

From Socks to Strings: Storytelling & Puppetry

Bodyke NS, January - March 2017

Artists in Schools scheme Arts Residency

Artist: Ruth Marshall

Teacher: Eadaoin Ryan

Project Description

The title of our project is “From Socks to Strings: A creative exploration of where our imagination will take us through the world of storytelling, puppetry, and oral language”. We aim to explore the world of storytelling to enhance the oral language experience of the junior class in our school. We hope to explore character profiles, model good story telling and allow the children to explore dramatic conventions and practice the structures and features of the narrative while engaging the more shy and reluctant speakers. We hope to give opportunities to use language to entertain, to support improvisational drama, spontaneous role play, tell experiences and experiment with new ideas and vocabulary. The project will also allow the children to explore puppet design and creating puppets for their characters, to bring their stories to life.

We want to encourage in the students a love of story, storytelling and story-making through listening to an experienced storyteller tell a series of meaningful stories. Students will be encouraged to take part in games and exercises to help develop their own imaginative capacity, creating characters, landscapes and plots, and culminating in creating and sharing their own stories, with the aid of simple puppets.

The project will be a junior class initiative where all children from junior infants to 1st class, will engage with the artist/storyteller to explore their own creativity.

The Artist Concept – Ruth Marshall

Storytelling is one of the most ancient forms of creative expression. Even before we had language, we still had stories that we shared through sound, gesture and eye contact.

As a storyteller, my head is full of pictures, and my task is, through my telling, to help others create their own images. In our screen-dominant world, where we are faced with so many ready-made images, we are in danger of losing our imaginations. Now more than ever, children need stories, and the powers of creative imagination. I believe storytelling is a healing balm that awakens and nurtures imagination, wonder and possibilities. A good story can change how we think, how we see the world, and how we decide to act in it.

I love stories and storytelling; I love to see a group children spellbound by the power and mystery of a tale. I fell in love with storytelling when I realised that stories touched a very deep part of me, and stayed with me, living within me, waiting to be retold.

I tell stories from that deep place within me: a place of presence. In telling stories or in teaching the art of storytelling and story-making, my intention is to put others in contact with that same place within them, and to nurture their imaginations – the country of images. I encourage children to speak and write from the land of images that is alive within them.

To become a storyteller, one needs to listen to good storytellers. A good storyteller has a presence that encourages powerful listening. Students will be encouraged to first of all listen, then to imitate, and ultimately to express themselves freely in a love of oral language.



The story

In January 2017, it was cold and wet outside, but in the junior classroom of Bodyke NS, a new story was just beginning. The previous September Eadaoin Ryan, a teacher at Bodyke NS in Co Clare, had contacted me (storyteller Ruth Marshall) with a view to submitting a proposal for an Arts Residency in her class. Bodyke NS is a small rural primary school, and Eadaoin's class has just twelve students, made up of junior and senior infants and class one. Eadaoin has a keen personal interest in puppetry, and wanted a project that would explore storytelling, strengthen the students' oral language skills, and involve puppets.

Although nowadays I am more of a storyteller, many years ago I had been a puppeteer with Dandelion Puppets, and brought puppet shows on environmental and social issues to schools and festivals around Ireland.

Eadaoin was keen to continue with project-related work within normal class times, thus integrating creativity into curriculum work.

We designed our project, and were delighted that our proposal was accepted. We set a date for our adventure in story to begin in January 2017.



In the classroom

For the first few sessions I just told stories, my intention being to model good storytelling in practice. I introduced some of the things I do when telling stories: I laid a cloth on a table, placed on it my candle, bell and sometimes, a few flowers. I explained that the bell is to help us listen, and the candle is my little piece of fire, like the fireside folk would gather around to hear and share stories in old days. The flowers are for beauty and nature. I brought my ukulele with me too, just in case a song was appropriate. Sometimes it is.

I told the children about an old woman called Biddy Collins who lived in a tiny cabin on a bog near Tulla, not very far away from us in Bodyke! How the fairies would visit her in the night and tell her stories. How she wandered from house to house next day, telling these stories and getting a bite to eat from her neighbours. How she always spoke a blessing before launching into her tales: *"God bless the hearers and the tellers, and where 'tis told, and them that's telling it."*

The first story was "Micky Devaney's Terrier": a story of a man's love for his Irish terrier, the clever tricks he'd taught it, his sadness when his old dog doesn't wake one day, and the waistcoat he makes from the dog's pelt - to keep it close to his heart!

