The Philosophy Foundation
THINKING CHANGES

SHEHERAZAD'S HANDBOOK: HOW TO TELL STORIES PART 3

MOVEMENT, GESTURES AND EXPRESSION

LESS IS MORE

When I began telling stories I moved around rather a lot. It may have had something to do with the fact that I was often telling stories to very young children. And although silly and overstated movements can be very effective with younger children, it does tend towards slapstick and is not usually my preferred way to tell stories these days. Of course, it will depend on many things, such as the story, the age of the audience, and it is, to some extent, a choice of personal style; but, in my view, the best tellers use the 'less is more' principle. Here are some more hints to help develop this aspect of your story- telling. Breneman and Breneman's book Once Upon a Time: A Storytelling Handbook (1983) was particularly useful for this section.

ONE-SPOT STORYTELLING

This is where you describe movement without moving from where you stand. If you want to physicalise walking, running, swimming or flying and so on then it is best to do so – especially if space is limited – where you stand. There may be times when you want to step out from your spot, for instance, if you want to make it clear that you are now representing or adopting the position of another character. Using the less-is-more approach an entire story can be told very effectively from just one spot.

WORKING IN LARGE SPACES

However, when working with large groups and / or in large spaces there is a danger that those not proximate to the teller will become disengaged just like 'the children at the back of the class'. For this reason it is of the utmost importance to make those at the farthest reaches of the room feel included and spoken to. Under these circumstances it is allowable for you to move around the room, making use of the space as you tell the story. It will not be necessary to do this all the time but, from time to time, you may want to make a brief tour around the space, moving slowly as you tell, allowing you to make contact with the entire group. When doing this you must ensure that your voice is clear and well-projected, so that those who you may have your back to at any one time can still clearly hear you. You may decide to wait for an appropriate moment in the story to leave your spot at the front, such as when a character explores somewhere. Never have your back to an audience member for a second longer than necessary!

GESTURES

If a character is climbing a rope, about to fire an arrow, or some other action that is easily represented, then do so with a minimal gesture. This can usually be done with no more than your hands and arms, though sometimes it will require a full-body stance, such as when repelling a monster with a spear!

CONTRADICTION

In films it became standard for the music score to tell the audience information that the action does not. For instance, the action may tell of domestic bliss but the music may presage something sinister, contradicting the pictorial message. This contrasted with an earlier tendency in film scores to be straight-forwardly graphic, paralleling the action and movement as it was seen by the audience. As a storyteller you do not have the benefit of a score to contradict the actions and events of a story but you do have gestures, movement, tone and facial expressions. A character is asked by another off-stage character if he has the magic ring; you say 'he replied by telling her that he didn't have it' but while saying this you take a ring off your finger and hurriedly put it in your back pocket. If the audience has already been informed by the preceding narrative that he does in fact have the ring then this gesture is all that's needed to tell the audience that though he says he doesn't have the ring, really he does and that he doesn't want them to know.

In the famous scene when Odysseus is rewarded by the Cyclops Polyphemus, when he says, 'I like you, Nobody, and because I like you I shall give you a gift in return for the gift [of wine] you gave me: I shall eat you last!' I have Odysseus reply, 'That's very thoughtful of you, Polyphemus.' A great deal of humour is achieved – as well as discomfort – if, while you say Odysseus' words here, you use tone and facial expression to tell a different story to that of the words spoken: namely, that it's not very thoughtful!

SUBSTITUTING

This is where a word is replaced with an action or gesture. This is a particu- larly useful device when working with young children, as it provides a signal to the children to say the word (especially if it is a repetitive word), phrase or chorus. Substitution can be very useful with other age groups too. For instance, an action or gesture can be used instead of a description or adverb. So, instead of saying '...he said while pointing,' you could simply point while delivering the character's dialogue. Or, instead of saying '...he said angrily', simply say what he said, angrily.

