

Staging the Story

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Performance storytelling is extending its reach out of the storytelling festival and club events into mainstream arts programming and theatre spaces. This article examines the opportunities, challenges and tensions of this development and suggests creative possibilities for the future.

This article is written from the point of view of a storyteller active within the UK storytelling revival and although I am aware of both the course of contemporary storytelling in other countries and tradition-bearer based telling this article is written from the perspective of a professional revival storyteller, facilitator and lecturer based in the UK.

Over the years the storytelling revival has developed norms and conventions of performance that function well in the environments in which it has developed and is developing. There was a period in the mid-late eighties when inroads were made into arts centre programmes however during the nineties this dramatically declined (B. Haggarty K. Norgate pers. comm.).

However recently there has been a noticeable revival in interest in storytelling from theatre and arts centre programmers. Several tours of middle scale venues have been facilitated by Creu Cymru in Wales, the Derby based promotion company Adverse Camber promotes storytelling for adults at a variety of events and venues including mainstream small and middle scale theatres and the Crick Crack Club has staged a number of highly successful storytelling events at the Barbican and National Theatre in London. However these primarily theatrical spaces have been developed with explicit and implicit assumptions, aesthetics and practices that make the transition challenging.

This article examines how storytelling can maintain and develop the values and practices it has developed while taking advantage of these new opportunities.

In order to better understand this transition a brief review of how storytelling performance operates in its home environment will be offered, followed by a look at how theatre operates in the same circumstances to demonstrate the differing process and aesthetics. The attempt to make the transition from one arena to the other will be illustrated by my own experiences as a storyteller working on the production *Hunting the Giant's Daughter* which is touring a variety of venues including small and middle scale theatres.

Storytelling Performance

Staging

Contemporary storytelling has developed a marked preference for a shallow and wide staging and a wide audience (the Bradenstoke Hall in St. Donat's Castle, the Guildhall Leicester, the Swan in Wolverhampton) as well as cabaret seating (some Storytelling

Cafés, the Gate in Cardiff). There are normally no wings and performers often enter the performance area via the area where the audience are seated or, if entering a raised stage, via steps at the side of the stage, the whole entrance and exit being visible (Festival at the Edge, Emerson College, the Glanfa Stage in the Wales Millennium Centre). In a wide audience the back row is considerably closer to the stage than the back row in a deep auditorium holding the same number. This allows the performer/s to make better eye contact with individual audience members which, as will be demonstrated, is an essential part of the storytelling aesthetic.

Lighting is generally arranged to facilitate visibility rather than create any specific effect and even when theatrical equipment is used, as in the bigger festivals, the informal spaces offer no or limited blackout and much of the light is bounced or diffused off walls and ceiling. As a consequence there is no lighting generated fourth wall and the lighting on the stage area produces weaker shadows than the same lights in a standard theatrical space thereby looking less 'theatrical'. Although the lights are directed towards the performance area the performers and audience are, essentially, in the same space.

Personally present

The performers appear as a version of themselves rather than characters whose existence is limited to the actions portrayed on stage. This is presented particularly clearly in the popular festival format where a number of storytellers (typically around four) share the stage and tell a story each with the non-telling performers present throughout on stage, listening. In my experience, which is similar to the experiences of other storytellers I have talked to about this, there is a brief discussion immediately beforehand when a running order, timing and possible stories or types of stories are discussed.

Typically the storytellers respond to the energy and atmosphere of the event and often tell a story other than the one they had originally intended to tell. During the performance the non-telling storytellers are on stage, listening in full view of the audience. Although aware of being visible and checking behaviour that might be distracting, i.e. coughing, whispering to a neighbour, scratching etc. more so than those in the auditorium, the activity of watching and reacting is essentially the same as that of the regular audience. The listening tellers complete a circle of concentration with the audience and their listening behaviour (gaze, smiling, laughter, acknowledging laughter with other listeners, relaxed concentration etc.) is fully visible to all. As a teller gets up to take their turn there is no moment when they stop being fully visible as themselves, although the role they take moves from (observed) listener to performer. It is the 'visibility' (Wilson 2006 p.84) of the storyteller as a person, as well as their skill and the story itself that makes the story worth listening to.

MC

In common with many variety performances storytellers are frequently introduced by someone representing the promoter of the event. The MC also closes the session thanking the storyteller/s and prompting applause as well as informing the audience of future events etc. This parallels the role of the *fear an taigh* (man of the house) in the Scottish and Irish cèilidh tradition.

