

# TRAVELS WITH MY PUMPKIN

*the Unforgettable Experience of Taking Tactile Tales on tour*  
by Cassandra Wye

It seemed like such a great idea at the start....

I had this idea to create a multisensory style of storytelling that would actively engage everyone, especially children with profound and multiple disabilities, in the development of the story so that the story created would be personalised for and by each audience. For that I needed I need a huge array of sumptuously made 2D and 3D props that could be shared with the audience and used by the audience to bring the characters and the story alive.

And it was a great idea...



But the amount of props we needed just seemed to get bigger and bigger... It nearly finished off my maker as she was deluged under a pile of butterflies, ants, parrots and snakes, elephants, not to mention a shimmering shoal of flying fishes ... She had to be rescued by a team of helpers as she sunk slowly under the seams of silk. But the finished articles were beautiful.

“The props were fabulous—you could see by the children’s faces that they enjoyed exploring them.” (Claremont Special School Bristol UK)

But the idea proved to be a good one—the interweaving of tale and textile worked brilliantly...

The participating children, primary and secondary, the parents, play-workers and teachers, in play-schemes and school’s

holiday schemes around the UK. LOVED the stories, LOVED the props, LOVED the whole interactive experience.

We made stories together, we laughed together, we played together, above all we had fun together. “I’ve seen many examples of stories told at children with complex needs but this is the first time I have seen stories truly shared with them—wonderful.” Specialist Senior Educational Psychologist UK  
And then somebody had another idea...

It had worked so well, that when funding proved to be available through the British Council, I agreed to tour Tactile Tales around Asia—bringing the stories to a whole new audience and offering training to artists and educators in inclusive storytelling.

And then the idea got bigger and bigger...

To visit first of all, Penang’s International Children’s Storytelling Festival and then fit in a visit to Malaysian storytelling Festival in Kuala Lumpur. From there, I wanted to keep to a long held promise and return to the libraries of Borneo to share Tactile Tales with the people who originally told me the traditional tales used in the project, and then on to Singapore special schools, a pit stop in Hong Kong for some storytelling and English Language Teaching and then home.

What could possibly go wrong?

How you ever tried to tour internationally with ninety seven props? Would you ever think of doing so?

You would? Are you sure? Well - then read on...

First point: Have you tried packing said 97 props into the allotted two suitcases allowed economy class? That took a while...

Second point: Have you then tried to fit in any USEFUL things such as clothes, hairbrush or shoes? That took a while...

Third point: Can you imagine how much it weighed? And how much it cost in excess baggage?

Frankly, it would have been cheaper to book an extra seat! And all this every time for 22 flights...

All I can say is the staff on Malaysian Airlines were wonderful. They did their best to help each time, but if Malaysian Airlines show an unfeasibly high amount of profit this year... you know why.

And the stress...

Can you imagine packing, unpacking, losing, finding, losing again, re-finding all of the 97 props over and over again? You would be amazed where they got to—especially the ants. There is something about ants, real or silk – they just get everywhere ... under the bed, in the closet, in the shoes, behind the door, in the kettle (well no, I think I made that one up, but you get the picture)

And the ironing...

Do you know how long it takes to iron 97 beautifully made silk props? TOO long

Imagine being in a hotel overlooking the beach in Penang, the UNESCO rated world heritage city of Georgetown right on your doorstep. And what I am doing? Ironing!

When I started storytelling as a solo artist, 20 years ago, I said: NO props. I said: NO props are needed in storytelling. I said: Use your imagination, a storyteller should not need anything to prop them up!

So where did it all go so wrong?

First - a turnip for Vietnam...

I was asked to go to Vietnam and be the first professional storyteller to tell stories in English on a tour of schools, theatres and libraries. After the horror of the Vietnam war the Vietnamese had no wish to learn English, because all their political connections were with USSR and Russian was the additional language in which they were educated.

But times and political alliances changed and the new generation were beginning to learn English. Would I go and tell English and Vietnamese tales as a way of bridging the divide between our communities?

I would—but I saw the need for a turnip (a Great Big Enormous one of course) to bring that story alive to a non-turnip eating audience.

And then a most unexpected happening...

I was telling in a specialist unit for children on the autistic spectrum in UK and one little boy held my sequinned turnip up to the light and spun a shimmering pattern on the ceiling...

“The turnip sparkles” he said and smiled at me.

The first person from a collective audience of 1000’s to notice this and make it happen.



From then on it was slippery silky slope downwards...

From that point on I was hooked. I began to wonder if “props” could in fact extend the story and enrich the story for everyone.

If we all could have a go at making the turnip sparkle - what else could we achieve?

Until the bitter end...

Eight years later I began to rue my enthusiasm, surrounded as I was for weeks on end by a sequinned sparkling, shimmering, tinkling mass of creatures—and engaged in a constant search for those disappearing ants.

And yet...

The plan worked. It took me forever to set up and reset between shows; it took forever to prepare

and set up for a training workshop, a huge amount of time and effort to carry everything from hotel to venue and back. The daily tour schedules were a nightmare.

But the audiences utterly loved it. They loved the stories so much—everybody wanted to join in with everything! The shows took twice as long as in rehearsal in UK and we kept overrunning.

And yet...

Tactile Tales created something special. As part of Penang's festival Tactile Tales offered the first inclusive performances for everybody, both disabled and non-disabled. One hundred and fifty or more adults and children from across the continent of Asia came together with each show, singing and dancing their way through the stories

"The adults in the room could not have imagined themselves snapping like crocodiles or flapping like peacocks but that was the effect Cassandra had on her audience... before long everybody was slithering, snapping and stomping along" Borneo Post Malaysia

And yet:

The opportunity to offer training and work with specialist teachers in Malaysia and Singapore was invaluable. After seeing the stories in action, the participants loved to have a chance to create a multi-sensory story themselves, without a lot of money or resources but with lots of imagination and laughter. The training meant that the impact of the project could continue to be felt long after I and my silken entourage had gone.

And yet:

I was able to work with organisations with had little or no funding, in facilities with little or no resources, with families on the poverty line because of the lack of inclusive childcare or day care meant they could not work. I worked with adults and children who, if I had not come, may never have had the experience of storytelling.

If you want to include everyone in the experience of storytelling then you have to do whatever it takes to get there.

And so I gave in...

I learned to love my exquisitely made, extravagantly expensive, ridiculously large array of textile tactile props, to love looking after them and lugging them around, to love even those poor benighted ants.

Why? Because they enable me to tell stories with everyone—and especially with those who need it the most

Would I do it again?

Of course! In fact - I already have—but that's another story...

Maybe one day, who knows, maybe I will even grow to love ironing!

And to be able to admit that sometimes I say things that prove to be completely and utterly wrong!

For more information, please visit my website:

<http://www.storiesinmotion.co.uk/tact.html>.

To receive a hyperlink to the video made of the project email: [cassandrawye@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:cassandrawye@yahoo.co.uk)

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