ANTICIPATION

A particularly effective further element that can be added to your gestures repertoire is to perform the gesture just before you say the action the gesture is meant to represent. This anticipates features of the story and helps pull the audience along through the story, encouraging them to employ their imagi- nation to piece the story together for themselves before you tell it. (See also audience anticipation in ‘Pace and pause’ on page 32.)

PHYSICALISATION

Sometimes it can be helpful for your telling to physicalise a character in the story. This is not to everyone’s taste and is not usually necessary; most stories can be told perfectly well without the need for this. However, adopting the physical characteristics, personality traits or idiosyncrasies of a particular character can help to more fully engage your audience (particularly younger audiences) by either aiding their visualisations or helping them access the story or follow it. Very often it will do all of these. If you use physicalisation then there are two ways that you can approach it:

SLIGHT PHYSICALISATION

This is where, for example, you stay where you are (see ‘One-spot storytelling’ on page 42) and indicate with a slight change who you are. Perhaps nothing more than a slight bend in your knees and a squint tells your audience that you are now the grandfather character, possibly augmented with a slightly croaky voice (see ‘Voice and voices’ on page 29).

FULL PHYSICALISATION

When you feel more confident you may decide to make much greater use of the space (see ‘Working in large spaces’ on page 42) available to you. For example, if telling Anthony Browne’s Little Beauty (2009) then you may decide to physicalise the gorilla in the story by moving around the space as if you were the gorilla in its room, moving as a gorilla might. If you are using the cardboard box prop (see ‘Minimal prop principle’ on page 47), then you may have put the box in the centre of the room and have just said, ‘they decided to give the gorilla a present which they left in his room one morning…’ at which point you ‘become’ the gorilla who has just woken up. Maybe you scratch your head and move around the space before even noticing the box. Then, when you do, you move cautiously towards it, unsure exactly what it is. When you finally do go up close and open it, perhaps you recoil fearfully at first before finding the courage or curiosity to look in again. Your ‘gorilla’ facial expression changes from fearful to wonder as you peer in.

Having made a storytelling decision and having decided not to tell the children what is in the box your facial expressions and physicalisation both introduce the children to the
character in a more immediate

and visceral way and, in part, tell the story. Next, switching roles to ‘narrator’, you say, ‘the Zoo scientists wonder what the gorilla will do with the defenceless kitten’ and, as you say, ‘the gorilla reached in and took out the kitten’ you show, without having to say, exactly how the gorilla does so: namely, gently and with great care.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICALISATION

Sometimes, and again this will often be the case with younger audiences, you may want to involve the children kinesthetically with the story. Returning to the Miss Anthropy example (see page 30), when my colleague introduced his class to the character of Miss Anthropy, who, if you recall, hates everything, he explained how ‘her face is all screwed up with hate like a fist’ and then he showed them by tightly clenching his fist. Next, he asked the audience to have a go, ‘how would your face be if it was like a clenched fist?’ Of course, the whole class is then engaged in trying to achieve this with their faces.

Other times the children, if engaged with a story, will participate, unprompted. For instance, if I tell of a character running away from something and if I begin to (on-the-spot) run, the children invariably join in. If they do this, let them, and then indicate with your hands to stop when you are ready to continue. Otherwise, as I have found, they will continue, all the way off the cliff !

USING ‘STORY SPACE’

If the storyteller describes a dragon flying overhead then they can describe the dragon while looking up towards an imagined sky, adopting the point of view (and the space) of the character who sees the dragon. Alternatively, they could spread out their arms to become the dragon itself, looking down from the sky on the ant-like people below. The storyteller can be wherever she wants. And, what’s more, she can change her perspective at will.

I remember seeing a colleague of mine, Rachel Kershaw, tell a story about a discussion between a native American grandfather and his grandson in a teepee. (The story was ‘The Wolves Inside’ taken from Telling Tales by Taffy Thomas and Steve Killick, 2007). She chose to sit next to the imagined teepee. She set the scene and then physically opened the imagined teepee to invite us (the audience) in to listen to their conversation. Her creative use of how the narrator inhabits the physical space within the story was extremely evocative and helped to draw us all into her story-world even though the story takes less than five minutes to tell.

