

The Actor in the Storytelling School

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Abstract: This essay was born from a formative and revealing experience of the author's incidental encounter with storytelling. Seduced by the unsuspected valences of this phenomenon, the author has integrated the "tools of the trade" in his work as an acting teacher. The article's premise is that storytelling is an exceptional way of uniting the actor and the spectator in common action, leading to a more complex understanding of the world surrounding them.

Keywords: storytelling, actor's training, public, reception, exercises, narrative self

Motto:

*"Stories are templates,
road maps to what it means
to be a human being."*

Jan Blake

I.

A picture is given: a wooden box with a golden chain hanging from it, having a golden key at the end. Or three items are given: a fishing net, a box, a veil. Or the following sentences are given: "A fisherman found his bride in a wooden box fished out of a lake.² They lived happily"; "one day, three veiled women promised the fisherman the supreme Happiness and he threw his wife back into the lake". Or the whole story of a fisherman who fell into temptation, missing the true happiness is given.

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2. The examples are taken after "warm up" exercises used in storytelling and the subject is taken from the story told by one of the most prominent figures in the British storytelling, Jan Blake.

The data above represents only some of the possible departure points in the elaboration of a story. It can extend up to a few lines, a page or an entire book. But, even more significant is the fact that it can be *communicated* in seconds, minutes or a whole evening, depending on the will, the means and possibilities of the storyteller. What interests me the most in the following lines is the story-communicated orally, its fulfillment by *telling*, not the birth of the narrative as a written text.

II.

My first experience with tales was thorough the miraculous stories narrated by a mother writer, concerned specifically with children's literature³. Later, in my adulthood, I re-encountered the storytelling world when my path, as an actor, was crossed with that of Ben Haggarty, a reputed British storyteller.⁴ In 2013, a group of enthusiastic Romanian and English volunteers, initiated *Festivalul Povestilor din Transilvania (The Transylvanian Storytelling Festival)*⁵, during which Ben Haggarty was present in Cluj, where he held performances and workshops. On this occasion, I was asked by the organizers to make a simultaneous translation. I was unfamiliar with the scale of the "storytelling" phenomenon in the English contemporary culture and the tradition of Romanian folk stories and of the folk bards was little known to me, as well. I had heard grandparents in the countryside telling about how life used to be, but their accounts seemed to be often just a long tally of names, a ball reeling slowly, often containing typical situations and occasionally an unusual event.

Briefly, the invitation to work with a professional storyteller incited me. In the main hall of the Ethnographic Museum of Transylvania in Cluj, which hosted the event, I was greeted by Ben Haggarty himself, a tall man, sober and elegant, with a well-knit body, a relaxed attitude, a bald head and a lively look. Without uttering too many words, Ben handed me a series of illustrations of a story about the devil who was fooled by the clever wife of a craftsman. An unusual atmosphere enveloped the whole story, the characters were ambiguous,

3. Carmen Odangiu, *Jocul cu umbra, povestiri critice* (Arad: Editura Fundației Ioan Slavici, 1996).

4. Ben Haggarty, British storyteller, for further informations please check <http://benhaggarty.com>.

5. Despite the interest aroused among the public of Cluj and quality program of cultural events, the festival has had only two successive editions in the years 2013 and 2014.

their decisions unpredictable. Later, I realized that Ben was already challenging the storyteller in me. A few minutes later, we appeared together in front of an audience consisting of parents and children of all ages. Ben told the story in English and I followed the story line, translating it into Romanian. I was very careful to make the translation as truthful as possible, which was not difficult since Ben was telling the story in simple and straightforward words. It became increasingly clear to me that the narrator was trying to reach the public directly, bypassing the language barrier. Slowly, despite all my care to preserve the spirit of the original utterance, and though I knew I had to keep my presence in the background, the moment was transformed into an improvisational dialogue. We were two actors on a stage, I felt like my partner was eager to hear and “see” the story translated by me in a language unknown to him that he, however, wanted to “taste”. I was anxious to see the unfolding of the storyline (I did not know the story in advance). Gradually, an interesting theatrical exercise was on the go: I was there not only to “dub” the narrator, but found myself stimulated by him to contribute to the story, to even provide my own version of it.

