

"Role-playing in Storytelling"

by Dr Eric Miller (PhD in Folklore), December 2013, Chennai

Introduction

The Indian Institute of Psychodrama, founded one year ago, is presenting Psychodrama Workshops in Chennai and New Delhi this month (December 2013). I am settled in Chennai, but I was raised in New York City. There I heard a lot about Psychodrama, although I never got directly involved with it. Instead I became involved with Storytelling. However, I was always drawn to Psychodrama. Now I am realising why: I am interested in role-playing, and both Psychodrama and Storytelling involve role-playing.

One big difference between Storytelling and Psychodrama is that in the case of Psychodrama, following the role-playing, the experience is processed by the group participants under the guidance of the Psychodrama director, who ideally is a trained counsellor.

In any case, it seems the activities of the Indian Institute of Psychodrama are now inspiring me to think about role-playing. This essay concerns role-playing in Storytelling. Included are some of suggestions I sometimes make when training and coaching Storytellers.

Commanding / Narrating / Explaining / Role-playing

Narrating (telling what happened) is most-closely associated with storytelling, but three other activities in which Storytellers also often engage in the course of telling a story and commenting upon it are: Role-playing (acting out a story), Explaining (saying what one thinks a story means), and Commanding (telling people what to do, based on a perceived lesson of a story). For examples,

When Role-playing, a Storyteller might role-play as a thief.

When Narrating, a Storyteller might tell a story about a thief.

When Explaining, a Storyteller might say, "A moral of the story is, thieves get into trouble".

When Commanding, a Storyteller might say, "Do not be a thief!"

Of these four activities, Commanding is most authoritative, followed by Explaining, Narrating, and finally Role-playing. Role-playing is the least authoritative of these activities because it involves pretending, playing, fantasizing -- and even, in a sense, lying (claiming to be someone other than oneself). Role-playing may also seem to weaken one's authority if one might be role-playing a character whose behaviour might be less than perfect: some Storytellers might be shy to associate themselves with such characters.

Moreover, people in authoritative positions may have been trained to just give an "Executive Summary" -- to tell a story in an emotionally cool and even tone, and to be as brief and to the point as possible. That is, people who have a good deal of authority and status in everyday life -- such as managers and executives in businesses -- may tend to not be interested in, or in some cases, may seem to be incapable of, role-playing characters in the stories they might tell. This may in part be because such people may sometimes in the workplace be solely focused on playing the role of "manager" or "executive".

However, when I coach people in storytelling, I tell them that role-playing characters, and enacting the emotions of those characters, are basic and valuable ways of engaging listeners and being a "good" storyteller.

Visualise, describe, mime, and become

One set of general instructions for storytelling is: Visualise the elements of a story. Describe these elements with one's voice. Mime these elements (act them out) with one's body. And then, at selected moments, *become* elements of the story, by role-playing the characters.

Identify and dramatise the key moments of a story

It is often not practical to role-play all the characters throughout a story: doing so might take too long, and one might lose one's focus. Thus, one often has to select certain moments to role-play -- and I generally suggest that these might be the key scenes, the pivotal moments, the turning points of the story. In these moments, the story comes to life: that which occurred in the past is suddenly also occurring in the present.

The difference between being told a summary of a conversation, and hearing a conversation

I often encourage Storyteller trainees to not just tell their listeners *about* characters, but to also let the listeners see, hear, and meet (enactments of) these characters.

The difference between a summary of a conversation, and an (enactment of) a conversation, is, for example:

Summary: "They discussed the matter, and decided to go to a movie".

Enactment: "One friend said to the other, 'What do you want to do?' The other friend said, 'Let's go to the beach'. The first friend said, 'We went to the beach last week -- let's go to a movie today' ..."

In a conversation between characters, the relationship between these characters emerges. There is often a good deal of give-and-take, and negotiation. To present a conversation, a Storyteller needs to convey not only what the characters are saying, but also what they are thinking. That is, what a character says in a conversation is only the tip of the iceberg (the iceberg is what he/she is thinking, and beneath that, what he/she is feeling). It may require some careful thought to present a realistic conversation between characters, and while memorisation of words is usually not involved in the type of storytelling I work with, often some planning by the Storyteller is useful.

The difference between being told a summary of a character's thoughts, and hearing a character thinking

Even if there is only one character in a scene, a Storyteller can still bring this character to life -- with monologue by that character, instead of dialogue between characters. This involves having a character speak his/her thoughts out loud.

Here is an example of the difference between summarising, and enacting, a character's thoughts:

Summary: "There was a young man who wanted to work on ships and visit distant lands".

Enactment: "There was a young man who thought to himself, 'I want to work on ships and visit distant lands! I want to travel the seas and have adventures!' "

The enactment tends to heighten the emotion for all involved.

