You and Your Community's Story

A guide to the concepts and events frequently used in Roadside Theater community cultural residencies

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Preface

This booklet is a presentation of some of the concepts and events that Roadside Theater and its community partners frequently use in community cultural residencies. This is not a rule book or a "how to" book. It is a place to begin conversation about your story and your community's story.

Importance of the Oral Tradition

The living word has a soul of which the written word is properly no more than an image.

—Socrates

The oral tradition is one of the most powerful and effective transmitters of culture in the history of humankind. At the center of most of the world's cultures and religions is story. At one time, stories lived in the memories and in the ritual tellings of the people. They had both aesthetic and utilitarian dimensions. They enthralled and taught. Today, in most western European traditions, education is often concerned more with the accumulation and imparting of written "facts and figures" than with the search for meaning through story. Roadside Theater focuses on the oral tradition, not to replace or ignore the written word, but to find its soul. Storytelling theater, derived from the oral tradition, takes place in a communal setting in which the storyteller/actor and audience come face-to-face.

Thinking About Your Story

Everybody has a story, their own story. But it seems like it has come to the place where people think their stories are stupid or silly and aren't worth anything anymore. Trouble is, seems like some people are always wanting to tell our story for us. But, we got to tell it ourselves! Otherwise how we gonna know it's us? And if we don't listen to the stories of others, how we gonna know who they are?

—from the play **Junebug/Jack**

When conducting a Storytelling Collection Project, it is important to get to the heart of each person's story, told in his or her own words. Here are some questions to spark stories.

Who Are You?

Do you live in the mountains? On the prairie? By the river? The ocean?

Are you rich or poor? Is your answer based on how much money you have?

Do you live in the city? The country?

Do you live in a neighborhood, community, town, city? How do you define the boundaries of the place you live?

Are you Catholic? Jewish? Moslem? Protestant? Buddhist? Other religious identification? No religious identification? Does this affect your identity? How?

Are you a Native American? What is your ancestry?

Was your father, mother born in America? Your grandfather, grandmother? Your great-grandfather, great-grandmother? Do you know the story of how your family came to live in this country? This state? This community?

Does your family tell stories? Sing songs? Play music? Talk to each other?

Do you think that some people are better than other people? Why?

Are there other names you use to describe yourself? That you call other people? Like red neck, hick, hillbilly? Do you know why or how these terms became attached to certain groups of peoples, races, or nationalities?

Do you go to school? Is your school better or worse than the other schools? Why?

If there was only one thing you could tell me about yourself, what would it be?

Who Are You:
Just to Jar Your Memory–A Dozen Questions

1. Who is the oldest member of your family living now?
2. Who is the oldest member of your family that person remembers?
3. Can you remember one story about this oldest family member?
4. Does that person remember any giant/ghost/Jack/fairy tales from his or her childhood? Do you? Tell it (them).
5. Does that person remember an old song or ballad? Learn it or write it down. Does that person remember games he or she played as a child? What were they? What was your favorite game?
6. After you've found out any and all stories available from your own family, ask them if they know anyone else who is a storyteller or who might remember something they've forgotten. Go talk to this person and learn new stories.
7. Who was your favorite storyteller as a child? Why? What was the best story they told? Tell it.
8. What is a favorite story about your own childhood you like to remember and tell?
9. What was your favorite place to play as a child? What did you play there?
10. When you were young, what were some scary stories that grown-ups told you to make you behave?
11. Times have changed. What one way of life from your own childhood do you wish was still the same now?
12. What are some reasons you feel storytelling might be important?

Thinking About Your Community's Story

> *I am a storyteller. I say storyteller 'stead of liar 'cause there's a heap of difference between a storyteller and a liar. A liar, that's somebody want to cover things over—mainly for his own private benefit. But a STORYTELLER, that's somebody who'll take and UN-cover things so that everybody can get something good out of it. Yes sir, I'm a storyteller.*
>
> —from the play **Junebug Jabbo Jones, Volume 1**

From the sum of everyone's personal stories come intimations of larger, communal stories. It is these communal stories that can tell us much about the place we live: how the community was founded, what are the hardships it has faced and is facing, and in what it finds joy and cause for celebration. To find the answers to these questions, stories must be collected from all parts of the community: old, young, rich, poor, male, female, Hispanic, African American, Native American, Chicano, Asian, those of European and Middle Eastern descent, and the list goes on.

