

LEARNING TO FAIL IN INDIA

by Jo Blake-Cave

In September I went to India. The tour, organised by the British Council, consisted of two performances at the Delhi International Storytelling Festival, a school visit, a discussion with musicology students, and four workshops and evening performances in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and Ahmedabad. Having never been to India or worked for the British Council before, I was slightly overwhelmed by the prospect and more than a little under the *glamour* of the *idea* of working in India.



This glamourous dust soon blew out of my eye when I arrived and realised that I was certainly not on holiday! The unrelenting schedule meant that I would spend much of the next fortnight seeing the inside of several aeroplanes (with immaculately presented Indigo Airline hostesses who seemed to have stepped gracefully out 1960s America—glossy black bobs, shiny red lips), taxis (I cannot put into words the experience of driving in India), libraries (much the same as here, comfortingly tatty), and hotels (intimidatingly plush). Except for the odd snatched escapade here and there, India remained something frustratingly distant which flashed past outside the taxi window. Even on my little explorations—like witnessing the 50ft Ganesh in Hyderabad before it was plunged into the lake, or seeing the fishermen bring in their catch before breakfast on the beaches of Chennai—I felt strangely distant. My body was certainly present, but my mind was wrestling with the sensory overload of walking down the street in a country that contains 18% of the world's population, whilst my soul still hadn't

arrived and was hovering somewhere over the coast of Turkey (in fact, I think I met it on my way back.) So, when I came home and people asked, 'how was India!?', I had to reply, 'well... I don't know really.' Consequently, when Pete asked me to write about my trip, I realised that I couldn't write with any great detail or insight about the amazing cultural experience I had. I couldn't write about the food, or the music, or the spirituality, or the poverty, or the noise, or the way LIFE smacks you in the face every time you step outside, or the equally majestic and alarming chaotic structure that everyone appears to recognise that I wish I'd got to see more of.

Beyond all these differences, what surprised me most, was how universally identical the questions, fears and reactions of the participants and audiences were. From them I heard the same lament over the loss of traditional stories that I have heard a thousand times here; and the same urgent, deep felt need to hold on to them, and the art form, and the nourishment it brings. 'But this is India!', I thought, 'Land of the Mahabharata! Kathakali! Pandvani! Surely, if storytelling is thriving anywhere, it is here?!' Well in some areas, perhaps, but not for the people I met on the workshops. Actually, with the things they said, I had to pinch myself—it was like I'd flown half way around the world and ended up in Kettering town library...



So, what follows is not really an account of my trip, but instead, it is a musing on a subject I came away thinking about: the relationship between failure, vulnerability and truth in storytelling. (*Sounds like a bundle of laughs, Jo... I know, I know. But it's not what it first appears... there is of course some kind of happy ending...*). Let me explain...



I'm not terribly fond of giving workshops. For several years I haven't really understood what I do with stories, which makes teaching 'how to' almost impossible. This is thankfully changing. But even so, these workshops represented a challenge for me. The participants were predominantly women teachers, but there were also doctors, homeopaths, IT whizz-kids, marketing experts, writers, filmmakers and dancers. The first two workshops went very well, with lots of laughter. The fourth was relaxed and friendly. But something happened in the middle. The third, normally so triumphant, was a mini disaster. Every exercise I introduced and story I told

seemed to fall flat. I went away feeling like I'd utterly failed them, and it set me to thinking about what that strange, icky feeling of failing is all about, and what it means to fail as a storyteller.

The idea of failure was already very interesting to me before I went to India, and informed the exercises I planned. (*Great! You planned failure!? Do you think this is where you're going wrong, Jo!?*) Well, perhaps. But what I mean is, I start with the premise that workshops are playing spaces, and embracing the certainty of failure frees the teller from the need to 'get it right'. You will all have seen and experienced the tension that overcomes some people when they start to tell a story for the first time—mannerisms emerge that are not there in relaxed conversation; ticks erupt and repetitive gestures distract the listeners; we suddenly forget we have a body, or lose control over it; we make up words, lose our breath, forget our name—it is Jimmy Who Had No Story. I find this fascinating! It's like our body reveals a truth that our mind and words are trying frantically to conceal! It seems to go to the core of that strange paradox inside many performers, that is, both a mortal fear of and an intense desire to be seen. When we tell a story, there is nowhere to hide – no costume or instrument to conceal us. We rely on being received by an other. Is this uncontrollable tension born of a fear of not being seen, or of being seen? Or of being seen, but not being received? To not be received by a listener, is this what constitutes failure as a storyteller? This is what I experienced in Chennai—not feeling received. There are of course many ways to fail as a storyteller, and this little article doesn't have time to explore all of them. Why would I want to anyway!? Because all things exist in opposition, and by getting to know how and why we fail, we can perhaps learn more to succeed, or at least fail better!

Failure exists at the limits, where we lose control, and one way to get to know the shape of a thing is by tracing its edges. Walking those edgelands puts us in a state of vulnerability where we are much more likely to catch a glimpse of something original, and dare I say, 'authentic'? I don't believe in a *right* way to tell a story. Trying to define what makes good storytelling can be like grasping at mist. But through experimentation, imitation, and trial and error, and learning to listen better to our intuitive selves, we find our own voice. Yes, there are certain generic standards that can be applied—the need to speak clearly and dynamically, to have a grasp of language, a certainty in the body, a rhythmic awareness. But even these qualities can be proved redundant by the exceptional teller who manages to strike that *note of truth*. *Truth! Truth? Is that what this is all about? What an earth is that?* Well we are told that there are three kinds of truth: my truth, your truth and The Truth. Very few humans have ever come close to the last; spending too much time dwelling on the second is the road to mad-

ness, but the first, that seems like a good place to start. And where might we find our truth? Where do heroes go to find their answers? To the edge of things, beyond the familiar!

So what am I saying here? That we must all fail much more often? And enjoy it when it happens? That the more we fail the closer we'll come to our own truth? Well, not exactly. Failure without repair and reflection would be traumatic. But recognising failure when it happens, what constitutes it, the effect it has on our bodies, how we compensate and repair in the moment of performance, and making space to play with it in our development, can transform it into a source of creativity and growth. I know people go to India to 'find themselves', but few do so by *failing* in a hot and humid room in Chennai library. But as I wrestled with the beast throughout that long, sweaty day, I felt incredibly fortunate to be part of a contemporary storytelling revival that allows me to make such discoveries for myself. Despite the struggles for definitions and identities inherent in any revival art form, there is a real freedom to choose what we do with this thing called storytelling. We get to make of storytelling what we need it to be right now—to use yesterday as a guide but not be enslaved by it. To fail and repair and repeat, and fail and repair and repeat...



So....

Roll-up, roll-up! New Storytelling Evening Course announced! Learning to Fail in Six Easy Sessions! We'll cover everything from ignoring your audience to forgetting the story!

Takers anyone?

Jo Blake Cave is a storyteller based in Northamptonshire. In 2007 she was highly commended in the Young Storyteller of the Year competition. Since 2010 she has been Storyteller in Residence at the Royal & Derngate Theatre in Northampton.

There are some interesting thoughts on her blog: <http://www.crickcrackclub.com/monkeys/jblake/>

