

Story Theater

One day a hungry beggar went to the house of a rich man. He asked for something to eat. The rich man invited the beggar in and gave him some soup. The beggar drank the soup very quickly. When he finished the rich man asked, "Do you want more to eat?"

"No, thanks," the beggar answered. "That was enough. I'm full."

But the rich man gave the beggar a large plate of meat.

The beggar finished that very quickly also.

"Do you want more to eat?" the rich man asked again.

"No, thanks," the beggar answered. "That was enough. I'm full."

But the rich man didn't stop. He gave the beggar some delicious chocolate cake. The beggar quickly finished the food again. "Why do you lie to me?" the rich man asked. "Every time I ask you if you want more to eat, you say no; but every time I give you more, you eat it quickly."

The beggar looked around. Outside the kitchen there was a box. He filled the box with stones and asked the rich man, "Is this box full?"

"Of course it's full, the rich man answered.

Then the beggar put some sand in the box that was full of stones. "Is this box full?" he asked again.

"Of course it's full," the rich man answered.

Then the beggar got a pail of water. He poured the water into the box that was full of stones and sand. "You see," he said to the rich man. "Every time I ask you if the box is full, you say yes; but every time you say yes, I fill the box again. It's the same thing with the food you gave me. There's always room for more."

This is a tale for students to tell. I've chosen to begin with it to give a context for what is to follow, and to demonstrate that Story Theater can be used with students of all ages and all levels of English proficiency. With it, we can highlight basic features of Story Theater that will become more varied and complex as the tales become longer, with wider vocabulary and more challenging images for student actors to project.

Story Theater takes a text—a piece of fiction, a fable, or a folk tale—and students act it out. They have not written this text, but if there is narration, they recite that narration. They do not write dialogues; but if characters in the story have dialogue, then students will speak that dialogue. Students will orchestrate the drama that a story portrays, choosing sound effects, props, and blackboard pictures to provide background. They decide who stands where and what actions are needed to bring the story alive...in a special way.

In Story Theater, students, not the teacher, do the telling, although the success of the telling depends, first of all, and mostly, on the teacher's original decision in selecting a tale. In making this choice, the teacher should remember that while students may become frustrated, truly exasperated, as they struggle with this foreign language, they also have the faculty of imagination.

Story Theater evokes imagination, putting a number of formal pedagogical principles into play simultaneously as action proceeds. For instance, language materials ought to be intrinsically motivating. They ought to engage the students, pique their curiosity, and be within their range of proficiency so that they are neither bored, because the materials are too familiar, nor frustrated, because they are loaded with too many new features, new words, new sounds, or new grammatical structures.

Story Theater is especially relevant at that time when students are tired or are about to become tired. It is also useful with students who are afraid to make mistakes, or with those who have a knowledge about the language and can recognize words, but cannot easily produce what they can recognize. The text of a story gives words to them so that they can actively use the language. This provides security. But if the teacher reads the story, if students recite the story after her, they remain at the

same level of language where they were when they began the activity, perhaps with a wider range of passive knowledge, but not with increased fluency in using the language.

Theorists concerned with foreign language learning remind us of the role that affect plays in foreign language learning. Krashen and Burt and Dulay highlight the role that reduced anxiety plays in the classroom, as does Lozanov when he advises us to de-suggest negative attitudes toward the difficulty of formal learning, pointing to the use of roleplaying as one means of recalling the joy of learning. Charles Curran's *Community Language Learning* and James Asher's *Total Physical Response* tell us to reach for the whole person, mind, body, and psyche in teaching. And Earl Stevick, investigator and a story teller himself, describes how measurably the imagination prompts the faculty of memory. That mental leap that the creative impulse makes enhances the likelihood that new constructs and the words to convey them will be remembered by learners.

There are other reasons for using Story Theater. Since ancient times, universal themes have been expressed in the myths and legends of all cultures. Whatever our background, whatever our culture, stories are there, from Aesop to La Fontaine, Noh plays, and Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. Tales from one society resonate in the minds and psyches of students from another. Images from Aesop ("the hawks and the doves," "sour grapes," "cry wolf") are common coin throughout the world. The competition to get a crown ("The White Cat from France") or the presence of a sorcerer challenging heroes (the princess hidden in the cat or the man submerged within the beast of "Beauty and the Beast") cut across cultures. Worries that attractive material might be useless because of culture-bound references are no concern when fables are used. A story from Colombia will be appreciated by a class in Vietnam.