The MC eases the audience from the social world to the performance world. In community settings, where the vast majority of the audience already know each other and the social dynamic is a strong one, this might involve settling an energetic audience, whereas in a situation where the audience are strangers to each other they may need to be warmed up. This dynamic can change, for example during weekend long storytelling festivals (Festival at the Edge, Beyond the Border, Cape Clear Storytelling Festival) where the audience become gradually more acquainted through their time together in the queues, food tents, camp site etc.

The introduction serves to emphasise the storyteller's real life identity, extols their virtues and normally models a relatively light and humorous style without taking focus from the teller as the main event. The audience are also affirmed and the MC typically thanks them for their presence.

Yashinsky (2005) sees the function of the MC as central to how storytelling performance functions and cites the redoubtable Harry Bailey of the Tabard Inn in the Canterbury Tales who not only makes sure that tellers get a fair hearing but that those who abuse the privilege are put in their place, as in the case of the Pardoner.

Audience relationship, gaze, participation

During the performance the audience's gaze is firmly fixed on the storyteller while the teller makes ample use of direct eye-contact with the audience directing the performance straight out towards them. In informal cabaret settings and outdoor performances the audience's gaze also takes in other audience members and the surrounding environment. Where stage lighting is used it is of prime importance that the audience is easily visible to the performer/s and the space is lit to make this possible.

A vital component of the gaze in a storytelling performance is that it is mutual. The audience are looking at a real person and that person is looking back at them and when real people really look at each other for any period of time a sense of togetherness and intimacy will naturally develop and it is within that mutuality of gaze that the story happens.

Participation is a natural part of the performance and varies according to the material. Generally the lighter the material the more appropriate participation feels although I feel this has more to do with adult notions of appropriateness. Ritualised group movements and vocalisation add resonance to heavier stories with younger audiences and I have seen this work with adult audiences in my own performances at a number of festivals. In the traditional storytelling of Belize the process of 'fattening' can range from ritualized audience interruptions and performer responses to a full scale community dance after which the storyteller takes up from where the story was interrupted (Beck in MacDonald ed. 1999). It must also be remembered that the simple act of group listening is a far from passive activity, Sturm (2003) demonstrates that the complex state of listening to an extended oral narrative and negotiating the events of the story and one's reaction to them frequently requires considerable agency on the part of the listeners.

The fact that in a storytelling performance real people are sharing the same space and connecting with extensive eye contact leads to a feeling of togetherness and intimacy

and in the available literature 'intimacy' is one of the most frequently used words in descriptions of storytelling (Wilson 2006, Ong 1988, Yashinsky 2005, Leith 2002,). Yashinsky (2005) sees this quality as being facilitated by the MC. In his study of traditional tall tale tellers Bauman (1986) sees this intimacy and heightened awareness as a way of transferring the experience of the teller to the experience of the listener.

This intimacy is also linked to a feeling of active participation and co-creation on the part of the audience. The storytelling audience "feels involved...contributes, as opposed to having been performed 'at'" (Wilson 2006). The audience members are able to put themselves in the action of the story "the listener is the hero of the story" (Yashinsky 2005 p.28) which can, in turn, effect their role in the real world as "protagonists and not extras in the scenery of the world*" (Machado 2004 p13). This dynamic also affects the performance, the audience's "responsiveness" being a "great spur to the storyteller's individual creativity" (Leith 2002 p.69).

The above observations outline what has become second nature for contemporary storytellers and may seem hardly worth mentioning, however those not familiar with the current storytelling revival may be reading this and taken together the observations point to a central aspect of storytelling performance that does not seem, as yet, to have been fully articulated; the porous nature of the art form.

Porous Space

The very specific nature of tented storytelling festivals means that the space is (sometimes literally) porous, sounds from the surroundings being clearly audible within and skilful performers weaving real-world intrusions into the performance. The story walk is another very specific storytelling performance type where the interpenetration of performed narrative and the actual landscape is essential as are performances in historical buildings and locations where present, historical, legendary and mythic time can all be invoked with reference to the specific location. The porous space also serves to emphasise the uniqueness of each performance as the surroundings are constantly affecting the performance.

Porous Material

The UK storytelling revival concentrates largely on traditional stories within the public domain and where personal material is used it is usually in conjunction with traditional material (Hugh Lupton's *Psalms from the Horse's Mouth* and Taffy Thomas' *Take these Chains from my Heart*). In this way the stories told have a looser relationship to the storytellers than scripted material which is copyrighted by an author, although word for word renditions of other storytellers' work are seriously frowned on. Although maintaining a cultural link with oral traditions, with the Scottish traveller tradition being particularly important, it is true that most storytellers get most of their material from books, however, even on the page, 'the boundaries of the books you find are amazingly porous' Yashinsky (2005 p.124).