Another surprising element during the performance, was the behavior of the public which reacted as if it was witnessing a real theatre show. The spectators permitted themselves to be transported into the world of fiction, although the reception conditions were not very favorable to the installation of the theatrical illusion: the main hall of the museum, inappropriate for a theater event, had a disturbing echo; it was rather a foyer with visitors passing through; the buzz and animation of the children involved in other workshops in the adjacent rooms could be heard constantly, so the atmosphere was that of a street festival. And yet our representation has managed to impose its time and place inside this living and colorful tumult. At one point, the bustle and the parasitic noise stopped. That's the “magic of the story?” I found myself wondering. It is said that, during the performance, even in the most intense or agitated scene, any actor reserves 10% of his/her mind for the “outside gaze” – a small part of the actors attention is among the spectators, checking their “temperature”; he/she then uses this feedback for the adjustment of his/her performance.⁶ It's not cheating, it does not mean “holding to the public”, it is just an indicator, a guide that implies Brechtian distancing, done with

6. This split attention of the actor, during representation, was conceptualized by David Zinder and Viola Spolin using the notion of „No Motion“. David Zinder, *Body Voice Imagination: A Training for the Actor*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 101, 198-9 and 233.

caution. Thanks to this phenomenon, the actor in me discovered that, during the storytelling performance, I could not manage to distinguish adults from children. The quality of the audience's attention "caught" in the story was the same, regardless of age. Who or what produced this effect? Our interpretation? I do not think so, I did not do anything sensational. The story? No so, given that its subject, the devil fooled – for us, that we have the ingenious Ivan Torbynca⁷ – was not unique. I was playing while, seeing that something miraculous was happening: *participation*. Very few shows that I had played in or seen before did generate the same kind of *communion*.

At the end of the event, I found that I was more energized than before it started, but, nevertheless, more confused: I could find no explanation for the strong impression left on the audience, which was applauding frantically, despite the maximum economy of means that we used in the performance. My interest in "the phenomenon of storytelling", steadily ever since, was born, therefore, from this acute dilemma, generated by the first performance in which I was a protagonist without me ever intending so.

III.

Later, during the workshop Ben Haggarty held at The Transylvanian Storytelling Festival⁸, he suggested that, at the theater, the show takes place *in front* of the audience, while the storytelling performance takes place *within* those watching, inside their head and in their flesh and bones. What does this paradigm shift mean in terms of theatrical reception? One can get some clarification when referring to the much-discussed phenomenon of "identification". If we consider a play, there is a possibility that the viewer might identify with the characters and action, comparing them to his own biographical experience. If we look at the storytelling, however, one can notice a difference in degree of personal involvement. This difference, I think, is caused by different levels of "authorial participation". As Ben Haggarty said,

7. Ivan Torbynca (Ivan Bag) is the main character of the homonym satirical story written by the Romanian writer Ion Creangă, published on April 1, 1878, in the journal *Convorbiri literare* in Iasi. The story has a theme with common origins in Romanian and European folklore. It recounts the adventures of the eponymous Russian soldier, who travels from the world of the living to Heaven and Hell, seeking immortality.

8. Ben Haggarty, "Fairytales for Grown-ups" (workshop, Storytelling Festival in Transylvania, Cluj, Romania, 21 March 21, 2013).

Popular vehicles of transmission – the verbal arts operate by "completion". You hear the words, you complete them with your own experience, everyone immediately becomes the owner on the content of the narrative in terms of the knowledge they automatically added to the story, it is an absolutely personal process, and therefore the film can never be as good as the book that inspired it, because we invested so much to make the story work for us; so the story is not a string of words, but it is something that *happens*, it's the plot, the action.⁹

When you see a show, the reception takes place, primarily, at an aesthetic level. But when you listen to a skilled storyteller, the aesthetic distancing is rivaled by the fact that simultaneously with the reception of the story, there is an automatic assumption of the action and of the characters. It is the imagination that makes this kind of participation possible. The imagination "takes off" from the very first words, as described by Gianni Rodari in his fundamental *Grammar of fantasy*:

... a word, randomly cast in mind, produces ripples on the surface and in depth, causing an infinite series of chain reactions, dragging along in its fall sounds and images, analogies and memories, meanings and dreams, in a move that involves the experience, the memory, the fantasy and the unconscious, which is complicated by the fact that the mind itself does not passively assist to the representation, but comes into action continuously, in order to accept and reject, to unite and to censor, to build and to destroy.¹⁰

Another explanation for the better degree of reception the story enjoys might be its presence in the everyday life, incomparable, quantitatively, with that of the theater. We do not go to the theater all day, not everyone has the histrionic gift, we do not "play a role" continuously, although, as suggested by the sociologist Erving Goffman, every social interaction is indeed a role playing¹¹. Instead, most of our interactions with others are built on narratives. Significantly, Ben Haggarty opened his workshop with a playful challenge

9. Ben Haggarty, "The Bearer-Beings': Portable Stories in Dislocated Times" (workshop, The Oxford Research Centre for Humanities, May 14, 2016).

10. Gianni Rodari, *Gramatica fanteziei. Introducere în arta de a născoci povești* (Bucharest: Editura Art, 2016), 13.

11. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 15th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

addressed to the participants. They had to throw, in an imaginary fountain, all the stories they could think about: from confessions between friends, to the stories of other peers, from the narratives provided by the media and by the advertising industry, to those propagated by politicians or those disseminated in the church. The conclusion was that everybody tells stories all the time: everything that happens to us every day, all you hear or see is sooner or later shared to others at the first opportunity, through a narrative material. Ben Haggarty demonstrated in his workshop, that even if the listener does not retell the stories he hears from others, the mere hearing transforms himself into a co-author.

Based on these realities already established by the aesthetic and psychological research, professional storytellers have gained, in recent years, a special status. In England, today, according to Ben Haggarty, there are about 600 professional accredited storytellers¹². The storytelling range of actions is enwidening far beyond the cultural field. The storytellers are nowadays involved in projects that aim for a more effective communication with the public in various fields. A proof of this is the yearly organization, in Romania, of a highly professional gala, attended by writers, editors, producers, digital innovators, filmmakers, entrepreneurs and musicians, all among the best in their respective fields. *The Power of Storytelling. The Annual International Conference, Bucharest* is a very special event which, according to its website, "is a conference built around the idea that stories can change our worlds. The only one of its kind in Eastern Europe, it brings together superstar storytellers in all fields – from media, to arts, to business – to show the potential of stories to connect people, to heal wounds, to move to action, and to drive change."¹³ The organizer's statement reflects Ben Haggarty's ideas held under the same creed: "stories are for everyone".

The democratic aspect of the storytelling phenomenon is not decreasing the quality of the material released. As suggested by British storyteller Jan Blake, a storyteller spends 90% of his/her time reading, searching, collecting, and "stealing" stories.¹⁴ A really "good" story, says Blake, is the one that seizes you and forces you to share it to others. Along with the value of the

12. Ben Haggarty, "The Bearer-beings."

13. "About the Conference," *The Power of Storytelling*, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.thepowerofstorytelling.org/about/>.

14. Jan Blake, *The Fisherman: A Tale of Passion, Loss, and Hope*," YouTube video, 18:25, from a lecture at TEDx conference, Manchester, February 14, 2016, posted by "TEDx Talks", March 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAV6eXaS6dk>.

narrative material, what matters is, of course, the availability of the audience, an idea which makes Ben Haggarty assert that "Live storytelling can only take place if the storyteller and the audience breathe the same air."¹⁵ Here, Haggarty discusses the "tools of the trade" by which the storyteller, being active every second of the performance, "finds" the words (does not just deliver a memorized text); he translates what he/she "sees", what he/she experiences directly¹⁶; he can tell the story from different perspectives, he can spontaneously alternate the utterance tempo, depending on the atmosphere of the public etc.

IV.

