

A Fondness for Folktales

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Honed by the tongues of tellers over time, folktales metaphorically carry culture and wisdom. They are treasures held in the heart not the hand. Folktales in the oral tradition are preserved and passed on because they are memorable, useful, and repeatable. If it happens to “folks” there is probably a folktale about it. I select folktales to tell with care and consider myself a curator of the repertoire I have chosen to carry. The stories chosen are personal metaphors. I research the history and context of folktales with rigor and empathy and seek to serve the content with suitable composition. Before sharing stories in a concert setting, I always pause, take a breath, and aspire to be an appropriate “instrument” for the flow of stories, playing each moment with intention. Entering into the story world, the teller is like a guide bringing listeners safely to conjured realms and back again. Having stage presence means being present. With thoughts focused, undistracted by stray memories or imaginings, it is possible to illuminate a story’s images with vocal nuance, facial expression and gesture, or to improvise new evocative language and music. There is satisfaction in completing the creative effort of bringing a story to life and arriving at the far side of the last image. Storytelling is an ephemeral art fueled by imagination and community spirit. It is a wondrous moment when the audience coalesces into a seemingly shared breath, gasp, sigh, or burst of laughter. Holding a pause or a word like a musician’s note lingering in the air is a joyful enterprise.

As well as crafting individual story works, and performing them, I enjoy the creative process of planning a set of stories. Devising a story list for a performance requires the same attention to composition as the design of each individual tale. Juxtaposed to one another, stories can resonate with each other, collide, refresh the listener’s palette, inform, resolve, and illuminate. Stitching the folktales anecdotally with homespun tales has allowed me a casual venue for linking folktales to personal experience. I assemble story lists and personal tale introductions for their thematic arrangement, emotional sequence, performance arc, and the intended duration of performance time. Sensitivity to the particular needs of an audience, the time of day, season or occasion can be considerations in concert design. Having a clear plan of tales to tell is a practical way to diffuse stage fright. The structure supports vamping on the theme, improvisation, and verbal jazz.

The folktale genre offers a time-tested armature for artistic expression and a venue for musing on life’s myriad trials and joys.

*There are no people a thousand years old,
but there are words a thousand years old.
-Mongolia*

Heather Forest, Ph.D. (heather@storyarts.org, heatherforest.com) is a storyteller, children’s book author, folk musician, storytelling educator, and farmer. Based for the past 30 years on a small family farm on Long Island, NY, she has shared her repertoire of musical folktales and homespun stories in schools, festivals, theatres, and conferences nationally and internationally.