

THE LADDER TO THE MOON

The progression of stories & narrative sequencing in performance

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Between 1985 and 1995, Hugh Lupton, Pomme Clayton and myself, working as 'The Company of Storytellers', pioneered performance storytelling for adults in Britain. We toured the length and breadth of the Island telling traditional tales in small and medium scale arts centres to audiences that were both large and socially and culturally diverse. We also developed storytelling for rural arts touring and were the featured artists alongside Welfare State at the first National Rural Arts Touring conference in Durham. We led dozens of workshops and training sessions in tandem with our public performances and inspired a new generation of storytellers to follow in our footsteps.

For many years the sequencing of the stories for our evening shows were constructed according to a pattern that we referred to as 'climbing a ladder to the moon'. By revealing that structure we seem to have launched a tradition – which suggests we did something right. During the years since we stopped performing such collective programmes, various references to 'The Ladder to the Moon' have been published; some fairly accurate (i.e. Howe & Johnson, 'Common Bonds – Storytelling in the Classroom', Hodder & Stoughton) and some less so (i.e. Philip Kane, 'The Wildwood King', Capall Bann). As the written word seems to carry much more authority than the spoken, I've tried to commit my understanding of the concept to writing for the sake of clarity and for setting the record straight.

INTRODUCTION

The following explores a set of ideas contained in a symbol and is an attempt to explain some of the obvious and some of the subtle aspects of its meaning. What is suggested is not intended to be a prescriptive recipe. It is the story of the birth of an understanding of a symbol and that story is not even necessarily based in verifiable fact, as it is the result of a dialogue between a number of creative artists. Yet the story does contain certain truths which correspond to a mythological sense of truth – that is, the ideas seem to resonate within those who hear them, meaning they are often recognised, taken in as seed - and bear fruit.

ORAL LITERATURE AND THE OCEAN OF STORY

The Ocean of Story Human beings have been telling stories for hundreds of thousands of years longer than they have been writing them. The resulting body of 'oral literature' is comprised of commonly and communally owned narratives and sources of verbal delight. This oral literature is the primal, primary and central form of 'live' literature. Storytelling has nothing to do with reciting writing or memorisation by rote; it is a living act of immediate re-creation, authorship and performance. Moreover it is surrounded with attitudes of profound generosity that challenge concepts of capital ownership. According to mediaeval Sufi tradition, the ideal of any artistic endeavour can be summarised thus - 'While I am making it, it belongs to me; when it is finished it belongs to you'.



An eighteen-volume collection of oral narratives known as 'The Kathasaritsagara' exists in India. A writer known as Somadeva is said to have compiled the collection in Kashmir in AD 1070, but the stories, written in a travelling merchant's dialect, are evidently much, much older. The title of the collection translates as 'The Ocean of the Sea of Story', and the repertoire of oral literature (preserved largely and paradoxically on paper) continues to be truly oceanic.

Imagine an ocean. In it there are many different waters, some wind-whipped and rough, some calm, some deceitfully pleasant, others evidently full of treachery and dangerous undercurrents – yet all are built from the stuff of life and capable of vast and energetic swell. Let's now apply generic story names to those waters, such as: anecdotes, reminiscences, family legends, gossip, rumours, hearsay, yarns, one-liners, jokes, jests, turns, rozzums, teasers, crack, patter, monologues, disaster-jokes, boasts, lies, cock and bull, tall stories, urban legends, conspiracy theories, ghost stories, sightings, nightmares, dreams, visions, prophecies, nursery tales, nonsense stories, shaggy dogs, folk tales, trickster tales, cautionary tales, old wives tales, parables, moral tales, fairy tales, aetiology (how & why), legends, history, romances, sagas, epics, myths, sacred tales, creation myths, superstitions, proverbs, nursery rhymes, playground rhymes, clapping songs, skipping songs, drinking songs, rugby songs, rounds, ballads, chants, prayers, spells, ceremonial oratory, and more...

In fact the term 'oral literature' covers all the forms of formal and formulaic spoken word – (as well as intoned, chanted and sung word) – that can be borrowed, re-created and re-shaped, translated and translocated to be transmitted – that is, to be passed on in order to be passed on.

This 'ocean of story' is composed of such a diversity of specific and clearly distinguished categories of oral literature that it's reasonable to suspect that there might be certain times where one story is probably more appropriate for the occasion than another.