As a teacher in the art of acting, I tried to identify the "tools" used in storytelling and to analyze their purpose. I concluded that many of them are common with those used by actors on the conventional stage, but also that there are others that develop some "specialized" qualities that are missing from traditional acting training. The craft of acting and that of the storytelling have much in common, but do not overlap perfectly. When Ben Haggarty mentions the *direct speech* (a "real" speech, that occurs in "real" time and through which, when adopted, the actor "incorporates the character, gazes at the world through the eyes of the character"), he implies what the actors call "assuming the role". The English storyteller suggests that he would adopt the *direct speech* (assuming the role) only in certain circumstances described below:

Whenever you get in direct speech, during the story, you actually deepen yourself in the world of the story and then something magical can happen. It may be a moment when the storyteller, tired after an hour and a half, chooses the most energetic character and "enters into that character" in order to refresh forces; then he can return to indirect speech, which is equivalent to a general reset.¹⁷

15. Ben Haggarty, "The Bearer-Beings".

16. See Haggarty's interesting exposure related to "the mantic/shamanic aspect" of storytelling: the world described by the narrator can be updated, one can enter this world. Imagination makes the invisible visible, the incarnation of psychological forces. Words, the English actor concludes, are just a translation of *what happens* when the story is told. Ben Haggarty, "The Bearer-Beings".

17. Ben Haggarty, "The Bearer-Beings".

So the storyteller does not usually “play”, he doesn’t become a character, he doesn’t illustrate unless necessary, as a means of self-regulation. Actor and playwright simultaneously, the storyteller has a secret goal: to stimulate the imagination of the listener, inviting him to become a partner, co-author of the narrative. This ability to relate to the dramatic interpretation as a vehicle, as a mean of inviting viewers to collaborate seemed to me one of the most subtle acting lessons by which storytelling can help the preparation of the acting students.

Driven by curiosity to discover how this very special skill of storytellers can be cultivated, I proposed my students to continue the research begun in Ben Haggarty’s company. Further, I will present some of the exercises that gave satisfactory results.

We started from autobiographical facts: the students had to write, in only one day, a story inspired by their life or the life of someone they knew. Once drafted, the story had to be sent to a colleague who had to present it as their own, in front of the entire class at a predetermined time. The text of the story had not been memorized as we tried to avoid “premeditated” performances, lacking spontaneity. Along the presentations, the students had a series of revelations, both as authors of texts, and as performers: they had the feeling of recovering lost details of their own stories, though they were retold by someone who was not present at the original source-events.

In order to highlight and emphasize the fact that a story is a *living structure* which, through repetition, can become “virulent” and also in order to understand how the “oral tradition” works, I proposed another exercise, chosen from Ben Haggarty’s work. The students, in teams of four, A, B, C, and D had to exchange stories, following a predetermined route (see fig. 1).

In the first phase, A tells a story to B; B tells a story to A; C tells a story to D; D tells a story to C.

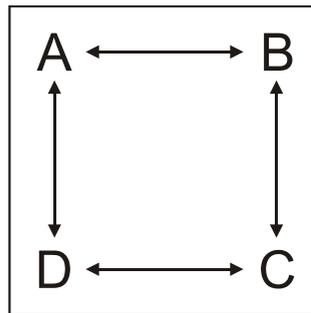


Fig. 1: Team dynamics in the story exchange exercise

In the second stage, A tells to D the story heard from B as if it was his story; D tells to A the story heard from C as if it was his story; B tells to C the story heard from A as if it was his story; C tells to B the story heard from D as if it was his story, etc. In the end, the actor A is getting back his real story retold three times! The transformation his own story has undergone, passing through the filter of three different storytellers, is always spectacular, remaining, however, within verisimilitude.

Ben Haggarty, admitting that storytellers are true “walking libraries”- some of them knowing hundreds of stories - asks rhetorically: “How can people remember so many stories and details?” Then he gives a surprising answer, proving that the story is somatic, is understood through the body: “Through repetition, the story melts into you: the fundamental functions in orality come from the body, one is *repetition* - very important -, the second is the composition of the three elements, Jo-Ha-Qyu.” The following mentioned are *alliteration*, *assonance*, *rhyme* and *rhythm* all coming throughout the body. Each time, Haggarty concludes, “we are slightly different, changed by the previous repetitions”¹⁸.

Another exercise with surprising results is the one in which one actor tells a story to his/her partners, and they, in turn, come before the public and retell the same story as if it would belong to each of them. The audience’s task is to identify the original author. Not infrequently the richness of details and the degree of involvement in the story made the real owner of the story seem unreliable!

