**Blending it:**

 *Impressions from ‘Storyknowing,’ a symposium and festival of storytelling and theatre with adolescents, 22-23 April 2016, York*

Cath Heinemeyer, International Centre for Arts and Narrative (ICAN)

Is there a kind of knowledge that can only be encapsulated in story form? Many writers and philsophers have suggested so. Jerome Bruner (2006) contrasts the ‘logico-scientific’ way of knowing, which aims to categorize and conceptualize, with the ‘narrative mode’, which asks the meaning of experience – of *particular* *people’s*  experiences in particular times.

If story gives us a way of communicating that bypasses generalisations and abstractions, might it help us have difficult conversations across generational boundaries? Might it help us understand the 21st century experience of youth, by learning from young people’s stories, and also allow us to be more helpfully present to teenagers as arts practitioners, teachers and professionals?

These are the questions that brought 120 researchers, practitioners, storytellers and adolescents together for a practice research symposium on storytelling and theatre with young people, at York St John University and York Theatre Royal (the two partners in the ICAN centre). They also gave the event its name: ‘Storyknowing’.

Our aim was to have a dialogue conducted through talks, practical workshops, performances – that is, partly through story itself. We wanted to find out: how does working with teenagers reshape the artform of storytelling? And what do they use stories to communicate, and how?

During the symposium it became clear that people are working with teenagers through story in diverse corners of practice: mental health, education, social work, art gallery outreach, dance and theatre – often in isolation from any storytelling networks. Workshops with Steve Killick, Rachel King and her Warwick MA Drama in Education students, Michael Harvey, ‘Openstorytellers’, and many others, brought nourishment and new strategies to these practitioners.

It became clear too that for teenagers, the boundaries between artforms (say, between storytelling and theatre) are blurred or even irrelevant. When we asked teenage delegates to spend the day preparing a retelling of the story I told the whole conference in the morning, it was natural to them to blend music, movement and ‘spoken word’ in their abstract and intelligent performance.

A certain divergence was in evidence between practice (often verbatim theatre or devising work) drawing on young people’s own personal stories (often stories of traumatic experience or marginalisation), and that starting from myth, folktale, art or other stimuli. The most interesting practice, for me, was that which worked on the boundary between these realms, recognising how they are interwoven in every telling of (and every listening to) a story. In fact, to my eyes, a sort of syncretism of the mythic and the personal, the timeless and the political, the traditional tale and its contemporary resonances, seems to define the performance of many younger tellers, including those with whom I have worked.

Our keynote speakers Roger Hill and Jo Blake Cave both grappled with challenging territory – Roger with the question of how young people can or should respond to what seem like ‘dark times’; Jo with the need for young storytellers to be freed from the ‘unspoken rules’ of the storytelling movement, while drawing on its riches. For both speakers, young people need to be able to create their own forms of storytelling, to make sense of the rapid pace of ecological, social and cultural change.

Some of these themes were evident in the young people’s performances during the event. ‘The Holding Place’, by York Theatre Royal’s youth theatre, infused the myth of Dido and Aeneas into the current and pressing story of the refugee crisis. Kala Sangam South Asian Arts’ young Indian dancers’ performance of the Rwandan legend of Miseke and Thunder seemed to allude to the hothousing and surveillance of young people. As ICAN’s PhD student, conducting practice-as-research into storytelling with teenagers, I was fortunate to be able to work with these talented, artistically and socially committed young people, to help them devise these performances.

‘Storyknowing’ was the biggest event yet at ICAN, and represented the culmination of the current phase of our socially engaged practice and research. Led by Juliet Forster of the Theatre Royal and Professor Matthew Reason of York St John University, we are now turning our faces towards an issue that has kept leaping out at us over the past three years of work: the crisis in young people’s mental health. Rapidly rising levels of self-harm, depression, eating disorders and anxiety, documented by Girlguiding UK, Childline and countless other studies, provoke widespread adult consternation and speculation (is it social media? Porn? Academic pressures? Unemployment? All the parents’ fault?), but few helpful answers.

Our evolving practice of multi-artform storytelling has given us evidence that story can help. It can’t *heal* – but it can open up new fronts for dialogue. And in a situation where young people are endlessly urged to ‘be more resilient’ while the pressures on them continue to be mounted up, it can help both adults and young people think more laterally, maybe more rebelliously. Maybe working with mentally unwell young people through story will yield up some answers to the ‘why’ questions, and begin to tell us what to do about it.

For further information about ICAN and ‘Storyknowing’ see artsandnarrative.co.uk ; or join the Facebook group ‘Storyknowing: Storytelling with Adolescents’. To find out more about Cath’s research see [www.storytellingwithadolescents.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.storytellingwithadolescents.blogspot.co.uk)

REFERENCES

Bruner, Jerome S. (2006) *In Search of Pedagogy, Volume II.* London: Routledge.