Story Theater not only embraces principles of learning and universal themes, it allows us to use in a refreshing way, tried-and-true techniques that have been frowned upon in recent years. For instance, choral activities—in ill repute because they were associated with meaningless drill—become transformed in a new guise. There is an amazing difference in group recitation when it is called a Greek chorus instead of the familiar whole class "repeat after

me” recitation. A teacher can check this for herself by having a class recite in chorus a story or dialogue that she models line after line. Then without modeling, she can ask small groups of students to take the above story and tell it, reading it out loud to their classmates who simply sit and listen, with their books closed. There may be false starts at first, but after one or two tries, the group becomes one voice as did the actors of Greek tragedy or Japanese Noh drama. Given even a crude drawing of the masks of “comedy” and “tragedy” on a blackboard, the tale tellers and their listeners recognize the difference immediately. The recitation is no longer a drill but a speech with meaning and a purpose.

In your mind’s ear, listen to the first lines of the opening tale told by a trio of students:

“One day a hungry beggar went to the house of a rich man. He asked for something to eat. The rich man invited the beggar in and gave him some soup.”

Because the conventions of story telling are so universal, students realize that they are telling a tale, not merely reciting a passage. Even beginning learners strive for rhythm, and the cadence of the sentences fall into place. Add the direction that the student/beggar must look and act the beggar and that the student/rich man must look and act the rich man: you will have in front of you—with perhaps no more prop than a cup (if even that!)—one student bent over, holding out his hand, and looking the supplicant while the other shows the self-possession of a rich man by taking on a different facial expression and a more confident stance. Just how students convey these two images is up to them, not the teacher; but if they know the meaning of the words “rich man” and “beggar,” the physical projection will be there. We are using the student’s imagination, not the teacher’s.

To introduce the Story Theater way of telling a tale, have two of the students become the rich man and the beggar, and the rest of the class, the chorus. In harmony and in unison, the chorus begins the tale:

“One day a hungry beggar went to the house of a rich man. He asked for something to eat. The rich man invited the beggar in and gave him some soup. The beggar drank the soup very quickly. When he finished, the rich man asked...”

When the chorus finishes the phrase, “... the rich man asked,” the student/actor rich man steps forward and says, “*Do you want more to eat?*”

“*No, thanks,*” the beggar student/actor replies “*that was enough. I’m full.*”

Assign roles before the first reading begins and go through the text together. Using the context of the whole story, students can make intelligent guesses about the meanings of strange words and determine how they will convey them in narration. Beginning-level students may not know the English word for “beggar,” and its meaning can be translated quickly, ideally by a classmate.

Students go into reading circles as professional actors do, and keeping original roles, run through the narration. When ready, the rich man and the beggar and three chorus voices go to the front of the class to act and speak the whole story. Enjoy the surprise of the action and don’t over-rehearse or push students into performing a role until they show that they are ready.

If, knowing his/her class, the teacher has chosen a tale within their reach, students, undistracted by strange words, will move from a passive knowledge of the language to active command. That is important enough to say again: students who are ready for Story Theater recognize the words and their meaning and the meaning of a story. If they were asked any number of comprehension questions about the tale, they would answer them, in monosyllables, perhaps, or as is often the case, in grammatical phrases. What Story Theater does is give them a chance to use their language actively and sensibly to convey meaning.

If the story is a good one and within their range of proficiency, students will work on the material gladly. The given text frees them to use their imagination as they speak the language carefully and repeatedly within the safety of the group that traditional audiolingual classes relied upon.

Unlike traditional roleplaying activities that call for students to act out words given in dialogues or skits, or to improvise their own words when given a character role, a setting, and a situation or conflict, Story Theater works with the whole text of a story, freeing students to focus on whole messages, not individual words. Indeed, students focus so much on

chunks of meaning that the rote, word-by-word recitation of so much class reading disappears and the deep structure of the story becomes primary.

Fables are not what they appear;
The moralists are mice and such small deer.
We yawn at sermons but gladly turn
To moral tales, and, amused, we learn.”

