

Graham Langley

There's something deliciously conspiratorial about Graham Langley, especially when he tells stories. Long and lanky, he drapes himself about the story, swaying in and out of the action. He paints pictures in your head as he takes you on a journey using colourful imagery, words, local vernacular, body language and heightened emotions.

I'll never forget the story he told at the national storytelling festival held in Canberra , October 1999. He dazzled with 'The Jam Maker', taking us from the ordinary surrounds of a lad at a job centre in Birmingham to his conquests as a Chinese prince. I can see images of the fantastical horse and the haunting green light. I still feel the boy's triumph.

And there you have it, one essence of his mark as a storyteller, what is remembered most is the story; then the teller, the exuberance of it all, the live action, his ability to carry the audience with him. Fantastic!

A definition was formulated over the weekend via the input of many tellers. Some people stand in front of their stories and the performance is the thing, a true storyteller stands behind the story and draws the audience in and together they experience the story. This is certainly true of Graham Langley and his approach to storytelling.

More than a storyteller, Graham describes himself first and foremost as an educationalist, then storyteller, folklorist, educator, arts activist, and promotor. A drama teacher in secondary schools in the UK for twenty years he became a full time storyteller in 1990. His passion is for the positive power of story, the importance of story and the huge history that inform our mythologies.

'My first intention when starting into storytelling was to tell traditional English tales...through oral sources.... received from my father and others. But things got skewed and I gathered repertoire like a rolling stone.'

With twenty years as a performance art teacher and ten as a storyteller Graham has gathered a wide repertoire of stories and creative techniques that he employs in his work. He conducted several dynamic workshops at the Festival that demonstrated the breadth of his experience and his work with promoting positive behaviour through story.

He is co-author of the book Promoting Positive Behaviour: Activities for preventing bullying in Primary Schools. The book explores the issues involved in children building positive relationships with others. Storytelling is recognised for its ability to build trust and the book includes five folktales that are gems. Creative exercises and worksheets show how to implement discussion around the 'theme of anti -bullying and outlines positive and creative opportunities for children to develop their understanding and skills.'

'I think it's important to start out by realising that storytelling is not a solution to bullying but the power of storytelling is such that it touches on people in a very positive way and low esteem is nearly always at the root of bullying be it bully or bullied' Fundamental to implementing the programmes outlined in the book 'is the capacity to work effectively in the classroom-which is where my work is aimed-it is essential. I don't think there is anything in the programme that cannot be delivered by the average energised storyteller or teacher.'

At the workshops, he demonstrated some of these activities and one of the things that strikes you about Graham is his energy. Lessons move along at a cracking pace as children and adults react to his positive reinforcement. He explains how it all began several years ago with a program called Talking Senss.

"I was asked to assist in a anti-bullying project in three schools, we were given two days at each school and I used a combination of storytelling, drama and discussion, games and songs. The schools we were allocated to were very difficult schools, we weren't targeted there for no reason.'

At the end of our time all involved found the results 'quite amazing'. The turn around in a school that had experienced a lot of 'aggressive behaviour between the children, very aggressive speech and attitudes and various bullying incidents' was nothing short of remarkable. One head teacher interviewed about the project said, 'bullying has been reduced in our school by about eighty per cent,'

Graham claims that even half that figure would be pleasing, but results reinforce his strong convictions about, ' the power of storytellingand...the way it deals with so many areas of human life. As we use stories, and peel away layers, we explore all the different things that are happening to people in folktales. The experiences in many folktales have at one and the same time an individual and a universal meaning. It is this link between individual response and universal meaning that gives traditional tales their power as a teaching tool.'

Not only do the children hear about a range of feelings and experiences but they share it in a community environment as a whole class, as a shared adventure. Children interviewed about Graham's visit several weeks later could feel the difference, 'I used not to let Jamie join in, but now we realise it's much nicer if Jamie joins in.'

Talk to Graham about story and you feel the generosity of his spirit and realise 'Talking Senss' is only one facet of his love and work with story. His reputation in the UK sees him at the forefront of the storytelling revival.

Search his web site at www.stories.demon.co.uk and a treasury of information is in store. He lead a recent lively email debate about 'story traditions and traditional storytelling in the UK.' It was an interesting contribution to the debate about the age old art of storytelling. Although a professional teller for ten years his storytelling experience goes back over twenty years 'when he told stories at Birmingham's renowned folksong club "the Grey Cock". He was a founding member of Banner Theatre and worked with Charles Parker the radio producer responsible for "The Radio Ballads" From his web general information page we learn that he has 'a strong faith in oral narrative and vernacular speech.' After watching him tell stories at the National Festival we know he is ' a gifted storyteller, committed to using storytelling in a variety of ways especially as a learning and teaching strategy in schools.'

In conjunction with the Humberside County Council Leisure Services Graham was employed 'to add a new dimension to events and walks organised by the Countryside Unit.' Graham's story's gave people 'the opportunity for quiet reflection in a place of great beauty' and prompted another group to start collecting and collating stories with environmental themes.

He has put together many storytelling packages that he performs and to dip into just a few; ' Ballads and Blarney with singer song writer Janet Wood, where they combine talents to

present a mixed evening of songs and stories suitable for all ages. Ragnall; 'What are the stories and what do they mean Where do they come from, these landscapes these themes Who are the people who walk through our dreams What are the stories and what do they mean' The sovereignty of the land and the sovereignty of the people they are one and the same thing. The ancient story of Sir Gwaine and The Loathly Lady is retold through story and song. Skeleton Woman 'A show that will knock your socks off. Performing with composer Peter Batchelor, this is a short piece of storytelling and electro-acoustic music, a strange marriage of old and new art forms. Stories from the Black Country and Beyond An evening with Graham of stories emanating from close to his native Birmingham.

And the list goes on, his enthusiasm for stories is infectious he makes you feel like an honoured listener.

Graham's passion for storytelling is not fleeting, a body of work gives authority to his voice. In overcrowded curriculums he tires of teachers seeing storytelling as a 'little nicety that we haven't got time for any more..... storytelling is such a powerful tool it can be used right across the curriculum.'

'Although the impact of two days (with the programme) was quite remarkable ,the impact will fade over time....it's important to keep the continuity.' 'I have a great appreciation of the creative capacity of all people, not just children.... Storytelling inspires them ...allows them to speak....to know what they say is valued.'

"And word spread throughout the countryside that a great storyteller was living in the village and people came from all around to hear the stories." Taken from a folktale in his book that features a boy, a dragon, and a tear it aptly describes Graham Langley and his appeal and 'greatness' as a storyteller.

Graham Langley is a great storyteller, he inspires all he meets.