After telling the story, I asked children to draw a scene from it: whatever had made an impression on them. I gave them beeswax block crayons, and showed them how to use the various edges to draw, and how to fill a whole A3 page with colour.

Later, we laid out the drawings in sequence, from beginning to end of the story. Each child had an opportunity to talk about their image.

Between sessions, Eadaoin made very expressive sock puppets of Micky's dog with the class.



Warm-ups:

Often I started the session with voice and body warm-ups:. We hummed, made vowel sounds, consonants, spoke nursery rhymes and verses. We moved around the classroom, stretching, waving our arms, opening up and claiming our creative space, freely making sound. We spoke tongue twisters: "mixed biscuits"; "red lorry yellow lorry"; "please Paul, pause for applause". The children really enjoyed these, and would ask for them each session. We also learned to speak our verse, Hillaire Belloc's "The Early Morning" and introduced gestures to accompany this. Later il introduced another verse: "An Emerald is as Green as Grass".

Other stories followed: "Jack and his Mother" and "Never Disturb a Woman at her Knitting", and around St Brigit's Day I told the seasonal tale of "Bride and Angus".



We looked at characters in the stories, particularly Jack and his Mother. How could we develop these characters? What would they look like? What colour hair? How tall or short? What would they wear? We looked a little at how they might feel; what they might be interested in. Children drew their idea of Jack and described him, repeating this for his Mother. They drew the whole story on one long roll of paper. In between sessions, Eadaoin and the class made hand puppets of Jack and his Mother from felt.

The story basket:

One day I brought out my story basket. The first child put their hand under its yellow silk cover and drew out an object.

Whatever it would be, I would use as a starting point for speaking a spontaneous story. In this case, it was a glittery high-heeled shoe.

This is how the class's story "Lily and the Golden Shoes" began.

The children took it in turns to pull something from the story basket. There was a shoe; star; butterfly; golden bird; fish; tub of buttons (which became 3 gemstones!). So the story moved on, with magical transformations, and a wish that came true.

When the story was complete, Eadaoin brought out a long roll of strong paper, and laid it out on the floor. Each child then took one scene from the story and drew this sequentially. The whole story came to life on paper. In a follow-up session, we filled in some details, fleshed out the bones of the story.



In later sessions, we worked with cutting out shapes from black card for stick puppets to tell the story of Lily and the Golden Shoes.

Story making:

I gave the older children four objects from the story basket, and asked each pair to create a story that included all four in some way.

These story 'prompts' were: a musical box; a cat; a blue glass bottle; a little bag of lavender.

Many magical stories emerged from this process, and the children were recorded telling their tales.



Making puppets:

I showed the class some of my own figures: Old Woman; Father Winter; Friendly Witch; and one that I had made over the weekend, to test that what I wanted to teach was easily do-able. These puppets had no moving parts, no strings, so are more like dolls who could be moved by the child's hand from behind over a cloth landscape.

I kept the materials and the method simple: toilet roll tube; cushion stuffing; tee shirt fabric; old tights; a couple of beads for eyes; some ribbon or braid; wool for hair. We also needed scissors and a glue gun. Eadaoin and I operated the hot glue guns.

Making the heads proved a little tricky for some of the children, and a bit of help was needed. Some of our puppets - who had started out as St Brigit; St Patrick; Jack's Mother - were transformed during the making process, once the teacher's bag of shiny buttons came out. Suddenly we had wizards and magical fairy princesses. But then, transformation is a common theme in stories.



In between sessions, Eadaoin helped the children to make another puppet each in the same way. This time, the puppets were all Lily from "Lily and the Golden Shoes".

Stick puppets and cut-outs:

I made simple cut-out backdrops from black card, and a few character puppets on sticks, to fit the story of "The Whale of Mull".

Firstly, I told the children the full story, which required them to help row a boat over stormy seas, haul up fishing nets; and fill a boat with fish. At the next session, I showed them my stick puppets of the fishermen and their boat; the whale that swallowed them; the fish inside the whale's belly. We also watched a short stop-motion film I had made of this story.



Having introduced the idea, I then made black card backdrops for the key scenes from "Lily and the Golden Shoes": Lily's bedroom; the forest; the stream; the gemstones.

