**‘A meta-narrative of a storytelling workshop with adolescent young people’**

**For ‘Narrative and…adolescence’, ICAN, March 2014**

***Scene-setting***

I have been a storyteller for many years, but only since last autumn have started working with teenagers in a variety of settings, from schools to youth clubs and drama classes.

It is still early days in my PhD, but the first resonances between my practice, my ideas, and my reading of others’ theory and practice are starting to emerge, and it is these that I’d like to present very tentatively to you this evening.

A practice-led PhD is to some extent research *through* practice, and the sharing of ideas from that PhD are to some extent expressible *through*  practice and *through*  performance – as in Dwight Conquergood’s ‘performance ethnography’ - so this evening I’d like to take you with me through a kind of ‘typical’ storytelling session with young people – that’s you: the recognisable moments, the questions that are starting to ask themselves repeatedly, and maybe you will also be able to see some of the changes emerging in my practice as a storyteller.

All of this causes me lots of uncertainty as a ‘practitioner’, and raises lots of questions as *‘what storytelling is’* and *‘what it’s for’* in the contemporary world of young people. Which is, of course, the point.

***Hesitant intro***

So how do I start, these days? It’s not like with a group of 7-year-olds who come into their classroom and unquestioningly, delightedly, accept the surprising break from routine of a visiting storyteller. I have, in the past, been sat in school woodlands greeting kids with tunes on the tin whistle and left them uncertain as to whether I might actually live there. Nor is it like with a group of adults who have paid for their ticket, have a glass of wine in their hands, and are ready and expectant to be enchanted by mastery, no matter where it leads them.

No. I enter the teenage classroom or club and must establish my credentials. Not my street cred, not my up-to-the-minute hip identity, but my reasons for being there, what I want from them, what I am proposing to offer. They are often the puppets of the adult world and its hidden agendas, and want to know the terms of the contract. This is actually refreshing and helpful. In any storytelling situation, there is a contract – you agree to listen until the end, and I undertake to bring you there safely. It can be a difficult one to broach, and the explicitness of it with a teenage group helps me to see the walls of the context, the bottom lines for the young people.

I am inching towards my story, but not yet. I need first to reduce the gap between you and me, by establishing you either as storytellers, or perhaps as owners of the space and myself as a polite visitor.

So let’s get started gently. Please turn to your neighbour and decide who is going to go first. Tell each other about a time when you were frightened when you were young, maybe as a teenager. Listen carefully to your partner’s story, or you may regret it! ***(Then ask for 2 volunteers to tell your partner’s story)***

We have already started transforming fact to fiction. Anything that happens from now on in an unsafe account of reality, but it doesn’t mean it’s false. Are we all OK with that?

And then, when I’m going to tell the story, there comes another round of credential-checking. I find myself leaving the ‘switch phrases’ like ‘Once there was…’ behind, not because they are clichéd or ‘babyish’, but because they are too abrupt for you. So how will I start? I need to give you a sense of why I have chosen this particular story, and where I found it, heard it or read it. I might remind you that some people in Ireland have a lingering belief that fairies live underground, under hills. Does anyone know of a place where supernatural beings are supposed to live? ***Hang on -***

This is tricky – by inviting you to participate I have broken the spell and quietness. I will have to summon your attention again, and when I do start you are going to have the insubordinate idea that you can interrupt whenever you want. I don’t want this. I want your breathing to slow and our communication to enter a different mode. But on the other hand, nor do I want you to suspend all your critical faculties and hang on my words too tightly. I want you to be something like a ‘coiled spring’ – feeling and maybe anticipating the twists and turns, ready to take action – in a state of ‘dynamic engagement’. It’s Brechtian estrangement – but I need to judge it moment by moment.

***It’s time to tell the story***

OK. I heard this story from another storyteller but I am not sure where she got it from. It’s from Ireland – a coastal town – and when I tell it I always think of a stretch of beach near where my parents live.

*The Stolen Child – tell* ***briefly.***

Finish: “And that night the woman sat by her own campfire, cooking a good soup for herself and breastfeeding her own child in her arms.”

***Moment of ‘paralysis’***

SILENCE

Now comes this sort of awful silence. I have tried to keep you ready to spring, but now you are absolutely left hanging, dependent. I was able to lead you in respectfully but you have been silent for a long time now, and coming out again feels very hairy. I don’t know what this moment is but it contains demands and discomfort on both sides – from me, the desire to see a response; from you, an awkward sense that something may now be demanded of you, a request for time and quiet. But no, the world needs to keep grinding on. And I really do want to see what you turn this into.