It is common practice amongst storytellers to place themselves in a line of storytellers stretching back in time passing the stories on. This can be interpreted as both an expression of respect to the traditions and peoples from whom the stories have come as well as expressing a looser grip on the material as product or artefact than that exercised by writers. There is no sense of ownership, in a copyright sense, rather a

feeling that the stories are common property. (In this article I am deliberately not addressing the issue of cultural appropriation and who 'can' and 'cannot' tell certain stories which is a topic that deserves separate discussion).

Although many storytellers offer specific shows, especially for adult venues, the foundation of storytellers' material is a repertoire from which they combine different stories to create a set for performance. This gives a high degree of flexibility allowing storytellers to respond to the audience and situation they find themselves in, both in the stories they actually tell as well as their delivery of them.

Another interesting feature of the oral performance of traditional oral stories is the rediscovery of techniques of learning and performance found amongst oral societies, Collins (2006) finding a number of features in common between contemporary methods and ancient practice from the Classical period.

This porous oral material has the ability to work on "several levels simultaneously*" (Hampâté Bâ 2000 p.14) not only linking performers and audience but also making connections with landscape (Lupton 2001, Harvey 1999), the internal world of the listener (Hampâté Bâ, 1994), "our own possibilities for transformation" (Yashinsky 2005 p.9) and the social world, reviving our utopian urges (Zipes 2004) as well as offering practical "equipment for living" (Bauman 1986 p.76).

Porous Performance

The intimacy and audience involvement of storytelling performance (Wilson 2006) mean that "the boundaries between art, artists and audience in storytelling are porous" (Sobol 1999 p.37). As an art form storytelling is 'rooted in the everyday' (Wilson 2006 p.96) and 'an art which lies very close to everyday life' (Yashinsky 2005 p.7) a factor which Ong (1998) sees as one of the defining characteristics of orality itself.

According to the Irish storyteller Nuala Hayes, this demands a "free and open" (Wilson 2006 p.154) style of performance as opposed to acting in the conventional theatre (Hayes is also a respected actor). The storytelling style of performance asks the performer to be more vulnerable which in turn feels more "scary and dangerous and risky" (ibid p. 154) than being on a conventional stage.

Many storytellers also work as facilitators in community and education contexts and the Scottish based Northern Irish teller Claire Mulholland says that she tries not to separate these two roles (Wilson 2007 p.175) bringing performance and real life closer together. In a traditional context Price and Price (1991) see the relationship between teller/s and listener/s as being more important than performance virtuosity.

In smaller, more informal performances audiences of all ages will talk to the storytellers between stories allowing the performer to fine tune their choice of stories to the audience, the event as a whole switching between a social and a performance dynamic with an "apparent absence of boundaries" (Leith 2002 p.13).

To put the above points into context the opening of a storytelling performance is described below.

Mats Rehnman The Milky Way - Stories of Nordic Nights

The Gate, Cardiff, November 2008

The performance was organised by the Storytelling Café and the Cardiff Storytelling Circle and featured a respected and well regarded Swedish storyteller, Mats Rehnman, telling a set of Scandinavian mythology and personal stories woven together.

The performance was held in the café area of the Gate Arts Centre in Cardiff. The audience entered the space, after buying or picking up tickets from an area near the building's entrance and were able to buy drinks at a bar with the seating area off to one side and partially obscured by a flexible partition wall. The seating was cabaret style with chairs, tables and sofas all informally orientated towards the far wall with a space kept clear for the performance itself. The performance took place on the floor without using a raised stage. Mats was himself present as the audience entered, chatting to some audience members to one side of the performance space in a general atmosphere of informality and conviviality.

As more people arrived it became clear that the space was not big enough so the centre staff started to remove the temporary partition and bring more seating with the willing and unprompted assistance of various audience members.

Mats was introduced by a member of the Cardiff Storytelling circle standing stage left of the stage's hot spot. Mats stood to the right of the MC and slightly more upstage, giving focus to the MC and not making any attempt to make contact with the audience himself. He seemed genuinely pleased to be introduced as well as slightly embarrassed. The MC cued the applause, gesturing to Mats and left the stage area. Mats walked into the hotter area of the stage and, riding the energy of the applause, launched into a rousing song in Swedish, glass of red wine in hand. He used this opportunity to make eye contact with audience members in every part of the room and finished the song with a loud 'Skol!' raising his glass in a toast to the audience. Unprompted and as one the audience raised their glasses and replied with a resounding 'Skol!', all together and right on the beat.