THE STORY OF THE NIGHT OF STORIES

Ancestral Storytellers It is said that, in East Africa, there is a certain tribal people who have an option, when commemorating events of collective and communal importance, to call for 'a night of storytelling.' The traditional opening formula ought to be enough to alert one to be cautious in trying to find factual evidence of this and that the following is anything more – or less – than a narrative metaphor. The fact that this narrative is set in the 'developing world' suggests that the story is trying to work with the genuine and haunting sense of lost continuity that agitates those many creative souls in the 'developed world' that dare doubt the 'dream of progress'.



The occasion might be a birth, a marriage or a funeral or perhaps a harvest or some other calendar, seasonal, solar, lunar or stellar event. For the sake of this story, let's say it is a funeral (with definite, Catholic, analogues to be found closer to home in the 'Wake' of Ireland and the 'Veillée' of France). The event will begin at sundown – and is to happen in a special place such as a clearing in the forest, a cave or a natural amphitheatre.' Already the story is counselling us that storytelling can have a ritual aspect as well as a casual aspect.

However, the storytelling has already begun: it began on the way there, in fact it may even have begun when the announcement of the event was made. Someone sees her friend and asks how her brother is - a story follows: another sees someone else and explains why he can't 'just yet' repay the money he owes - another story. These are our individual stories, our stories of everyday life.

When everyone is foregathered in the special place, then, as the sun bleeds into the west, someone commanding respect – an officiator or master of ceremonies – comes forward and utters the equivalent of 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here this day to commemorate the life of our dear departed friend and relative ...' And so, as the stars begin to shine through the dark cloth of dreams, the formalised storytelling commences.

First the stories of the 'dear departed friend': anecdotes about the mischief he or she got up to, reminiscences of the bold and generous deeds they did. As the moon rises, perhaps the stories move to his or her ancestors, 'He was so like his father' and 'Do you remember the time when...?' But then someone says, 'Old George here, he'd hate to have us all moping around his coffin. Do you remember that joke he used to tell about the bloke who goes into the pub and sees a tiny feller playing a miniature piano on the shelf behind the bar...?' And so traditional narratives – passed on, collectively owned and shared – make their presence felt. Jokes turn and spin, perhaps eventually clustering around a culture hero such as Duncan Williamson's 'Donald Archie Dougal Douglas McLean', or Nasreddin Hoja, or Brudda Nancy. These become the stories of the folk – we, you, many and I: the rich and the poor; the wise and the foolish; the old and the young; men and women; rural and urban; and all those vain, conceited, hopeless hypocrites who meet their reflection in the owl glass...

The moon is rising high, and someone says, 'But there are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophies' (Horatio). Then stories of 'the otherworld' begin: stories of spirits and 'My Life in the Bush of Ghosts', etc. All are 'legends' that have a toehold in the landscape of here and now.

Then someone starts 'Once upon a time' signalling that the toehold has gone: the stories are now ultimately metaphorical, their world is an inner one - the land where we stand, where North, South, West and East meet; where the false-mothers, ogres, weak kings, beggar-guides and middle brothers are all aspects of ourselves as we journey through inner landscapes of swamp and desert, dark pit and high mountain. These 'wonder tales', beloved of Freud and Jung (and, after them, so many other mythopoetical thinkers) aim to make us wonder about the nature of the energy dancing unobserved in our inner, subconscious, passion play.

The moon is at its zenith. Someone says, '...but we owe the fact that we are free to assemble here on such a night, in peace, to our ancestors: they who first brought our people to this valley.' And then the tales of the legendary ancestors begin, they who achieved great things – with help from higher forces – their faith, the spirit world and the deities. These stories begin to suggest a bridge between this world and the manifest forces of fate and destiny that govern it. Yet, perhaps the ancestors are barely mentioned as the stories move now to Epic, fully fledged episodes in which larger-than-life heroes and heroines collide with each other and with the Gods, all driven by the chaos of an emotional life painted eternally loud and clear - and all too familiar.

And then, as the moon dips to the horizon and prepares to leave the skies, so the humans barely feature in the stories. The stories have become the exclusive domain of the gods: pure expressions of knowledge, passion, force and logos incarnate.