***Is it true?***

The first question is usually more or less the same: “Was that a true story?” or “Is that lady still alive?” Well, granted that you are a group who believe in disappearing hitchhikers, or that turning three times round and saying ‘Grey Lady, Grey Lady’ into a mirror will summon a ghost. But still, surely you know it wasn’t true – I even told you so at the beginning, although I left some gap for doubt – so what does that question really mean?

I think it might be something like, Is this something you can credibly tell on to others? Does it have a location you can name? Is it something you can use as a reliable guide to the intricacies of human nature? And what claims am I as storyteller making for this story?

I try to explain about ‘story truth’ and how legends form over generations. But there is another kind of authenticity that is sometimes questioned. Is this story a ‘good enough’ story or is it ‘weird’? A group of 11-14-year-old girls loved the Native American story of Feather Woman who goes to live in the sky kingdom with her lover the Morning Star, even though it ends tragically, but they said the story of the two Maori girls whose bravery gave us our Moon was ‘weird’. Its narrative arc did not resonate with anything they had come across before, so it didn’t make sense – whereas Feather Woman has counterparts, for example in the Twilight series. You are not children who are so short on narrative structures that they will grasp willingly onto almost any, but people who have already started writing your own reference book of ‘how the world works’.

***Response***

Now, depending on the context, we will do something with the story. We will retell it in pairs or groups, enact it, draw or create freezes of moments from it, rewrite it from another perspective or in another time, interrogate the characters…The aim is a kind of ‘transformation’ of the raw material of the story, by which I mean you will appropriate it in a way that means something to you. I have tried to remove you for a while from the constraints of the current surroundings so you could experience at least one alternative beyond it. ***I am hoping I have given you something you can use to add to your repertoire of possible ways to understand and deal with a situation.*** My assumption is that this is a good thing and my experience has corroborated that sometimes – though many storytellers argue persuasively that this process should be left to happen naturally.

Whether real transformation of the story then occurs is highly context-dependent. In a well-established youth drama group with excellent facilitators, I have seen young people with additional needs home in on themes in a myth which were burningly important to them – like bullying, parental abandonment, dependent love - and create very moving versions of the story. In shyer, inexperienced groups, where trust is yet to build up between the young people and with me, the renditions may stay extremely tight to my version of the story and its moral arc. We can get trapped in a world of mirrors and start to yawn.

It also depends on whether I made the right choice of story, and on my nouse in choosing the right activities to give you, something I am only starting to develop an instinct for. I hope that, as I work with certain groups over a longer term, I will start to see a transfer of power to you so that the onus for making these right choices does not just depend on me.

I also have a hope that you might bring that power to bear beyond this room. For example, how do you feel about your youth club closing down? Or about your teachers being pressured to push you over a grade C boundary instead of helping you to challenge and change your world?

***Agenda***

I used to believe that ‘people will take from the story what they want or need’. And of course this is true, but I am also coming to a recognition that, of course, I like any storyteller have an agenda. I also have a responsibility - I try to give you stories which contain all the rawness of life and put it into some sort of meaningful context – so I have to plan quite carefully how I am going to handle these themes, rather than just send the story out there roughshod. This is not always something I can see clearly, so I have tried the exercise of analysing the themes in my favourite stories for teenagers and compiling them into something like a mini-monologue. As I read it, some of the statements seem to need serious consideration – they are big assumptions or value statements. But for now, I am going to finish by reading it to you.

***My meta-narrative***

These things that are inside you –

Your anger, your uncontainable longings, your lostness, and your newness to yourself –

They are heavy and good and necessary.

The world would stop turning without them.

So cup them carefully in your hands;

Do not sell them,

Or spill them on the ground for the world to spin twisted fables from.

We face terrible things and awesome challenges. You may have a poor inheritance.

So resourcefulness is everything;

Feel it resonate in others here present.

Keep your eyes and ears open and your instinct tuned,

See the human in everything.

And be persistent!

Don’t aim to please but to endure;

Don’t consume but generate…

It is these things that will enable us to prevent – or transform – the deluge.

Arrogance is a hindrance,

Prejudice is a burden.

People are complex systems but every cause has an effect.

What you give will come back to you,

What you take will be taken in double measure.

No matter what surrounds you, even in the closing moments of your tragedies, you always have these choices.

But first rise above that ‘you’, that ‘choice’,

Float high above them and view the whole landscape.

See its lofty vantage points and its sullen swamps,

Its mires and its traps set by the powerful.

But others have trod this country before and left signs.

The things that are inside you are good and true –

Even the unspeakable things –

Here in this moment we will cup them in our hands together.

After that it is up to you.