As well as the telling of stories this brief description indicates that informality, intimacy, collusion, improvisation, humour, a sense of occasion and careful but casual use of space are all being used to make the performance what it is.

Key features of storytelling performance

There follows a list of features which appear to me to be core to the contemporary storytelling revival and which storytelling in theatrical spaces attempts to maintain and develop.

- A strong repertoire base
- Intimacy, engagement, direct address and mutuality of gaze.
- An understanding of the story's context and its literal, creative and metaphorical landscape.
- A porous quality of performance, material and space that links performer, material, audience and the wider world

Contrasts with the theatre

Before moving on to contrast storytelling performance with theatre performance it is important to emphasise that it is in no way my intention to provide criteria to definitively distinguish the two or say that one is better than the other. They are both, after all, types of performance and ‘inextricably linked’ (Wilson 2006 p.145). Rather, I am hoping to demonstrate through this contrast what is valuable and unique about current storytelling practice before moving on to discuss how these values and practices can be used in more conventional theatre spaces.

Storyteller and Actor

In the UK there is a marked professional separation between storytelling and theatre and although some storytellers active in the UK revival (including myself) have a background in the theatre few keep a foot in both camps. This is not universally true, however, and the great Irish *seanachai* Eamon Kelly was a well known actor working at both the Gate and Abbey theatres in Dublin. In the contemporary Irish storytelling scene both Jack Lynch and Nuala Hayes are also respected actors. The Dutch revival has followed a different course too with Loekie Wieringa influencing a generation of tellers with an emphasis on theatrical stage craft and the influential and well-respected French storyteller Abbi Patrix (Patrix 2003) has devised and performed many theatrical storytelling performances with, amongst others, *la Compagnie du Cercle*.

Wilson (2006) has demonstrated the connection between the performance of storytelling and Brechtian acting and Brecht himself made the connection between the portrayal of character in epic acting and social storytelling “This showing of other people’s behaviour happens time and again in ordinary life” (Willett ed. 1979 p.136), a connection which parallels the connection between social storytelling and performance storytelling. This being said, psychological realism is the dominant contemporary performance style within mainstream theatre and the one whose assumptions and aesthetics are more likely to be unconsciously absorbed by storytellers as part of their cultural inheritance and it is with this particular style of acting that storytelling performance is being compared, not in order to demonstrate an unbridgeable gulf between them, but in order for us to be clearer about what storytelling is and how it operates.

In the UK, where a high level of separation exists, the difference between the two worlds is marked. Actors are generally employed by a company to work in an ensemble of other actors saying words pre-written by the playwright within the overall vision of the director. There is a rehearsal period of around four weeks followed by a run and/or a tour. On the other hand storytellers do the bulk of their work as solo performers, researching, devising and preparing their own material and promoting themselves to potential bookers as self-employed sole-traders. As well as working on specific shows storytellers develop a repertoire of stories to suit different

occasions with individual stories being told over many years and often after a long development process.

Having a repertoire means that the storyteller has the flexibility to change the actual material as well as the delivery of it, responding to the circumstances of the performance whereas theatre companies have to do the show they have prepared. This freedom, fluidity and individuality closely parallels features of performances by tradition bearers observed by Albert Lord and Milman Parry (Lord 1960) in the former Yugoslavia in the 1930s.

Performance

In conventional theatre the actor plays a character (or possibly, characters) and acts what the character is doing, i.e. the verb (complaining, explaining, looking for something etc) (Donnellan 2002). The actor's prime responsibility is towards his part. In contrast, in storytelling 'the narrative is the central character' (Wilson 2006 p178), so in effect while the actor plays a part the storyteller plays the whole. This means that there is a much looser identification between performer and character allowing the storyteller to tell the story as well as adopt the point of view and attitudes of characters within it in a way so light as to be almost imperceptible while at the same time maintaining simultaneous contact with the story and the audience, as Peter Brook noted of the traditional storytellers he witnessed on his travels (Brook 1993 p.31) "They have an ear turned inwards as well as outwards...being in two worlds at the same time."