Each child made their own set of stick puppets - Lily; star; butterfly; bird; fish; shoes - to tell the tale, and practised telling the story, while using their stick puppets.

Each was paired with another child, so that there would always be one to hand the puppets to the child who was telling the story.

We looked at important things to remember when telling a story: making eye contact with the audience; pausing every now and again for effect; bringing expression into the voice; remembering to breathe; pacing; etc.

Each child told the story of "Lily and the Golden Shoes", and also had a role as the support person to another child.



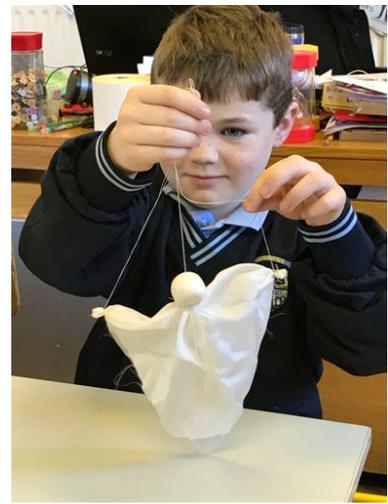


Spontaneous story:

When the story basket came out again, we sat in a circle and I handed objects to the children one by one, encouraging them to set their imaginations free, and freely speak whatever story came to them.

A new story was created, where a horse flew to another planet.....

After that, the children were delighted to be able to see all the mystery objects in the basket.



One day I brought a simple silk string puppet, and some of the children tried to work with it. It required a bit more concentration and coordination.

Sound Effects and Music:

I brought my ukulele along on occasions to demonstrate that sometimes a song can enhance a story. I showed how a softly toned xylophone could make a magical sound - something we needed in the story of Lily and the Golden Shoes. A bell, or a brass bowl struck lightly, creates a moment of stillness before a story begins.

Eadaoin also made an exciting electronic soundscape for one of our stories.



Improvisation:

As the project neared completion, I put the children into pairs for a bit of improvisation with their puppets.

Each pair had a table with cloths, or a cardboard stage set, and the puppets of their choice. We set up a story landscape, and each pair devised a story that they would tell using their puppets.



Giving feedback:

Each pair performed their puppet play to the rest of the class. Everyone got a big round of applause, followed by a constructive feedback session. The children told their classmates what they had particularly liked about the story and its presentation. The teacher and I then gave helpful suggestions for making their performances even better. This included hints on handling the puppets; making sure they face the audience; speaking clearly; keeping puppets still, rather than jiggling up and down; keeping puppets who are not meant to be present in a scene out of the stage area; etc.

Each pair listened and took the helpful suggestions into their subsequent performances.

Celebration:

We planned a celebration to mark the conclusion of the project. Parents and the older class were invited to view a display of the children's work, and to hear stories the children had created.

Every child had a part to play: the younger ones would speak about their puppets; the older children would tell a story either using their puppets or using the long drawings to illustrate each scene. Eadaoin and I would speak about the project and we'd end with me telling a story - and there would be tea and cake!

On the day of the celebration, it was a pleasure to see the children speak confidently before the assembled crowd. A photographer from the Clare Champion took plenty of photos, and the Clare County Arts Office sent Ceara along to help us celebrate.



Reflection and appreciation:

I think that, over the 30 hours of the project, the children learned to express themselves clearly; to trust themselves to speak; to play with words and story; to build their oral language skills; to create an ambiance for storytelling. Their imaginations really are without limits.

For myself, it was a pleasure to work with a small group over a 3 month period and to have continuity to build up on the work already done. The children were so willing to try out whatever new things I asked them to do - whether that was to imagine a hum travelling from their heads to their toes, to speak tongue twisters or verses, to row an imaginary story boat, or speak spontaneously a new story that no one had ever heard before.

Working with Eadaoin was also very rewarding. Her enthusiasm for learning and creativity shines through. Many teachers will take a back seat when an artist/storyteller visits, but Eadaoin was right in there, happy to help hands-on, and to continue with the project themes outside project time. I very much appreciate her input and support. Our project was a real collaboration.

Many thanks to the Clare County Arts Office and the Arts Council for funding the project.

The Early Morning

The moon on the one hand, the dawn on the other;
The moon is my sister, the dawn is my brother.
The moon on my left and the dawn on my right-
My brother, good morning; my sister, good night.

~ *Hillaire Belloc*