STRUCTURE AND THE WITHHOLDING OF INFORMATION (OR THE ODYSSEUS PRINCIPLE)

A story has two component parts: content and form. The same story told by two tellers may well have the same content but often it is the style and structure that really marks the difference between two tellings of the same story. Much of the ‘Sheherazad’s handbook’ section of this book is dedicated to those elements that

inform stylistic differences: how much pace, movement or gesture you will use to make a story your own. But much of my interest lies in how I piece the story together. Watch Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction (1994), Harold Pinter's Betrayal (1978) or Christopher Nolan's Memento (2000) to see how chronological structure can be employed as an important part of one's storytelling approach. And, as we see with a film like Memento, it is not just a choice about how the information is shared but also about the experience the audience has and the reason for the audience-members experi- encing it in that way.

Neither Tarantino nor Pinter were the first to play with story structure in a novel way. Take The Odyssey. It begins towards the end of the narrative and with Telemachus, Odysseus' son. The section that is usually thought to begin the narrative, the abduction of Helen and the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, is not officially part of the narrative and only gets a brief mention in passing by the characters Demodocus and Odysseus. The best known sequence of adventures that includes the episodes with the Cyclops, Circe and the Underworld (among others) is told about half way through the book by Odysseus when he recounts his adventures to Alcinous and his retinue. (Surprisingly little detail is given to this sequence.) Given that the order of Homer's story is not the same as the order of the narrative (this, by the way, helps to see clearly what the difference between these two terms is) I have always taken it as licence to all subsequent storytellers to play with story structure even though they may feel that they should remain faithful to the content.

Playing with structure is an important resource for the storyteller but it can also be an excellent tool for helping encourage thinking from your audience. (See 'When to ask a question' on page 63 in Chapter three: Storythinking).

MINIMAL PROP PRINCIPLE

Given that this book is aimed at teachers first and foremost, and given that I am not an expert in the use of props, I will not dwell on extraneous features to the storyteller's craft such as costumes, props and the use of musical instruments. Professional storytellers make good use of all of the above but I shall introduce a few basic ways that props can be used for your storytelling without requiring anything too outlandish.

I have often found that props are unnecessary but from time to time have included their use in a minimal way. My first use of a prop was when telling the story of 'Gyges' ring' (that can be found in The If Machine) in which a shepherd finds a magical ring of invisibility. When describing the ring – and the shepherd putting it on and taking it off – I found myself, without thinking, doing the actions with my wedding ring. I noticed that the children's eyes had become transfixed on the ring as I manipulated it as if they were wondering whether my ring was really magical. I have also seen storytellers do similar things with artefacts from a museum's collection, for example, weaving a story around the artefact.

Minimal prop advice is to find something that can act as a focal point around which the story and the storytelling can then revolve, something for the audience to focus their eyes on but that otherwise does not interfere with your normal storytelling procedures. It has the benefit of helping to keep them engaged and focused and gives their eyes something to look at other than you. If your story focuses around a crown (see The Magic Crown on page 169) then you may use a toy, wooden or card crown as your prop, or if a book (see the story Once Upon an If on page 85), take an appropriate looking book with you for your telling. However, it is worth remembering that you can tell most stories very effectively without any props.

You can also use a nondescript item and transform it as the story progresses. When telling the story of Little Beauty (see my comments on page 45) I use a cardboard box as a prop. When the gorilla is given a kitten I use the box to act as the container in which the kitten is presented to the gorilla. The box later becomes the television that the gorilla and Beauty watch when the gorilla becomes angry and that he goes on to smash up.

VISUALISATION (OR HOW TO FOLLOW A RECIPE)

Nothing beats experience for recalling information. If you have made a journey then giving directions for that journey is often relatively easy to do. If you have cooked a recipe, and especially if you have done so more than once, then writing it down for someone else is reasonably straight forward. However, if you have only looked at a map or if you are the one receiving the directions, it is much harder to retain the information. How many times have you reached a certain part of a recipe only to discover something time-consuming that you had missed when reading through, such as marinating overnight?

