

A Geezer in Giza

Taffy Thomas gets an Oriental job.

As a jobbing storyteller performing about three hundred and fifty times a year over 30,000 miles (a dear friend of mine the other day remarked “A 60 year old man shouldn’t be doing that.”) I regularly think myself the luckiest man in the world, telling stories I enjoy telling to people I enjoy meeting. Just occasionally, the coin lands the other way up, i.e an hour stuck in 5 mile traffic jam on the M6 (the M6 is a very difficult mistress) or more recently in national storytelling week, setting out at 6am in blackness and six inches of snow, wondering if we did make it, would the school be closed (as you can’t phone a school at 6am to check) or indeed would we get back home afterwards.

But just occasionally, out of the blue, the bonus of a lifetime comes—not financial, but a lifetime travel opportunity—an old friend, formally a teacher in Kendal, and a member of ‘Footloose’ (my wife Chrissy’s contemporary dance group) now elevated to primary head of the modern English School in Cairo, Egypt required my services for a week of storytelling at her school.

The last words on the phone from our booker before our departure were “Remember, you’re coming to Africa,” followed by “pick up eight bottles of wine at Cairo airport, duty free. As a visitor, you’re entitled to it, and it keeps our cellar stocked up.” No problems, although sorting half a case of wine at 2am did seem a little strange to an occasional alcohol user like me. If we were at all unsettled, we were immediately relaxed by the warm welcome of our hosts, who had stayed up to greet us.

After a long sleep, Mohammed, our driver, collected us and took us to the school. Here a beautiful storytelling space had been created next to the library. The fact that I couldn’t bring my own storytelling chair had occasioned a school craft and design project for the year fives. Apart from building advanced interest in my visit, it involved parents. Of course, the chair and space have outlived our visit and, I am assured, continue to be used for storytelling by both students and staff.

Over the ten days of our visit I did thirty performances, telling a variety of tales to over one thousand children and teachers. I had expected a majority of English and American ex-pat. children



of diplomats and contractors. This was not the case; with a few exceptions the children were Egyptian whose parents had chosen the English education system. I discovered from teachers, many of whom had experience of English schools abroad, that over one million children are educated in English schools worldwide. This should be heartening to

any teachers reading this, but although English schools are often 'dissed' at home, in other parts of the world English teaching is still rightly held in high esteem.

Immediately before the Egypt tour, I managed to complete a feature article for Scholastic Publication's Literacy Time magazine, on the importance of riddles and riddle stories in education. This was to accompany a new interactive Scholastic website called 'Taffy's Teasers'. This became live on March 2nd, and without subscription (i.e no fee!) anyone can log on to Literacytimeplus, and then click on the 7-9 year old section, then click on Taffy's Teasers to be amused by animation of myself asking a riddle. This happens for eight consecutive weeks with the option of clicking on a clue and the answer at the end of the week. This resource will hopefully amuse, and show a new audience this important part of the living oral tradition that we are all part of.

In the feature article I reference the riddle of the Sphinx. Because of this, on arrival in Cairo, I received an email from my publisher asking me to arrange a photo at the Sphinx, thus filling our one day off. Such a visit was no hardship, other than that a photo session at the Sphinx is near impossible unless you happen to be Pink Floyd shooting an album cover. As the picture shows, we managed to secure an angle without scaffolding or myriad American and Japanese tourists. As a friend commented on our return, "Look at that dusty old thing... and the Sphinx looks pretty good as well!"

A visit to the museum took us to the oldest mummy in Egypt, 3,500 years before Christ. I struggled to compute that, five and a half thousand years ago—where is the simple storyteller in that? And then something important dawned, as a child fifty years ago I was forced to learn a bit of Shelley *'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings. Look on my works ye mighty and despair.'* Now, leaning on a piece of Pharonic art, it all made sense. So those of us who practise our art in schools may be planting seeds that grow in fifty years time. That's not a bad thought, is it?

There are many other thoughts, stories and fond memories, but you can catch me at a bar for those.

So we're home at our storytelling centre in the Lakes, tired, a little wiser and a little older, but not compared to that mummy!



OZYMANDIAS by Percy Bysh Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."