Jean de la Fontaine

There are longer pieces with more complex sentence structure and varied vocabulary. The Golden Swan, a story from Laos, is a good example of how an entire class can be involved in telling a story in groups, in teams.

The teacher might read this tale once to a group of intermediate level students, modeling the pronunciation, stress, and intonation. S/he might also have students read the text as they listen to a recorded version. It is important, though, to remember the virtue of keeping the material fresh and not to limit the students' imagination. Any repetition of the telling should happen within student groups which are assigned sequential segments of the story. Breaking the narration at natural junctures, in logical sections, or perhaps even in length, four groups of five students are given the tale and asked to spend 10–15 minutes in acting circles to imagine how they will portray their section of the story. In this case each group has a Chief Hunter and a Widow assigned to speak dialogue. The three (or more) students who will present the narration in Greek chorus must decide who will step forward to mime the descriptions and what props they will use. The various versions each group acts out—with the narration as the common thread—are characteristic of Story Theater as groups listen to each others' piece of the tale and anticipate adding their own. This approach has the added advantage of maintaining student interest, piquing their curiosity as they wonder how the other groups envisioned the same tale. There is laughter and fun and shouts of recognition as the same character portrayed by four different groups has four sets of accidental characteristics. There is appreciation and recognition and realization that another mind, another group came up with a different image of the same person.

Once students feel prepared, Group A moves to the front of the class and begins the tale. When A finishes, they slip quietly to the

side and join the audience for Group B which has just as quietly moved to the center. Holding to the rhythm, even aiming for a seamless transition from group to group is part of the challenge and fun of Story Theater.

Besides being within the range of the students' language proficiency, and appropriate to the age and maturity of the students, the content of material selected for Story Theater presentation has to be attractive enough to work with, familiar enough to hold students' attention, and relevant enough to sustain their interest. Otherwise presenters may be deflected from acting, if they need to learn too many new words, or if the theme is beyond their comprehension because of age or experience. But if the story is well chosen, students will work with it gladly, becoming so involved in the telling that they focus not on individual words but upon the message, the most elementary requirement for genuine expression. The deep structure of the story and the words used to tell it become primary, as it does in their first language.¹

Length is another important concern. Passages should be brief enough to be told within a three to five minute period, keeping in mind that perhaps 20 minutes have been spent in preparation. More than 15 or 20 minutes of preparation may make the activity tedious and in the process kill spontaneity, a key dynamic for successful Story Theater. Still, a brief performance has in fact been preceded by earlier small group work. For a story to run smoothly, performance time may be only five or 10 minutes.

As with the tales used here, stories chosen for portrayal should have lots of descriptive detail and concrete images that student actors can mime or convey with simple props or pictures. Abstract expressions need to be graphic enough for quick representation by upper beginning level students.

There are lots of reasons for using Story Theater in the classroom. It is fun. And effective! It appeals to students' unconscious—that part of us that theorists in second language acquisition stress is so important. Story Theater lowers students' anxiety level, a major concern

of Krashen; it reaches the whole person, Curran's requirement for successful learning; it addresses the unconscious which the psychiatrist Lozanov recognized as playing a fundamental role in language learning; and by linking meaning and imagination, it enters memory, which Stevick sees as central to acquisition. But most compelling of all reasons for using Story Theater, is Joseph Campbell's observation that the themes of fables and myths are so universal that a story from Japan will be appreciated by a class of students in Athens.

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The Golden Swan



Group A chorus: “There was once a mighty hunter who lived in Laos. He was a good husband and a kind father, and he looked after his family well. In fact, he was such a good hunter that people called him the Chief Hunter. People knew he was a very lucky man.

Everything about the Chief Hunter’s life was fortunate. His children always had food. His wife could trade the birds and animals he caught for the best rice in the village. They had the best cloth to make their clothing. Life was rich and happy for the Chief Hunter’s family.

Then one day the Chief Hunter hurt himself while he was hunting. He came home to his wife, and she said, (*it is here that the student-actor/Widow speaks*) “What is wrong? Your face is pale, and you are moving so slowly. What happened?”

“I don’t know,” the Chief Hunter said wearily. *The Chief Hunter/actor utters the direct speech, “I don’t know;” and the three students narrate as a Greek Chorus “the Chief Hunter said wearily . . .” while the Chief Hunter shows his weariness by facial expression or body movement.* “I feel very sick. Let me lie down.” So he took to his bed, and his family nursed him devotedly and watched him with great care.