Story Collecting

Types of Stories

Here are five categories that may be used as guides for defining types of stories one might collect.

1. **Family History Stories** (stories from immediate or extended family members). These stories are true, or believed to be true. Examples: Ask your grandmother to tell you about her grandmother. Ask your father or mother to tell you about the day you were born. Ask a family member to tell you about the day they got married.
2. **Local History Stories** (stories from the community). These stories are true, or believed to be true. Examples: Find out how your town got its name. Ask an older person to tell you about a pivotal event in the town's history. Find out how the town was founded.

3. **Folklore** (folk tales, fairy tales, legends, giant stories, tall tales, ballads, tales of supernatural events). These are fictitious or true stories told over and over down through the generations to teach lessons. Example: Ask your grandparents or parents to tell you any stories they know about how an animal got its features.
4. **Games, Riddles, Songs, and Jokes** (not from books, radio, or t.v.). These activities have been passed down from generation to generation. Examples: Ask your parents or grandparents to show you their favorite childhood game. Ask them to sing you the songs they sang as children. Ask them to tell you some jokes their parents told them.
5. **Witch Tales, Haint Tales** (ghost stories). These are fictitious or true stories about the supernatural. Examples: Ask your parents or grandparents to tell you a ghost story. Ask them to tell you a story about witches.

Interviews

When interviewing a family member, neighbor, or friend, ask questions that require explanations rather than questions that can be answered yes or no.

Practice interviewing a classmate or friend before doing your first real interview.

Have a classmate or friend interview you with your own questions.

Tape record your interview. Some people begin to change their speech patterns when they are being recorded, so you may want to do several sessions to allow the teller to get used to the recorder.

When elementary school students are conducting interviews with older people, it is sometimes helpful for a team of two or three students to conduct an interview together. The students can learn from one another and feed off each other's questions.

Be patient, and give the teller time to tell you what he or she thinks is important.

Transcription

Interviews should be transcribed word for word in the teller's language.

Do not standardize grammar.

Communal Storytelling Events

We used to have all kinds of dances and parties. They was corn shuckings, bean stringings, molasses stir offs. And they'd get a lot of work done too. Blamed if they wouldn't. But I think mostly it was an excuse to have a dance afterwards. They'd clear everything out of the middle of the floor, somebody'd drag out a fiddle, and they'd get down to some serious dancin'.

—from the play **South of the Mountain**

Collecting stories from individuals is only a part of a Storytelling Collection Project—another part is creating situations in which people get together to tell stories and to listen to the stories of others. There are many ways to do this: Story and Music Swaps and Story Circles can be held; stories can be made into plays, radio dramas, books.

Story and Music Swaps

A Story and Music Swap is a public event, loosely taking the form of a performance, in which local musical and storytelling traditions are celebrated. Swaps can be structured in many ways, but usually have an informal, family reunion kind of air about them.

Story and Music Swaps should:

Have an audience that represents a broad cross-section of the community.

Have a producer who organizes the event and gets out the audience.

Have a purpose. This purpose will vary according to the Swap's placement in the Storytelling Collection Project's process:

- A Swap located at the beginning of the project can help the community discover or rediscover its local traditions.
- A Swap located at the end of a project can be a public exchange of the stories and music brought to light by the project.

Have a person at the Swap who organizes the line-up of performers according to the purpose of the event and keeps the Swap rolling.

This person should keep the event open to extemporaneous audience and performer participation, while gently moving the Swap toward its purpose.

In a Swap located at the beginning of the project and designed to discover or rediscover local traditions:

The producer should locate people in the community who are musicians and storytellers and ask them to participate. **These are not usually professional musicians and storytellers, or people who learned their craft from classes or workshops, but folk artists who have kept local traditions alive by learning them from their families, developing them in their lifetime, and passing them on to the younger generation.**

The producer should make sure the performances represent the diversity of the community.

In a Swap located at the end of a project and designed to be a public exchange of the stories and music uncovered by the project:

The purpose is to celebrate the community's traditions, but also to voice its concerns.