Stories trigger a part of the brain that corresponds with the actual act, so if children are hearing you tell of an exciting ride on a bicycle it activates a part of the brain activated when they are actually riding a bike. This is because a story, as opposed to a recipe, naturally produces visualisation in its audience. Visualisation is more than simply understanding a chunk of information: it is the act of seeing something in your mind's eye in a way that resembles really seeing something. This can be illustrated well enough with a recipe, of all things.

Pick up a recipe book and open it up at a randomly selected page. Now read the recipe through once in the normal way. Then read it again, but this time, fully engage the imaginative part of your brain. You may even want to use your hands to help with this, acting out the various parts of the recipe as you go. If it says 'finely chop an onion and then fry gently for a few minutes or until the onion has changed colour', do this in your mind using your hands to stir the onion while holding the pan as you complete the task. Carry on through the recipe in this way and you should notice how much easier it is to recall the recipe and how much better you understand what the recipe requires.

Telling a story a good number of times is like being on a journey or cooking a recipe. You can also use visualisation techniques in preparation for telling a story that you've not told before, in much the same way as the exercise above with the recipe. To do this you need to imagine that you are in front of a class and then you need to tell the story out loud or 'out loud in your head' (see Keyword lists on page 35). In other words, you need to go through each word that you will say, responding with fully formed pictures and images of the events of the story in your imagination. You should only need to do this once before facing your audience but if you are less experi- enced do it as many times as you can: while waiting for a bus, walking to the shops or driving to work. Better still, find someone to tell it to such as a partner, your children or some willing friends.

HOW TO DESCRIBE A STORY

Here's a quick visualisation exercise: I want you to imagine that you are a camera in a film. Sometimes you'll go closer to show the audience a detail, such as the decoration on a vase. Other times you'll pull back to reveal a panorama such as the view from a ship. Sometimes you'll simply focus on a dialogue between two characters, but other times you'll spend lingering over the details of the environment in which the scene is set.

Storytelling is the same only you don't have a camera, you've got to produce a similar effect equipped only with your voice, your body and your words. You're not just the camera operator, you are also the director so it's up to you when you 'zoom in' and when you 'pan out'. Paying heed to 'The Goldilocks Principle' (see page 23), too much over-elaborate description may begin by enchanting your listeners but they will soon lose interest unless there is a plot to carry them along. But just giving them a list of the events in an '...and then... and then... and then...' way won't capture their attention in the first place. You will have to make your own decisions about when to do what. One very good test for whether you're getting it right is the reaction you get from your audience.

Here are some hints and exercises to help you:

- ✔ Watch films and see what the camera does and ask yourself – from the point- of-view of the storytelling – why the decision was made to make the camera do this or that. (Remember: everything happens for a reason.)
- ✔ Read stories and see what 'the camera' does in them, imagining the story is being filmed.
- ✔ When telling a story use description to set the scene but give yourself the following rule: don't take too long; keep things moving.
- ✔ Watch 'the camera of the heart!' Sometimes it will be necessary to imagine a camera filming how people are feeling, or thinking. The same principle applies: sometimes 'pan back': ('Kalypso wondered what Odysseus was thinking but could not see in his face') and other times 'zoom in': ('upon hearing the screams of the men Odysseus was hit hard by an intense feeling of regret at what he had done').

VOCABULARY

Unlike the reader of a written story, the storyteller is not committed to any one range or level of vocabulary. The vocabulary the storyteller chooses to employ will depend on the audience she finds herself in front of.

As a basic rule of thumb choose simpler words for younger audiences. However, there's more to say on this. Children like to be challenged and they like to learn new words so don't be afraid to use longer or unfamiliar words. Here are some suggestions for how to introduce less familiar words. And remember: context is everything.