The presentation of a well-known classical or folk tale in an invented language (gibberish), usually turns this seemingly easy and fun exercise, into an opportunity to explore the actor’s intra- and inter-communication who, freed from the obligation to use intelligible words, ventures into the realm of pure sonorities, of nonverbal expressions, always discovering original and fresh ways to transmit the story coherently and emotionally.

We have to admit that, in many cases, beyond the enthusiasm of the students, the purpose of these exercises – that is to reach a form of storytelling stripped of histrionic ambitions and “fireworks”, to no longer tell the story as a string of words, but to actually make it *happen*, to *act* - remains an elusive goal, especially in a short timeframe. But on the way, students learn many useful and critical things for acting. First, we get to train the “imagination muscle”; then the students start to become aware

18. Ben Haggarty, “The Bearer-Beings”.

of how culture is transmitted. It is not about the transmission of written texts, but as Haggarty said, the story is about images, facts, ownership, and creation.

Secondly, through storytelling, memory and attention to detail are encouraged/coached. "Distant Analogies" and "Random Talk"¹⁹ are names of exercises suggested by the Israeli director and pedagogue David Zinder, based on the creative imagination games invented by the futurist artist Filippo Tomasso Marinetti: the students, using improvisational collaboration, have to recount a fictional event of the recent past, an event about which they actually do not know anything. The story is born as the actors are telling it, mutually stimulating their imagination. One of the most important aspects that these exercises contain is the creativity/improvisation tandem. The storyteller's dramaturgy takes place spontaneously, live, his words "are born in the mouth" as the Dadaist Tristan Tzara said.

One of the two fundamental works of Keith Johnstone, the "father of improvisation", is entitled *Impro for Storytellers*, although it is not about storytelling, but rather about theater-sports and about unleashing the creative improvisational powers of the performer. In the last paragraphs of the chapter on spontaneity, Johnstone's thoughts formulate what could be a storytelling profession of faith: "Where do ideas come from anyway? Why should I say 'I thought of it?', or 'I thought of an idea', as if my creativity was something more than the acceptance of gifts from an unknown source?"²⁰

V.

When you tell a story or listen to one, you often get to understand the world better. On the other hand, the story can mean running away from reality when it becomes unbearable (in times of war, for example). Escaping through storytelling can be much powerful than watching a movie, a play or even reading a book, says Ben Haggarty. In the story they create together, both the teller and the listener, are accomplices, even if they are not aware of it. They *act* together, entering the world of fiction. Eventually, the story works, as stated in the motto of this essay, like a map of what it means to be human.

19. David Zinder, *Body Voice Imagination: A Training for the Actor*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 177, 182 and 188.

20. Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers. Theatre sports and the Art of Making Things Happen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 73.

The neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, in his book, *Synaptic Self: How our Brains Become Who We Are*, on the assumption that identity is characterized by dynamic and fluidity, concludes that “who we are” largely depends on the linguistic interpretation of our experience translated into tales (“stories”) that we tell ourselves about ourselves and our place in the world. These “stories” make up the “narrative self”²¹ (Le Doux 2002: 271,272) (or “autobiographical self”, according to A. Damasio). It contains assignments, mental constructs, imaginary scenarios that we develop continuously. LeDoux warns that the stories that constitute the “narrative self” or “autobiographical self” may enhance or limit the creative capacity of the human being.

In Romania, which we find today being caught in a turbulent process of redefinition of its social identity, the storytelling culture for grown-ups could experience a renaissance, due to at least two factors. On one hand, there is the emerging phenomenon of devised performances, especially in the private theatres.²² On the other hand, one can easily notice the unprecedented proliferation of theatrical performances in which actors come in proscenium and directly address the audience. Until recently, video projections were invading the visual universe of performances, and so does the microphone placed on the stage today become a theatrical topos both in private and in state subsidized theaters. The “phenomenon” of ubiquitous microphones on stage seems to be a symptom of a need that I sincerely hope will soon be answered by the emergence of Romanian storytellers.

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21. Joseph Le Doux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002), 271--72.

22. It is worth noting, in this context, the serious research done by Romanian theatre scholar Olivia Grecea, published in her doctoral thesis called *Devised Theatre. Utopia, Tool and Political Theatre*, at the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca Romania.

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