The producer should make sure the performances represent the diversity of the project.

Story Circles

A Story Circle is a small group of people sitting in a circle, telling stories or remembrances, facilitated by a Story Circle leader. Each Story Circle should have a purpose. Every Story Circle is different according to its purpose.

Story Circles should:

Consist of from five to twenty people.

Take place after some formal or informal time to socialize. For example, after a performance, a pot luck dinner, or a dessert reception.

Have a facilitator who begins, moves along, and ends the circle.

Allow for silences.

Be as much about listening as about telling.

Story Circles should not:

Give importance to one story over another.
Give importance to one type of story over another.
Be a critique of a Roadside performance.
Primarily serve an archiving function.

Story Circles can:

Begin with a song.
Begin with a story that introduces the circle's theme.
End with a song.
Be tape-recorded as long as it does not interfere with the telling.
Be multi-generational, multi-racial.

The Story Circle facilitator should:

Take a read of the group at the prior formal or informal social event.

Know the purpose for the particular circle (examples: introduction to a community storytelling project; reinforcement of cultural identity; examination of issues of race and class; identification of community concerns; entertainment).

Know the theme for the particular circle (examples: cultural migration; holiday traditions; childhood memories of school experiences; courting memories).

Note: This is a lot to remember if you are a first time Story Circle facilitator. Please keep in mind that these are guidelines, not rules. You can vary from many of these suggestions, forget a few of them, and still conduct a productive, enjoyable Story Circle.

Introduce him or herself and describe the circle's purpose and theme, taking care to explain that it is acceptable to tell a story that is off the theme of the circle but brought to mind by the previous stories told.

Emphasize the idea that listening to the stories of others is as important as telling your own. Discourage participants from thinking too much about what they will say when it is their turn. Spontaneity is the key.

Tell the group how long the circle will last so participants can pace the length of their stories to the time available, taking into consideration the number of participants.

Sometimes begin with a story or song that sets the proper tone for the purpose and theme of the circle, or let a participant begin.

Go around the circle with each person telling or passing.

End on time.

Before ending the circle, ask if people who have passed would now like to speak.

Sum up what has happened at the end of the circle by asking for comments from participants.

When possible, end with a story or song (perhaps led by a participant) that brings closure to the spirit of the particular circle.

Leave time for participants to talk informally to each other when the circle is over.

Exploring the Oral Word and Written Word–An Exercise

If you truly want to know about people, listen to the stories they tell about themselves.

—from the play **Borderline**

Roadside Theater uses many different exercises in its community cultural residencies. These exercises are designed to do such things as illustrate particular points, teach skills, invoke exploration of a subject, or reinforce cultural identity. The following is an example of one exercise that Roadside might use in your residency.

The key to storytelling is learning to listen. Inadequate listening pulls the teller and the listener out of the moment of spontaneous response. This exercise is an introduction to the art of listening and a demonstration of a few of the differences between the oral word and written word.

The Exercise

Requirements: five to twenty-four participants, ages adolescent to adult; an exercise leader.

Premise

The key to storytelling is the oral tradition; the key to the oral tradition is learning to listen.

The exercise leader begins by stating this premise to the group, repeating it if necessary, then giving the following instructions.

Instructions—Step 1

1. The exercise leader announces that there will be a maximum of fifteen minutes allowed for the following procedure.
2. The exercise leader divides the participants into groups of three, creating group diversity as to gender, race, age, etc. Staff may participate, but the exercise leader does not.
3. One person (referred to as the source) in each group of three will tell a story to the other two members of the group.

- The story should be short.
- The story must be a true life experience.
- The story does not have to be about the teller, but should tell about real people.

4. One person (referred to as the storyteller) in each group of three will listen to the story with the intention of retelling it to the group later in the exercise.
5. One person (referred to as the writer) will write down the story as it is told.
6. The story is told only once. There is no review of the story by the source for the other two members of the group.
7. The exercise leader should be available to help groups settle into the process, to answer questions, and to make silent observations.
8. After the telling/listening process, the exercise leader brings the groups of three back together into one large group, and makes sure everyone carried out the instructions.