• One way is to put in a longer word and then to repeat the meaning immediately afterwards: 'The storm eventually subsided (which means it slowly went away) and then...' A more subtle version of this is to follow the unfamiliar word with a clue-word to help the children infer its meaning: 'The storm eventually subsided until it was calm again'. The clue-word here is 'calm'; if subsiding results in being calm then it is relatively easy to understand the role a word such as 'subside' is playing here. This is different from understanding what a word means and, although short of being a full understanding, it enables a listener to continue to access a story without interrupting the flow even though it contains unfamiliar words. In fact, this is the way most of us have learned many of the words we know. It is also why we often have slightly inaccurate definitions of some words.

- ✔ Meaning can also be helped along with hand gestures or movement. This technique also helps to maintain the flow of the story. So, for instance, when you say the phrase, 'The storm eventually subsided', as you say the word 'subsided' you could raise your hands to approximately face-height with your palms facing down and then bring your hands down to just below your neck indicating a gradual downward movement. This, combined with the aforementioned clue-word technique, can really help to convey meaning.
- ✔ Another technique is to ask if anyone knows the word so that they can explain it to the class: 'The three of them gathered together to confer with each other about what to do. Does anyone here know what 'confer' means?' This shouldn't be done too often as it interferes with the flow of the storytelling, but is good if there is an important or crucial word, or one that reappears in the story, that it is important the children understand. With very young children it is effective to have at least one 'interesting' (new) word in each story, such as Beatrix Potter's use of the word 'soporific' in The Tale of The Flopsy Bunnies (1909). She uses the technique of providing a clue-phrase of feeling sleepy after its introduction:

> 'It is said that the effect of eating too much lettuce is "soporific". I have never felt sleepy after eating lettuce; but then I am not a rabbit.'

- ✔ And finally, if no one knows the word, you could ask them what they think it means. Always repeat the full context (the necessary phrase, sentence or stanza) to help them with this. I often find that even the youngest children can infer an approximate meaning of some surprisingly advanced words simply from the context. You can always clarify or provide a more accurate definition once they have had a go if you feel it is necessary. This should seldom be done as it takes rather a lot of time, but it can be a particularly useful strategy when using poetry with a class. (See the 'Unfamiliar words' exercise on page 166 for an exercise with poetry that makes use of this strategy.)

DEVELOPING YOUR INSTANT THESAURUS

Here's an exercise to help develop your powers of description using your vocabulary. Read the following through.

The knight went up the winding stairs silently and eventually came to a door. He listened but heard nothing, so, he carefully tried the door. Upon his first touch it unlatched itself and swung open as if to invite him through. Beyond the door was darkness.

Now read it again and stop on a highlighted word such as 'door' and now try to think of three different ways to say or describe this word: 'portal', 'entrance', 'escape'. Notice that you could think of a word that simply acts as a synonym or you could think of a more evocative word that is more context-dependent (in this case 'escape') – get creative! Then, carry on reading until you come to another highlighted word and repeat the same exercise. Don't limit this exercise to only the highlighted words; also try to replace a word with a phrase (e.g. 'eventually' = 'after some time'). This exercise is best done with paper, writing down your three words. Think about which words work best and why. This will depend very much on your audience.

WHEN AND WHAT TO DESCRIBE

It is important to choose carefully when to describe and when not to (see 'The Goldilocks Principle' on page 23). It is important to remember the following rule: do not over-describe. The three main reasons for describing are: 1) to build an atmosphere, 2) to help imagine a scene and 3) to provide information or draw attention to something. Take the following bare bones of a story from Plato:

- ✔ An earthquake reveals a long-lost city to a lone shepherd.
- ✔ One of his sheep is lost in the city and he needs to retrieve it or he will have to pay for it from his wages.
- ✔ He goes into the city in search of his lost sheep.
- ✔ There he discovers a throne with the remains of a dead king sitting upon it.
- ✔ The shepherd removes a ring from the finger of the skeleton king.
- ✔ Another earthquake covers the city once more and the shepherd narrowly escapes.
- ✔ Once he is safely on the surface again he discovers that the ring has the power to turn him invisible.
- ✔ With this power he turns the queen against her husband, kills him and takes his place as king.