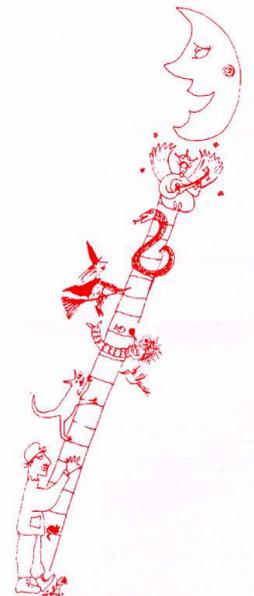
As the dawn breaks in the Eastern sky, the stories have become myths of creation, speaking of how-and-why the world was created, how-and-why humans were put into it, and how-and-why it is that we die. As the sun rises we find we have travelled during the night from stories detailing the incidents of our individual lives to vast stories that strive to understand the cosmic purpose of the humanity to which we belong. With the daybreak, we return to the quotidian, the everyday: a reality enhanced by imagined metaphors suggesting purpose, possibility and hope.

The Night of Stories makes a journey of ever increasing perspective. It is a little like those wonderful books of aerial photography that show someone sunbathing, and then someone sunbathing in a garden, and then a garden in a suburb, and then a suburb in a city and then a city in a county and then a county in a country, etc, until you are left drifting up there in a universe of tiny flecks of radiant and reflected light. Funnily enough such books are no more than the brilliant contemporary equivalent of the traditional cumulative form of a nursery tale such as, 'The House that Jack Built': 'This is the sun that rose with the dawn, to call the cock to crow on the morn, to wake the master with horse, hound and horn, to summon the priest all shaven and shorn,' etc. The individual perspective gradually yields to the cosmic perspective.

THE LADDER TO THE MOON

The Ladder to the Moon So, having understood something about the vast 'Indian' ocean of oral narratives, and having encountered the 'African' Story of the Night of stories, my companions and I then encountered an (unattributed) 'phrase from Ireland', 'Telling stories is like building ladders to the moon...'

We were already familiar with William Blake's sketch, 'I want, I want' which shows a ladder leaning from the earth to a crescent moon, and somehow a fusion of ideas took place. These ideas melded together to suggest a bold performance paradigm whereby we would aim to do no less than transport and transform the energy of the earthbound to the heavens, by harmonising and harnessing our energy, the energy of the stories and the energy of an audience, so that together a ladder could be climbed – a ladder presented to us by the ancestors. I can't say we were always successful – but we tried!



Each of the orders of narrative from the 'ocean' would correspond to a rung of the 'ladder'. Following the sequence from the 'night of stories', those tales closest to us, i.e. our personal stories and the stories of our families, communities and ancestors would form the lowest rungs. (Sometimes it was enough just to comment on the journey to the venue.) The stories of 'Everyman/woman' and we - 'the Folk' - would act as the next few rungs, including urban legends and jokes.

This would mean that, in the spirit of Nietzsche, Dionysian peals of ribald laughter in the face of death (leaving the earth) would polish the rungs of the lower ladder. Then would come fables, moral tales, etc,

then perhaps (true) spirit and ghost stories, then wonder tales, then legends, epics, myths and finally creation myths. The top of the ladder would, amongst many other things, perhaps explain how the moon came to be there and the mystery of its death and rebirth.

This is not an exact schema – and it would be utter foolishness to try to argue the place of one story over another, for example many aetiological tales could be placed almost anywhere – and some of the most elementary nursery stories and nursery rhymes can be revealed as expressions of cosmic truth. Also, much depends on the teller: a story that could sound a genuinely sacred note through the work of one teller could equally be rendered banal farce by the incompetence of another. The ladder to the moon should be understood as a general symbolic principal, not something literal.

The key to understanding any symbol is to first study it directly. This is a ladder. Study how you climb a ladder. You cannot get to the top without touching all the steps. This means that every step plays an equally important part and, most importantly, this is not a question of hierarchy: no one step is any better or worse than another; it's just that each step is in a different place, serving a different purpose.

Great care has to be taken when setting up your ladder. Do it well or it will slip. The angle of incline is important. We found that the lower rungs, particularly jokes and folktales had to be got right. Releasing tensions through a good laugh or the 'BOO!' shock of a scary story helped prepare the ground in the first half of our programmes for what would come in the second.

Over time, we gradually, and individually, realised – each in his or her own way – that it's quite possible to scale up and down the entire length of the ladder several times during the telling of just one story – for example the epic exists in certain jokes, just as jokes play a crucial part in epics. But to recognise this took many years of experience – and of working with a surging, comprehensive, oceanic repertoire.

...Oh, and then again there's the seemingly quite different matter of drawing the target after you've loosed the arrow, but that, as they say, is another story...