

Report of IATL bursary recipients Plansay&be at;

Storyknowing. A Festival and Symposium of Storytelling and Theatre with Young People.

York St. John University and York Theatre Royal. 22nd and 23rd April 2016.



Plansay&be at the Storyknowing Festival 2016 (from left; Xiao Han, Veronica Han, Chenchen Zeng, Chiung Lin, Robert Söderstrand, David Silva, Joyce Yiran Ho, Lauren Pitt and Tientien Ho)

As a significant part of our studies of the role of story in education, we had been introduced to and instructed in the form of performed storytelling developed in the 1970's by Mike Alfreds and the still going theatre company, Shared Experience (see also Ali Hodge and Alibi Theatre). Our exploration of this constantly developing, quick-changing form of storytelling, during the autumn term of 2015, culminated in performances in a primary school at the end of that year, which were further developed in the new-year, and workshops around the stories were created for secondary school visits. Having invested a good deal of effort in these processes, and become firm advocates of the educational potential of this form, we were keen to find other opportunities in which to demonstrate this. The Storyknowing festival in York was therefore a highly relevant forum for us. Organised by the International Centre for Arts and Narrative, it provided platforms for hugely diverse exponents of the art. We had also heard that the festival organisers were unaware that such an education in performative storytelling existed in the UK, so it was also a great opportunity to profile Warwick University's evidently unique cultivation of the narrative form we were presenting.

The rich catalogue of events caused painful dilemmas as to which seminar or workshop to attend, as many were equally appealing, but generally, the events chosen prevented too much concern about what was being missed, frequently demonstrating that not enough time had been allocated to certain speakers, but which then led to them being tracked down in pauses in order to pursue unanswered questions or to gain deeper insight into their particular area.

We were exposed to a range of presentations, exemplifying the diversity of means of expression used by contemporary storytellers, in areas ranging from; an autobiographical, audio-accompanied walk in rural Yorkshire, where an visual artist and writer, Hannah Davies, revisits a childhood tragedy; a youth theatre presentation exploring the refugee crisis through the Dido myth; a verbatim theatre project revealing how telling another's story becomes a personal responsibility of care among young people; as well as stand-up, no-frills professional storytellers from all corners of the UK, and Middle Eastern, African and South Asian performers incorporating dance, rhythm, songs and music, enriching their

tales further with traditional costume and artefacts, all adding to the transportation of the imagination into the moral mazes and other worldliness of myth, legend and folktale. We felt confident our contribution would add vibrancy to this diversity, where the narrative is passed between the performers, who are the characters, animals, furniture, buildings and floods, saving us any setting up or transport of anything other than ourselves (which enabled us to instantly adapt our pieces to the unexpectedly small size of our allocated venue!).

Several panel discussions described areas of work in which the making and telling of stories is playing an increasingly interventional role in supporting social and personal development. Particularly illuminating was its application at The Village Storytelling Centre in Glasgow, where young offenders were encouraged to recall past experiences and then to envisage ways out of criminal behaviour through the creation of fictional future scenarios for themselves;

‘... storytelling allows us to address directly... factors around *self-identity* which have shown to be critical to primary and secondary desistance such as *reflecting on past-life experience*, creating and embracing a new *personal narrative* (Maruna, 2001) and being able to imagine and believe in an *appealing `replacement self`* (Giordano et al, 2002).’

In London, multi-ethnic groups of youth are brought together at Oval House, where Naomi Shoba facilitates their re-telling of their cultural identities, as ‘counter narratives’ to prevalent demographic assumptions about these groups within their locality. She also involves their parents and grandparents in the story-making process, and establishes with the participants a value system within which to work, enabling them to appreciate the value of their creations, and the significance of coming together to create their stories, leading to re-establishing and strengthening cultural and social values.

That professionals are able to apply the art to genuine social needs and purposes, and can report on their successes, elevated the significance of storytelling beyond its sociocultural purpose as a means of conserving values and norms, or of providing practical life-lessons, or even the psychological necessity of good stories for children in their unconscious digestion of the world around them, all of which we had examined in depth on our course. Among these professionals, its role was being extended, providing perspectives for the disenfranchised, from which to view other ways of being, enabling participants to discover, define, practice and adopt new values, reappraise their social and cultural ties and envisage and even experience both personal and social transformation. Providing the right environment for this to operate requires extremely dedicated and visionary practitioners, and meeting some of these was truly inspiring, opening up for a range of potential directions for our future practice or research.

We therefore felt privileged to have several prominent delegates attend our performances, whose interest in our work confirmed our sense of having a valid contribution to make to the festival and the wider field. Although our target group of younger participants were involved in a simultaneous youth theatre workshop, our older audience were willing to participate in the workshop activities accompanying each story. This was followed by a lively Q&A session, giving us the opportunity to share what we had experienced during our learning processes, both on the course and from our performances in schools, and to enjoy the recognition and appreciation expressed by many present of the work we had shown. Our experience was enhanced by having our course tutor with us, who was not only very supportive throughout, ensuring that potential audience knew where our somewhat tucked away venue was to be found, but also dealt with questions in ways that lifted our work above its personal significance to us as learners, to the greater meaning that this form and arts in general have for education, and the importance of our promoting this at such a festival.

Our course at Warwick had provided us with a solid foundation in the role of story in education, giving us both deep insight into the subtexts of the stories, and a very useful perspective from which to view the events at the festival. This was certainly built on and enriched by many of the performances we attended, and especially some of the panel discussions and presentations. We could apply theories we had learned and see how these had been expanded on and taken into new areas of expression and especially of practice, not least as a means of compensating for the inadequacies of contemporary institutions charged with the education and care of the young, and to repair some of the damage caused by social injustices inherent in the ideologies of those in power, which lead to these inadequacies.

[The Legend of Nezha; The Dragon Prince's sharks attack Nezha.](#)



[Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves; Ali Baba's brother is caught in the thieves' cave.](#)



Below; audience participation in Ali Baba Workshop.





Without the support of our tutor, Dr, Rachel King, who paid for our participation costs out of her WATE award, and the IATL bursary, which covered the accommodation and most of the transport costs, we would not have afforded this insight into the rich diversity of contemporary storytelling, its significance for a wide range of young and adult participants, and the ways in which its potential to effect social change is being realised. As is suggested above, this was a rewarding and enriching experience for us all.