Over dramatisation slows storytelling down to the extent that the bond between audience and teller is broken and the story ceases to function. As US born Canadian storyteller Dan Yashinsky advises "When a witch screams, the storyteller doesn't have to" (Yashinsky 2005 p.152). Using one's own attitude towards character and situation in performance, rather than expressing everything from the point of view of one character is closely allied to the Brechtian notions of *Gestus* (Wilson 2006). There is also a significant similarity with the theatre director John Wright's notion of 'declaring the game' in which there is a joyful acceptance of the fact that the performer is pretending (Wright 2006)

These broad areas of contrast are similar to those outlined by the Portugal based Brazilian storyteller and actress Clara Haddad when asked what, for her, were the differences between performing theatre and telling stories. She maintains that storytelling allows her to be herself, have a stronger contact with the audience and take multiple points of view (Vargas 2008).

Space

"A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." (Brook 1968 p.11)

This iconic definition of the essence of the theatre reveals a lot about the subtle differences between theatrical and storytelling presentation. The actor in Brook's space is walking. He is on his way somewhere, not a 'real' somewhere because this journey is not a 'real' journey. He is pretending, and the space obligingly pretends with him. Storytellers tend not to walk across empty spaces because they are not

going anywhere – they have arrived and have a story to tell. The space we are in stays the same space and the action of the story is not played out primarily in the stage space in front of the audience but somewhere between the audience and the storyteller in the nexus of gaze and attention.

Space, left to its own devices, is never empty. It has to be made to appear empty by convention. This could be the carpet that Brook's actors took with them round Africa or a full scale blackout, sound proofing, drapes, lighting and sound rig. An important part of the challenge facing storytelling performance in theatres is the fact that the more hermetically sealed the space is the more antithetical it becomes to the porous nature of storytelling.

The here and now reality of the space in performance is enhanced by the relative informality and intimacy of the form as developed in festivals and clubs to date. Moving into contemporary mainstream theatrical spaces can prove problematic because the spaces seem designed to hinder the creation of intimacy rather than foster it "modern auditoria are sociofugal, throwing spectators apart, limiting their eye contact, discouraging social interaction with implications for the practice, function and meaning of theatre... The role of the spectator in signification is denied" (Pearson & Shanks 2001 p.108). MacKintosh (1993) also bemoans the current state of theatre architecture as being more in tune with cinema than theatre, allowing easy viewing of a flat, rectangular playing surface. It is interesting to note that this dissatisfaction comes from the theatre itself indicating an unhealthy gap between those who make and perform theatre and those who pay for and design the buildings.

Audience

While there is general agreement that the audience's presence is vital for theatre to happen (Brook 1968,1993 MacKintosh 1993, Jellicoe 1967) the relationship is an indirect one. "The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind." (Hagen 1973 p.57). Stanislavsky talks about the actor's "public solitude" (Stanislavsky 1950 p.40).

For Hagen (1973) the actor's focus should be on the reality of the drama and not the world outside, in fact real world intrusions are seen as problematic and making visual contact with individual members of the audience can make the audience "feel self-conscious, uncomfortable, abused" (ibid. p. 207). Although the presence of the audience is essential the actor's attention is not directed there and she gives advice about "what can you do for yourself with that big gaping hole out there" (ibid. p. 106)

There are, however, some obvious exceptions to the above generalisations which need to be acknowledged. Direct address to the audience is not always discouraged and can be used as an essential motor for improvisation (Wright 2006) and has been an important tool in political theatre (McGrath 1981). Interestingly both John Wright and John McGrath can be seen as working outside mainstream theatre. Wright often bemuses conventionally trained actors with the injunction to 'stop acting' in his workshops. Failure to comply can lead to being beaten with a rolled up newspaper. McGrath reports that while direct address in *Lay Off* (a production of the English 7:84) worked well in working-class venues and factory occupations, middle-class London audiences felt uneasy and patronised.

These factors lead to the conclusion that it is not merely performance style that differentiates storytelling from conventional theatre but a context of event, artistic process, performance space and audience expectations. This is an important consideration for storytellers and promoters who want to take up and develop opportunities in mainstream theatrical venues.

Staging the Story

It is this transition that I would now like to examine with particular reference to the current tour of *Hunting the Giant's Daughter*. The performance is a faithful reworking of the story of Culhwch ac Olwen from the Mabinogion performed by a storyteller, musician and singer and produced by Adverse Camber Productions (for more details see www.adversecamber.org).

