

How To Prepare A Story

By Ben Haggarty

Storytelling is an art of both interpretation and improvisation. You tell a story in your own language for the listeners who are immediately in front of you. You can tell the same story to 500 adults in a theatre, 35 seven year olds in a classroom or to a friend down the telephone... In each case the story is the same, but, by necessity, the language, tempo and energies involved will be different. A storyteller is simultaneously the interpreter, adapter, author, performer, director and critic of his or her material. So, the task before you, when you find a story you like - and really liking the story so much that you must tell it is perhaps the most important part of the whole process - is to make it your own; make your own version...

What follows is a basic approach to that task, agreed upon by most storytellers:

- When you've found a story you want to tell, read it through several times and then put the book away.
- Then try, very simply, to run through the story. The 'story' is essentially 'what happens'. (The ability to discriminate between what belongs to the story and what belongs to the storyteller: the elaboration's, the embellishments, comes quite quickly with experience). Try to do this aloud - in a monotone if you like, with no expression. Tell the 'bare bones' of the story: just nouns, verbs, the minimum of adjectives and reported speech. At this stage your principal concern is with getting your mind clear about the mechanics of the story - the 'what happened next?'
- When you've done this you'll probably need to go back over the text because you might find that there are bits which aren't quite clear.
- Put the book away and try pacing around your room telling the story out loud, still focusing on the mechanics, the 'what happens' and 'how?'
- Have one last look at the text, if you need to, and then put it away forever.
- Sit down. There is probably one image, amidst many, that really stands out for you in the story. Identify it - it may be obscure but don't try to analyse why it attracts you! It is important because it is your doorway into the visual world of the story. In your minds eye, explore the picture. Zoom in on close-up details, pan across the scene, take in the colour, the light source, the costumes... what is the background? You are directing your own private film, and the more details you can clarify, the clearer the story will become to you. Visualisation is the key to telling stories. When you tell, it is as if a film is unwinding in your imagination and you are describing what you see to others. The more clearly you see your story, the more clearly your listeners will see it, though their versions may be quite different from yours. You do not need to describe every detail you are seeing, just know that you could if you were asked.

- Choose a few other moments, dramatic moments, turning points, and visualise them.
- Then go for a walk and tell your story to the bees. Let the world think you're mad. Who really cares?
- Now you're ready to begin because, in truth, you can only learn to tell stories by telling stories. And you need someone to tell them to. This is where your friends and colleagues come in... The most common fear people have about telling stories is, quite rightly, the fear of forgetting the story. Find someone to tell the story to, without making a song and dance about it. Quite casually and informally, tell them the story, or rather, tell them about the story, perhaps starting, 'I found this story the other day, I think it's quite interesting, it's all about...' and ending, 'So, what do you think?'
- You've got through it, and in fact you did more or less remember it all! It wasn't such an ordeal. Perhaps you should tell the story in this light, informal way to one or two more people.
- Then comes the moment when you have to 'formally' tell it. You've done the head work. Your mind is reassured that it knows what happened. So, go on! Plunge in! It will work.
- It did! Now do it again with another audience. Again and again. The first five or six times you tell a new story are really exiting; the story seems to have a life of its own. Jokes emerge, whole new scenes and even characters reveal themselves. You get intimations that, although you thought it was about this, it's actually about that... It is a wonderful activity. The more you do it the more at ease and natural your storytelling will become.
- By the time you've told your story about eight times a pattern will begin to establish itself; the words gelling, inflections and movements becoming settled. Your own unique version is appearing.

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