Take a look and try to identify where description would be apt and also note where it would not, then read on.

The following aspects would be augmented by a little extra description:

- The dead king (builds atmosphere).
- His narrow escape (creates tension).
- His discovery of the power of invisibility (this is the focal point of the story).

I would suggest not spending too much time describing the following:

- ✔ The city (it has no role to play other than providing the story with the ring).
- ✔ The earthquake (its only role is to open the earth to provide the ring through a strange but plausible event).

THE SMELL OF OLD BOOKS – ENGAGING THE SENSES

As a storyteller you find many ways to draw your audience in. Many little things come together to create a big effect: the earnest look in your eye, the pauses between sentences, phrases or sections, the lowering of your voice are all examples of little things that add up to a larger, overall effect. One of those 'little things' is the occasional and well-timed appeal to the senses.

I tell a story about three friends who decide to bake a cake, in order to engender a discussion with young children about fairness and justice. At some point they (the characters and the audience) have to decide how the cake should be cut and how much of the cake each child should get (see my book The Philosophy Shop, 2012, page 235). To help me draw them into the story so that they feel something of the investment of the characters, I take them through the whole process, describing how one of the characters saves all her money and how another goes to the shops to buy the ingredients. (I ask the children to tell me what sort of things they will need to buy.) Then, as I describe the children waiting for the cake to bake I say that 'they all sit looking at the oven' and how '20 minutes seems to take forever' and that 'they can all smell the warm aroma of a baking cake wafting towards their noses'.

As I'm telling them this some of the children smile, others lick their lips while others inhale slowly through their noses, some of them close their eyes. The appeal the storytelling has made to the senses has triggered something Pavlovian. Just as the smell of frying garlic has the power to trigger salivation in preparation for eating and digestion, so too can storytelling trigger similar physiological responses with nothing other than the power of the imagination.

This example is a full-on assault of the senses but there is another, more subtle, way to make use of sense-activation with an occasional peppering to add a sense-dimension to the listener's created world. When I tell the story of The Little Old Shop of Curiosities (see The If Machine, page 111) I might include something like the following:

The audience has been asked to imagine a strange and out-of-place shop squeezed in among a row of familiar shops near where they live. As they investigate further, they push open the door and just before they close it again to leave I might say,

‘Just as you are closing the door you catch the smell of old books – a smell you happen to love. You decide to push the door open again and to take a proper look inside...’

Of course, this results in their going in and discovering something quite amazing (see the story to find out what!). In this telling, the discovery entirely hinges on the accidental – and apparently insignificant – detail of a chance aroma. And activating their sense of smell has also helped to realise the scene in the mind’s eye – or is it the mind’s nose? – of the listeners. Even those who may never have smelled old books (an increasing possibility as we move further into the digital age) are prompted to imagine what old books may smell like. If this is the case, then their imaginations have been properly and actively engaged.

PICTURE BOOKS AND HOW TO TELL THEM

As in the example of Little Beauty (see page 45), picture books can make excellent resources for finding tales to tell, but be careful when choosing. Some of them work very well and transfer very easily to storytelling but others transfer less well. One reason for this is that some picture books are more than just stories with pictures, sometimes the storytelling is shared between both the text and the pictures so that only a partial amount of the information on any page comes from the text alone. A good example of this is UFO Diary (2007) by Satoshi Kitamura. This does not necessarily mean that it can’t be told; for instance, if the picture contradicts what the text says then this contradiction may be conveyed perfectly well through good storytelling (see ‘Contradiction’ page 43).

Reading picture books can also call upon your storytelling skills. (See exercise using Not Now, Bernard on page 29).

For a list of picture books complete with Task Questions for use with classes log on to the online resources that accompany this book. A regularly updated list is available from The Philosophy Foundation website: http:// www.philosophy-foundation.org/resources/picture-books.