The show was initially commissioned by Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival in South Wales to celebrate its 10th anniversary in 2003 and then went on tour with an Arts Council of Wales grant as a Creu Cymru priority project as well as being performed in Ireland and Holland. In general the performers feel that both premiere and initial tours were a success but with the additional funding made available from the Arts Council of England through the production company Adverse Camber we were able to work to a much higher professional standard in technical, production and creative terms and were more aware of what we wanted from the theatrical spaces we were going to work in.

The storytelling revival has developed specific codes to ease the event from a social one to a performance one however because the theatre processes its audience differently on its journey to the auditorium (car park, box office, bar, foyer, corridor, usher, auditorium) when they take their seats it is naïve to assume that they are in the same space as those who have come through the stage door. In order to bridge this gap it must first be acknowledged that it exists in order to use the available resources to create a single space and real time contact between real people.

Performances in theatres are programmed and marketed and as such the theatre needs to tell its potential audience enough about the show to help them make a decision about whether or not to buy a ticket. This means that the performers are committed to a specific show and will usually be unable to change the stories they tell based solely on how they think this specific audience will react. Flexibility is one of the great strengths of storytelling however many festivals devoted to storytelling already ask for or commission specific pieces so this requirement, although significant, is not an unnatural or unusual one for storytellers.

Stage conventions

Storytelling performances adapt social conventions to create an inclusive performance event however once in a more formal theatre setting the conventions of the theatre need to be acknowledged in order to be used, played with or subverted.

In general storytellers pride themselves on being able to perform to almost any audience in almost any situation, relying on the form's flexibility, the audience's innate hunger for stories and a good repertoire to make the event a success. The intimacy that storytelling generates is possible because of the low-tech nature of the form and the real presence of the storyteller in front of and amongst the audience.

Once the paraphernalia of more formal performance is used there is both a perception and very real danger that this precious intimacy will be lost. (See Bauman (1986) for an analysis of how tradition bearers have altered their style to suit platform telling with a trade off between intimacy and virtuosity). One of the key purposes of this article is to discuss how to make this transition with our storytelling integrity intact.

Technical

The hermetic black box of much contemporary theatre is asking to be dressed and lit. Even doing nothing and playing against black curtains under the glare of the working lights is itself a bold design statement and there is no guarantee that the low-tech, ad hoc design style of storytelling performance will look anything other than under-prepared in a theatrical space. To appear simple, un-fussy and approachable on the theatre stage requires considerable effort.

Lighting

As soon as stage lighting is directed towards the stage there is a danger of a lighting generated fourth wall being created. For a storytelling performance eye contact with the audience is vital and there needs to be sufficient house lighting to see them clearly. This can be problematic in some venues where the house lights are of a spotlight type which effectively silhouette the first few rows and illuminate the tops of the heads of everyone else.

In a theatrical space the lighting rig has a markedly different effect than in tented or multi-functional venues. Without the spill and reflection of the informal space the lanterns create more shadow. This gives a lot more control and a much wider range of lighting possibilities on the stage but requires a lot of lighting to create the desired effect and delineates the auditorium and stage to the extent that they can become separate spaces.

If lighting can be created to acknowledge the same space phenomenon of storytelling there is no reason why it cannot be used to sensitively underline mood and dynamic in the performance. Lighting deserves to be properly designed and storytellers need to be aware of how sloppy lighting can work directly against the connection they are trying to achieve. Ad hoc lighting in a typical storytelling venue with ample spill and reflection works effectively but the same approach in a hermetically sealed black box usually casts heavy shadows over the storyteller's eyes which blocks contact with the audience. Although the storyteller can see the audience's eyes we cannot see the storyteller's and the lack of contact we feel as a result is caused by a lack of mutuality in the gaze between storyteller and audience members.

Sound

In *Hunting the Giant's Daughter* we either work with the piano in the venue, if it is good enough, or an amplified keyboard. As soon as one element of the performance is amplified there is a danger of creating an incoherent aural world if the other elements of the performance are not also amplified, the tendency being for the listeners' hearing to adjust to the highest level leaving non-amplified voices or instruments sounding weak by comparison. If done insensitively this leads to a disembodied

performance with a disassociation of the sound and its source. The amplification needs to allow the actual sound of the performers' voices to be heard resonating from them as well as through the PA. Microphones on stands create a barrier and clutter the stage, hampering the performer's movements. Lapel mikes are more subtle but pick up a lot of chest voice and are less clear and precise than head mikes. We opted for high quality head set microphones with a very thin wire supporting a small microphone in order to make the technology as discrete as possible, especially as it is in front of the performers' faces.