Let listeners hear a character's internal dialogue

When role-playing a character, one can give voice to different inclinations, ideas, and feelings, within this character. A dialogue between the "Good angel" (the conscience) and "Bad angel" of a character can be presented. A character might remember or imagine (out loud) what important figures in his/her life might say about a situation. A character might consider (out loud) some of the pros and cons of a possible course of action. All of this involves characters (out loud) looking at both sides -- or many sides -- of a situation, and thinking things through.

Put listeners in the physical and emotional positions of characters

When playing a character, a Storyteller draws each listener into a relationship with that character. A Storyteller can enact Character A as this character is addressing Character B. As the Storyteller is doing this, he/she can look into the eyes of a particular listener. This playfully puts this listener in the physical and emotional position of Character B, and invites the listener to respond -- to think, speak, and move -- as Character B.

When a Storyteller does this, I recommend at times him/her looking at one listener for at least a full sentence. This gives this listener a chance to settle into the role of Character B. The Storyteller can see, hear, and otherwise sense the reaction of the particular listener, and can respond in turn.

There is actually a craft -- which I am seeking to learn more about -- of inducing and eliciting listeners' in-character responses. A Storyteller usually wants listeners to role-play characters in ways that elaborate upon and explore the story that is being told. The Storyteller usually does not want listeners to take the story in unplanned directions. He/she usually wants listeners' role-playing to affect the story's plot only in limited ways.

Role-reversal

The Storyteller can role-play as Character A speaking to Character B, and then reverse roles -- role-playing as Character B replying to Character A. In such situations, the listener is first in the position of Character B, and then in the position of Character A.

Develop flexibility, fluidity of self and identity

Role-playing characters requires an ability to pretend to be others. Children and many good Storytellers tend to do this naturally and easily. For others, this is something that needs to be learned and practiced.

Tell any story from a variety of points of view

It is useful for Storytellers to get in the habit of telling any story from a variety of points of view, such as

- 1) From a narrator's point of view (3rd person).
- 2) As if it happened to oneself (1st person).
- 3) From the point of view of any character or object in the story.

Let the story -- and its characters -- speak for themselves

Especially regarding stories that have been passed down from generation to generation, it is often a good idea to let the story do its work in the minds of listeners. This may involve letting listeners experience the events of a story for themselves, without too much advice from the Storyteller. Listeners tend to imagine themselves in the positions of story characters -- that is, they role-play the characters. In the process, they also formulate thoughts about what it all means.

For a Storyteller to constantly editorialise, give commentary, explanations, interpretations, etc, is for the Storyteller to impose his/her self into the equation and prevent the listener from relating directly to the story, and making the story his/her own.

A Storyteller announcing the moral of a story after telling a story may be a sign that the Storyteller is not sure the telling was clear. A Storyteller leading a conversation about a story after telling it is an act of generosity and strength: this lets each listener formulate and share his/her thoughts about the story, and lets the story be something that is shared, not something owned just by the Storyteller.

The shamanic nature of the storytelling event, and role-playing in shamanism

I would add to the above discussion of role-playing in storytelling, the following thoughts about 1) the shamanic nature of storytelling, and 2) role-playing as an aspect of shamanistic activity. The following comments apply even if one perceives spirits only as poetic and symbolic representations of aspects of self, other, and the universe.

A Shaman is one who mediates with other realms, other levels of consciousness and reality.

A Shaman may -- via his/her astral body, his/her imagination, etc -- travel into realms of spirit, dream, the divine, the unconscious, etc.

Or, as a result of a Shaman singing, chanting, and/or speaking the story of a supernatural character, this character may be perceived to temporarily inhabit the mind and body of the Shaman and/or of others present. In such cases, the act of narration is an act of invocation. A Shaman may also request such a character to occupy the body of him/herself or someone else present. This type of activity is known in English as "spirit possession".

Shamanism and storytelling (especially the telling of epics and myths) are closely related in many traditional societies: the telling of epics and myths in such societies often leads to the Storyteller and/or listeners experiencing "spirit possession".

Storytellers in general may be thought of as going on, and taking listeners on, "spirit journeys" to other realms, especially into realms of the imagination (possibly relating to individual and/or the collective unconscious). A Storyteller may also bring characters into the here and now, embodying them and putting listeners in the positions of these characters' conversation partners.

Regardless of the type of storytelling one might be doing, role-playing characters makes these characters real (at least in an imaginative sense), as the characters temporarily inhabit the Storyteller's and the listeners' selves and bodies. This role-playing of characters tends to make the emotions relating to the characters much more present and powerful, for the Storyteller and the listeners.

Dr Eric Miller directs the World Storytelling Institute (based in Chennai, www.storytellinginstitute.org).

For information about 1) role-playing in Psychodrama, 2) the Indian Institute of Psychodrama, and 3) the December 2013 Psychodrama Workshops in India, please see <http://tinyurl.com/plsz9ey> (Chennai Workshop), and <http://tinyurl.com/mpknfgr> (New Delhi Workshop).