Some Things for the Exercise Leader to Note During Step 1, 1-7

1. How are roles chosen within each group?
2. Who does the source focus on during telling?
3. Does the source pace the story to accommodate the writer? The storyteller?
4. Is eye contact made and maintained? With whom?
5. Note the state of each individual before, during and after the exercise: Nervousness? Apprehension? Referring to notes? Asking questions to refresh memory of specific points?

Instructions—Step 2

1. The exercise leader places three chairs in clear view of but separated from the large group.
2. The exercise leader asks for a group of three to volunteer to begin this portion of the exercise, asking them to sit in the chairs and tell the story to the rest of the group.
3. The exercise leader asks the large group if they can identify the role of each of the group members sitting in the three chairs, encouraging them to point out even the most obvious clues (such as one person is carrying a piece of paper so that person must be the writer).

4. The exercise leader asks the person who listened to the story with the intention of retelling it (the storyteller) to tell the story to the large group.
5. During the telling, the exercise leader silently observes everyone (audience, storyteller, source, writer) closely.

Some Things for the Exercise Leader to Note During Step 2, 1-3

1. The exercise works to create a social/theatrical environment that emphasizes the interdependent roles of those on stage with the audience or listeners.
2. Who is the most relaxed—the source, the storyteller, or the writer? Who is the most tense?
3. Is the writer constantly referring to notes or adding to them?

6. After the story is told by the storyteller, the exercise leader asks the writer to read the story.
7. After the writer reads the story, the exercise leader asks the audience to relate what they just saw and heard, making the point that these are observations, not conclusions.
8. Following is a list of possible questions for the exercise leader to ask the audience. It is best to ask only a few questions after each group of three has performed because later groups tend to change their behavior according to the observations made about the previous groups. The evaluation should be drawn out over the whole exercise. During the questioning, the exercise leader should challenge, prod, support, and create energy and an environment of honest evaluation and respect for the stories and participants.
    - Who spoke the most directly to the audience?
    - Which version seemed the most factual?
    - Which version had the most detail?
    - Which version seemed the most emotional?
    - Which version was the most moving to you?
    - Make an observation about body language in each version.
    - Make an observation about grammatical and other linguistic traits in each version.
    - Make an observation about speech inflection and rhythm in each version.

- Did the storyteller, the writer, or both reference the source or look at the source to affirm or check a detail?

9. The exercise leader calls upon the source to answer these questions:
   - Did either or both versions tell the story you thought you told?
   - Did either or both versions pick up subtleties and nuances that you weren't aware of communicating?
   - Did either or both versions reveal a new point in your story?
10. After the first group tells their story and observations are made, the process is repeated with the remaining groups of three. If time does not allow observations with each of the groups, at least get all of the stories told.

Summary

The exercise leader should help the group summarize what they have learned through the exercise. Here are some conclusions that might be drawn. Please keep in mind that these are only suggestions. Each group will be different and should be encouraged to draw its own conclusions.

Possible Conclusions:

Each story is valuable and deserves attention.

In this exercise the source was the authority on the story.

Our ability to comprehend is based upon our attentiveness. For example: it was more difficult for the listener to listen to the story when he or she was simultaneously trying to write the story down.

When the story was told by the storyteller rather than the source, it became a shared story, a communal story.

It took careful listening on the part of the storyteller to capture the facts and emotional nuances of the story, and to personally invest in the interpretation of the story.

Sharing ownership of the story encouraged the group to work together.

This exercise is intended to show that both the written word and the oral tradition have their own merits and uses.

The spoken word can guide our thoughts emotionally and intellectually.

The written word can guide our thoughts emotionally and intellectually.

The type of written language we used in this exercise was in the form of note taking to duplicate a story that someone told.

If we are seeking to emotionally connect with an audience in the moment, the oral tradition has a vitality that the written word cannot duplicate.

Formal education is often governed by the written word, failing to teach the importance of the oral tradition to our daily lives, to our artistic expression, and to the literary tradition.

This exercise only hinted at what happens when the written word springs from the imagination and vitality of the oral tradition, as in the case of regional writers writing from their own oral traditions.

Roadside Theater

306 Madison St.
Whitesburg, KY 41858
606.633.0108
606.633.1009 fax

P.O. Box 771
Norton, VA 24273
703.679.3116

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