A more subtle problem when using amplification is a disassociation felt by the performers without monitors. Because the PA is directed towards the audience with speakers well in front of the stage if the acoustics either soak up the sound or reflect it back in an unexpected way the performers do not have a clear feel for how the audience is perceiving the performance and are uncertain how to react. Monitors allow the performers to feel how the mix of voices and instruments is working and to respond accordingly

This factor reveals a hitherto unacknowledged element in the creation of intimacy in storytelling performances, namely that there is an aural equivalent of eye-contact (mutual, same space contact between audience and performer/s) over and above the simple matter of audibility and that if technology mediates the performance to such an extent that it is stronger than the actual physical, real-time presence of the performer the connection that storytelling requires is no longer possible. Ong (1988) writes that sound has an 'evanescence' that 'incorporates' listener, teller and material emphasising the porous nature of live storytelling and the need for technology to support rather than overwhelm the oral dynamic.

The performers of *Hunting the Giant's Daughter*, and storytellers in general, prefer to work acoustically, however there are environments where that approach can be counter productive and there is no point shying away from effective use of technology where appropriate.

Design

Over the years there has been a tendency for storytellers to adopt a certain studied informality in performance in order not to create a gap between performers and audience that might militate against the intimacy storytellers need. Put directly on the more hermetic (as opposed to porous) theatre stage this informality can look sloppy. This extends from the clothes that storytellers wear (it must be acknowledged that this observation is limited largely to male storytellers!) to a grasp of the conventions of theatrical meta-performance.

In considering design a subtle difference emerges in the way the audience perceive the space in theatrical and storytelling venues. As in much social storytelling the audience in festivals such as Beyond the Border or Festival at the Edge effectively disregard much of the performance surroundings. Although the audience are aware of sounds coming from outside, the flapping of the tent, the technical equipment etc. these do not provide the focus for their attention. They are able to filter through the distractions to the performance of the story and the appreciation of the action and description of the narrative which appears to be placed sometimes in the actual

portrayal of character and action by the performer on the stage, sometimes in the imagination (often strongly visual) of the individual audience members and most often in the web of communication between audience and teller.

In the more hermetic theatre space there is an invitation to notice everything and treat everything as significant so that visually clashing costumes, an ill-considered backdrop or technical clutter all become off-putting and a barrier to the intimacy and communication storytelling requires to function.

In *Hunting the Giant's Daughter* the costume and set design work in sympathy with the performance and performers so that we are all wearing clothes that we feel comfortable and confident in. The backdrops make the show easier to look at and contain visual elements that reward sustained looking as well as delineating the performance space. For us as performers they help create a performance landscape that parallels and complements the narrative, thematic and literal story landscape that we carry with us without dominating the stage so that the story can still happen in the web of attention between performers and audience without getting stuck on the stage space.

Staging

The playing area in most theatres is often considerably deeper than the variety style staging favoured by storytellers. When using a backdrop the stage can be reduced by bringing it forward however the spatial dynamics of the theatre will probably mean that bringing it too far forward will feel claustrophobic from the audience's point of view. The performers will be left with a deeper stage than the one they are used to on which the usually limited use of space employed by storytellers can look stiff and cramped.

The opportunity of working in small and middle scale venues is an opportunity to reach new audiences in new spaces with new dynamism. The dangers are that storytelling will either not master the new medium sufficiently to develop in theatres or begin to offer shows indistinguishable from what theatre companies already have to offer.

Some suggestions are offered below which are intended to help maximise the potential of working in theatres and draw on our own experiences performing *Hunting the Giant's Daughter* and the core values already identified.

Make the show first

We were fortunate in touring our show independently before working with Adverse Camber which gave us the confidence to engage with the new creative practitioners who were part of making and touring the new show (producer, dramaturg, set and costume designer and sound engineer) so that we, as performers, were seen as the ones who really knew about the literal, imaginative, linguistic and social landscape of the material. A clear delineation of team members' responsibilities meant there was never any confusion over boundaries and a strong ethos of collaboration was developed and maintained throughout.

Having the show ready meant the designer came to see a run through of the piece so that her work was directly inspired by the experience of the performance and an awareness of our appearance and physicality as performers. This meant she was able to dress both the space and the performers with a sensitivity and understanding derived from the experience of watching it rather than a director's conceptualisation.

Two roles, in particular, developed over the process of making *Hunting the Giant's Daughter* which lifted the work to another level professionally and artistically.