(*The Chorus continues*): At first the Hunter seemed to get better, but then he slipped back. He died a week later.

His widow grieved terribly. (*The Widow shows her grief and her poverty*). She missed her husband, and she did not know how to live without him. The family became poor, and it was difficult to find enough food to eat. The children (*one chorus voice continues as other chorus members step forward to mime the children’s distress*) often cried when they went to sleep because they were hungry. The Widow was at her wits’ end. She could not sleep for worry and grief. (*As the first group leaves the stage, Group B moves quietly into place and continues the story.*)

Group B’s Chorus: “One night, as the poor Widow tossed and turned in her sleep, she heard her husband’s voice. (*As the Widow tosses, a chorus member speaks for the Hunter.*) “I have come back to help you,” the voice said.

The Widow sat up and looked around. She knew she was dreaming, and in her dream she went outside. A large Swan spoke to her with the Chief Hunter’s voice. (*Ideally the student story tellers, not the teacher, will have decided how to convey a swan, by physical miming, a stick figure on the board, a mask, a white sheet, etc. Invariably student imagination produces an image that the listeners will recognize.*)

“I know how hard it is for you,” the Swan said in the Chief Hunter’s voice.

The Widow was happy to hear her husband’s voice, yet sad because she knew it was a dream. Her throat closed so she could not speak. The Swan stood in the moonlight and said, “I wish I could be here with you.” Then it came closer. She could see that many of its feathers were made of gold. In the moonlight it seemed to be a golden swan.

The Golden Swan said, “Put your hand out and take one of my golden feathers. Use the money for food and clothing for yourself and the children. Go on. I will return whenever you need more. Pull a feather out of my wing.” So, very gently, the Widow pulled a feather out of the Golden Swan’s wing.

*The Swan
stood in
the moonlight
and said,
“I wish I could
be here
with you.”*

The Golden Swan said in the voice of the Chief Hunter, “Go to sleep now. In the morning you will know that this was a special dream.” So the Widow put the feather beside her bed and went back to sleep. She slept so well and so deeply it was as if her man were still alive.

(Group B slips away and Group C moves forward) When she awoke, she remembered the dream and looked for the golden feather. There in its place was money and gold.

The wife wept with gratitude. Her husband was kind and generous even after death. Later she went to the village and bought food and clothing. She was careful not to spend too much. She was very quiet about her good fortune and decided to try to make the money last a long time.

She looked after the money well, but after a while there was very little left, and she began to worry. Would the Golden Swan come back again? On the day she spent the last coin, she felt alone again—just like when she was first a Widow.

The Golden Swan came back to her, and she took a larger feather than before. The Golden Swan flew away, and the Widow dreamed on and planned what she could do with the money.

The next day, sure enough, there was an even larger pile of gold and coins. The Widow laughed and gave her children a little money to buy food in the market. Then she went to find the people who ran the gambling in the village. She was sure she could double her money.

(It is Group D’s turn to move forward and continue the narration with its own interpretation of the Widow and Swan; the narrating chorus will speak the lines of the gamblers, a good example of how apt the chorus is since the gamblers indeed are representative tempters.) “I would like to gamble,” she said. “Will anyone play with me?”

“Do you have any money?” the gamblers asked.

“I have money,” the Widow said, and she let the gamblers see part of the gold. The game started that morning, and by nightfall the Widow had no money left. She went home, angry and depressed. On the way she thought of a plan.

“My husband will be angry when he finds out how I lost the money,” she thought. “If I had a lot of money, I would not need to ask him for more.”

That night as she lay down, she waited for the Golden Swan to come. He came as usual and offered his feathers. This time she plucked all the golden feathers she could find. She did not care how much she hurt the Swan. She was possessed by greed. The Widow put the feathers into a pile by her bed so that she could see them as soon as she woke up. “Such a large pile of feathers should turn into a lot of money,” she thought.

The next morning she woke up and looked for the money. All she found was a pile of dull dead swan’s feathers.

That night the Widow was afraid to go to sleep, but at last she did. The Golden Swan came to her in her dream and said, “I will never come to help you again. You do not deserve anything from me, and from now on you must look after yourself.” Then the Swan flew away and never returned.

