles and, with the aid of actor/teachers, create a theatre of learning. As they discover the need for oral communication and the skills involved, they pass down their stories to other people in their families, schools, and communities, making Storytellers of us all. Their story ends when they have saved the beloved Storyteller and the past. The whole story begins many months before the children come together.

In a rehearsal room, around a paper-filled table, the programme is researched. The concepts on which the idea is based are set forth and a direction evolves. Children of nine and ten, parents, and educators are interviewed in order to understand who their Storytellers are, what communication skills are being taught, and whether or not a programme on the Storyteller would be of interest to this age group. During part of every day, findings are brought back to the paper-filled table. But most of the first two weeks are spent gathering information from living sources.

In order for the actor/teachers to create the mystery of The Lost Story, they must have solutions to the clues which hide the past. Since the solutions are hidden within the still-existing Storytellers they are hunted down and watched. You can't advertise for people who are living stories: you have to gently lift layers of forgotten memories and let their retelling fill the air around you. Slides and photographs are taken, and tapes are made in order to study the memories later.

As the search begins, Andy Nor Denmark is the first to appear. In 1933, he decided to roll a barrel across Canada. It weighed about 450 pounds, had a floating bed inside and advertising across the top. There had been many people who had claimed to walk across Canada, but it couldn't be proven. The barrel was going to prove positively that Andy had walked every step of the way. The crazy scheme was undertaken and, as his story unfolds, the past tumbles back mile, upon mile, upon mile. . .

“Oh yes, that was the year of the grasshoppers and the dust. The

automobiles had to leave their headlights on even in the daytime. The grasshoppers were so thick I had to take shelter in my barrel. You just couldn't walk, and if it wasn't the grasshoppers it was the dust. . . ."

Andy talks about the people he met and the friendships that were established, and as he talks we observe the Storyteller as well as his story. One of the children will later be taking on the role of Andy Nor Denmark. The actor/teachers will remember Andy's pride and excitement in sharing the past. There is no copyright on Andy's oral stories. They are in the air, free for anyone who cares to listen and pass them on.

Another Storyteller is Sammy Sammy who lives on Hornby Island, Place of the Woods. People come from all over the world to hear his stories and poems, listen to his music, watch his ghost plays, and absorb his magic. Unlike Andy, Sammy Sammy's home is his story. He lives amidst his history.

The search is never-ending. Each Storyteller brings the company closer to solving the mystery. Certain similarities begin to appear among the Storytellers. They are collectors. Photographs play an important part in the telling of their tales. They have names and titles of distinction. They love people and take delight in an enthusiastic audience. They have lived their stories and wear them as fine tailored coats, giving detail to each piece of thread. The listener just can't hear enough to satisfy him. They have a good luck piece, a hat, a charm, a piece of stone that protects them.

The pieces of paper on the rehearsal table pile up as the search continues. Children are brought in to help work through specific sections, and the sifting process begins. Each idea is carefully evaluated. The Company takes care to design a balanced programme, having several forms of participation to encompass the needs of every individual. Slowly a structure emerges, and the programme breathes life. A tape will be sent to the children (a group of no more than 60) explaining the urgency of the quest to save the story and the Storyteller. It will clarify why they have been chosen to solve the great mystery. In order to be fully prepared, the children will be asked to gather stories of their own past and remember them on the date of the programme. On this specified date, each child will be given a storyteller to portray. Actor/teachers will then give vital clues to the children through their stories. If the group is responsive to the problem and able to piece the clues together, they will experience the great magic of discovery.

"The Return of the Storyteller" grew out of a need to save the art of oral communication in a mass-oriented society. A child more than anyone else is the receiver of the remains of this dying art. If it is lost, the child will never know the warmth, security, knowledge, appreciation, and love that the oral story brings. We turn to children, with great respect, and ask them to save what

so rightly they deserve.

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