The Producer

Touring theatres and other established venues means selling the show to them and helping them sell the show to their audience. The only way to do this effectively is with professional promotion. As more people become involved with the project there is a greater need to have someone co-ordinating work from the centre. In this case the initiative to undertake the project and apply for funding came from Adverse Camber which in turn validated the performers' belief in the show and its potential giving a momentum of confidence and commitment to the project.

Performing as part of a tour of theatrical venues is considerably more complicated than working in more informal venues and the role of producer is central both in terms of management and creating and maintaining a fundamental commitment to and belief in the project from the entire team.

The Dramaturg

'Dramaturg' was the term used by the theatre worker who worked with us in the development of the show. Pavis (1999) lists several roles and responsibilities of the dramaturg that align with the practice we developed including, someone who comes with "fresh eyes" as a "critical observer" who can identify "blank spots" and ambiguities" and "clarify plots" (p. 123 *ibid*); "asks pragmatically what the spectator will get out of the performance" (p 124 *ibid*) and helps make the text "clear for a given time and a given audience" (p 126 *ibid*). The dramaturg in this project played a central role in the creative development of this piece influencing how the performers interrelated and making the best use of their combined skills and energies.

When the project started we knew there was more to the show than we were getting out of it but we did not really know where to start. The dramaturg demonstrated to us that we had developed certain roles within our way of working, which although helpful in the early development of the show, were now a block. Letting go of old habits and learning to trust the piece and each other was a great creative liberation.

One of the trigger moments was the discovery that we did not need permission to move anywhere we wanted in the space. Until that point we had been limiting our movement on the stage out of a kind of creative politeness but a whole new realm of possibilities emerged as soon as we started to use the space more freely, trusting that the other performers would follow whoever had decided to take the lead. One of the new dynamics that emerged was a use of the depth of the stage and diagonals that are normally utilised in conventional theatre but largely ignored in the contemporary storytelling revival.

The dramaturg comes to the work with fresh eyes, very much as the audience might, and her reaction to what we did on stage and her questions about the show gave us a new insight into how the audience perceive the piece and helped us engage more with them when it came to the performance. Exercises were proposed to release the hitherto untapped potential and life in the show and the process was conducted in an atmosphere of mutual trust and full engagement that built the confidence to take creative risks.

Rather than coming to the material with an over-arching creative interpretation or style of the piece, as a theatre director might, the dramaturg used her skills to facilitate and provoke the style and attitudes that would take the project to the next level as well as deal with practicalities to ensure the performers can be seen, heard and understood.

Space

In all storytelling from the social sphere to the stage there is a combination of narrated events and characters presented with a deft physical and/or vocal delineation (often performed below the level of both storyteller's and listeners' awareness).

Storytellers have tended to limit their movement on stage (with some notable exceptions such as Xanthe Gresham and Ben Haggarty) developing a definite presence (see Barba on the 'dilated body' in Barba/Savarese 1991) within a space slightly larger than that available for social storytelling.

The increased use of stage space that came out of working with the dramaturg was closely linked with the impulse to perform specific moments, either through narrative or song, rather than a literal depiction of what was happening in the story at that moment. There was no attempt to physically portray characters or their interactions in the way that conventional theatre does, instead the liminal portrayal of character and point of view and the physicality of telling were both amplified which allowed storyteller and singer to communicate within the moment of character portrayal while still being themselves (equivalent to Brecht's *Gestus* or John Wright's 'declaring the game').

The music also amplified the moment that was being played and allowed more extended use of the space, including diagonals, depth and synchronous or contrasting movements. This extended the weave of the moment so that action demonstrated by the storyteller and singer were not bound to a realistic timing and not perceived by the audience as trying to be anything other than two people performing as themselves on a stage, each performer's attitude (*gestus*) still being clearly visible.

Conclusion

According to Heywood (1998) contemporary Storytelling is fed by children's literature and romantic fiction from the nineteenth century onwards; studies of folklore, mythology and anthropology; therapy, psychology and psychoanalysis; the counter cultural movement that developed in the 60's; the theatre; informal traditional storytelling; folk music and the traditional arts and elements of the mass media.

This article has focused on just a few of these elements but I feel these to be the most relevant to help us 'continue to improvise both the custom and content of the art form, reinventing storytelling as a new artistic form.'(Yashinsky 2005 p.6).

I hope that I have demonstrated that the opportunities offered by the growing interest of mainstream venues are worth taking-up while retaining the core values and characteristics of contemporary storytelling. I also hope that this is a discussion that will be taken up challenged, developed and nuanced, particularly by other storytellers.

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An asterisk in the text indicates my translation

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