

# ACTING THE PART

by Rob Parkinson

It happened to me again the other day. No offence was meant of course. ‘Where did you do your drama training?’ a teacher asked me, innocently enough. She was, of course, only showing an interest in how I developed the skills she’d seen in action with pupils during the morning sessions of a school storytelling visit. And her assumption was natural enough – in her experience, people do courses and qualifications in order to become the kind of professional I am.

Maybe I should have been flattered: a trained actress and drama teacher herself, she clearly thought I was a fellow thespian acting the part well enough to pass muster. So why did I have to (yet again) repress an inclination to bridle, maybe even to blurt out something like, ‘I wasn’t acting. That was for real!’?

Now I know of some very good storytellers who do have a theatrical background, so let’s get out of the way any prejudice against drama training and the acting profession in general. I enjoy good theatre, I admire and respect fine actors for their many talents and skills, I’ve learned a lot from watching how actors work. But I suspect anyone with that background interested in the genuine art of storytelling has to take on a very important and vital lesson before they are any real good as storytellers rather than fakers, however grand and impressive their faking could look placed under a proscenium arch. It really ain’t the same thing. It may be related, it can sometimes draw on some of the same skills, it may feel and even look like something an actor *ought* to be able just to do, since she or he has learned on-stage presence, voice projection, and how to memorize and say words as if they mean something, how to improvise on those words and accompany them with appropriate body language and movement, but true storytelling has a quite different dynamic it’s too easy to miss, one for which any hint of acting a part, let alone theatrical ego, is the absolute kiss of death.

This seems to me an essential point to stress at this particular time well over thirty years into the modern storytelling revival, when a lot of the early idealism and enthusiasm for the unique qualities and connection to be found in storytelling is becoming harder to remember – and may mean nothing to those who are new to tale telling. And indeed when a relatively high proportion of funded public storytelling is looking more and more like the branch of theatre the arts bodies were always inclined to think it must be, even in the ‘eighties. I think arts funders had more excuse back then; they didn’t know that storytelling might differ from the image they held of it in the back of their minds – and I’m not sure that we did either, since we were all finding out about the art through experience. But I really think that we and they should know better by now.

Yet when you think about it, the borders between acting and storytelling are less than easy to define, let alone to police. You might be tempted to say that a storyteller telling a story doesn’t have a script; she or he improvises the way story is told to suit the occasion. But then that’s not really unfamiliar territory to a good actor; not all acting is scripted and a good actor knows how to adapt. And it does rather depend on how you define a script. After all, anyone who has told stories regularly enough to develop a repertoire will appreciate how, with repetition, a story can first grow and develop fascinatingly through interactions with different audiences in detail and depth – and indeed power – but then, if it gets too many airings, acquire just too much gloss, becoming semi-scripted, too glib, too arch or too melodramatic maybe, too insincere, inauthentic or something of the sort. At which time, if you





are honest with yourself, you're generally best to put it to bed for a while unless circumstances demand something, as it were, 'hardened off'. Because if you are a professional, you will appreciate that need for material you can always trot out to order and still be convincing, even when you're not feeling one hundred per cent, or when you got stuck in traffic getting to the school, or when they've decided to put on a drumming workshop in the neighbouring tent or a rock band is rehearsing in the next studio. For when, essentially, for whatever reason, you just can't get people to truly listen and start to fall under the ancient spell of story by taking a bigger risk with something more adventurous.

The paradox you are working with at that point is, I think, around the fact that people can still be 'enchanted' by what to you are hoary old chestnuts you've fallen back on – and what's more they may well admire your professionalism in being able to serve them up so tastily in less than ideal circumstances. The demands of telling stories in any context (paid or unpaid) demanding repeated performances 'to order' favours the

well polished, finished and reliable 'product' – and it's very tempting to just give 'em what they want. Yet I reckon that's when you find yourself in danger of leaving behind the storytelling calling and simply acting the part.

To me at least (I don't know how it is for you) the real adventure of storytelling is like the real challenge of life itself – that essential need to be here and now, a real person not an automated dummy with a programme invented for some other place, some other time – or for that matter, for an archetypal world of arts council approved excellence. The real adventure of storytelling is being aware that you are not reciting something someone else made up for some other stage set, but in *this circumstance here* with *these people*, creating something new and meaningful *now*. It may be anything from a quick quip to a deep and wonderful ancient myth that has layers of marvellously complex metaphor, but it ain't there to be admired and appreciated and ticked off on the list of cultural conquests; it's there to be absorbed and made part of the fabulous tapestry of the moment.

So, for what it's worth, here's my version of what storytelling is essentially and what a storyteller could at least strive to be, the qualities that first excited me in my own early days in storytelling 30 plus years ago and has gone on intriguing me (and indeed shaming me when I fall short) through all the contexts in which I've pursued this art since - from public performance to workshops and training to therapy to parenting and all sorts more in my case. It might just be a start for a handy list of what is special and unique about storytelling, though I'd never pretend that it's complete and I'm not insisting you agree anyway:

Storytelling is a human interaction that depends on established rapport. Storytellers get to know their audience and a major part of the skill is around that getting to know, then being able to go on from that to 'enchant' – not pretentiously, but actually, taking willing listeners from a diffuse state of divided attention into an absorbing 'story trance'.

A storyteller doesn't have an act which she or he rehearses and repeats with limited variations; he or she is more like (say) a Zen swordsperson who has a series of deeply internalized 'moves' that are spontaneously matched to 'unexpectedness'

Storytelling is, or can be, uniquely responsive to the moment. Good storytelling develops differently on the day, changes course, takes account of time place and people in order to 'get through' and maintain rapport with listeners.

Hence it doesn't involve repeated gestures and movements, exact positioning on a set (actual or imagined), exact repetition of set pieces. It doesn't become stylised and mechanical.

Storytellers may, however, have a repertoire of creatively developed stock phrases, actions etc. in the same way that improvising musicians have a musical language they adapt 'on the hoof'. They draw on these by way of making their stories real and immediate, rather than as displays of virtuosity. Storytelling language (both verbal and non-verbal) is hence always creative.

Being a storyteller is not a costume you put on for work or for a hobby and then at the end of the day, you take it off and hang it up and you're someone different. You could as happily tell a tale one-to-one with someone who knows you well as to an audience, without that person noticing you somehow winding up into a routine.

The stories a storyteller tells are somehow part of her or him, part of the way they think and imagine. Real storytellers are, at best, speaking a strange and very advanced language that delights and excites, telling of marvellous vistas they have glimpsed, intriguing and unusual perspectives, mysteries that fascinate. Which doesn't mean they can't share ordinary unpretentious fun and familiar feelings at the same time.



There's nothing wrong with being paid for telling stories but it's worth remembering that storytelling is a calling to live up to as well as a profession, that very many stories, traditional or otherwise (and including the patterns on which we create new tales) are fundamentally extraordinary ideas, marvellous metaphors, wisdom and visions, not artefacts you simply put up for hire. They are for people of all ages who still have, as Suze Rotolo\* put it (with a quite different but maybe not entirely unrelated context in mind), something to say, not something to sell.

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*Rob Parkinson has been a professional storyteller and musician since 1984. He's also a therapist, the author of several books and CDs and regularly runs courses around the practical skills of using stories for psychological change. You can find out more about his work plus some free resources on [www.imaginaryjourneys.co.uk](http://www.imaginaryjourneys.co.uk)*

\* Suze Rotolo is an American artist. In the early 1960s she was the girlfriend of Bob Dylan and a tremendous influence on his song writing—his muse.