

# **THE CRICK CRACK CLUB**

## **Assessment Criteria for Performance Storytelling**

**Prepared by Ben Haggarty, Artistic Director.**

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**[www.crickcrackclub.com](http://www.crickcrackclub.com)**

## Introduction

This paper gives an insight into the practical and aesthetic reasoning behind the choices the Crick Crack Club makes in deciding which artists we support and which events we choose to promote. The paper briefly introduces The Crick Crack Club as an organisation and then offers some definitions of performance storytelling, placing it as an intrinsically visible and therefore comparatively prominent sub-sector within the wider storytelling sector. We then present our assessment criteria as *ideals* both in terms of merit and value, and in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

## The Crick Crack Club

Formed in the autumn of 1987, the Crick Crack Club is a peripatetic 'stage' that specialises in creating high quality and distinctive public events for audiences, which simultaneously challenge artists to develop. We actively encourage the artists we work with to explore the limits of their repertoire and performance.

Our aim has always been to create conditions in which substantial public audiences of strangers are best able to hear stories that reflect the full spectrum of *traditional* narratives – from brief fables to lengthy epics and sacred mythology. In order to do this we have worked tirelessly to position ourselves so that we can try to stage events in conditions that offer optimum focus in terms of acoustics and silence, visual focus and audience comfort. In our experience these conditions are best provided by the formal neutrality of purpose-built theatre studios.

We have worked regularly with both of the capital's major Arts Centres, The South Bank Centre (1989 – 1999) and The Barbican Centre (2002 – 2010), along with dozens of regional arts centres, theatres and literature festivals. In 1993 we co-founded the Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival in Wales - and were responsible for selecting and programming the storytellers there until 2005. In London we currently programme regular public events at the Soho Theatre at the Rich Mix Arts Centre; and at the Forge Venue, Camden, as well as numerous one off events. We produce and run the biennial Festival of Fairytales for Grown-ups at the Bargehouse on London's South Bank. In addition, we programme events for a regional circuit of theatres and literature festivals. We are directly responsible for promoting an average of 100 public events per year in England and Wales. We also influence the programming of many other events.

The Crick Crack Club has always kept a watchful eye on the broader performance storytelling scene as it develops in Britain and abroad. In order to invigorate and influence the sector's continued progression, it has made numerous, considered strategic interventions – such as the organising of festivals and conferences, and the development of training and mentoring programmes.

As one of Europe's most experienced professional storytelling organisations, our ultimate priority is to promote what we consider to be *standard-setting* storytelling for our audiences and, over many years, we have developed a demanding and knowledgeable audience who have high expectations of our events. This means we are necessarily selective in the choice of artists we support and the shows we promote. We try to promote work that 'raises the bar' for the continuing development

of a critical audience for performance storytelling, which also challenges artists and inspires future storytellers.

## Preparing these Criteria

These criteria have been prepared by the Crick Crack Club in response to requests from performing arts promoters, funders and professional storytellers that we share our insights and articulate the reasoning behind our decision making processes. Contemporary performance storytelling is a relatively new area of performance, just over thirty years old. The assessment criteria for excellence in established performing art forms such as theatre or dance are deeply understood within the cultural sector and the professional arts training sector, as well as within education, academia and general society. In fact they are so deeply understood that they hardly need to be listed. The paradigms and praxis of performance storytelling are not so widely understood and there is almost no well-informed critical literature available on the subject.

Criteria are used for making relative critical judgements on scales that range from positive to negative. Whether codified or not, criteria lie behind the auditioning processes that govern all the professional performing arts. Preference directed purely by the vagaries of personal 'taste' is evidently subjective – but 'quality' is a more objective measure: one can recognise the intrinsic qualities of a work of art and the techniques and competencies that have produced it without necessarily liking it. To this end, the criteria outlined below are based as far as possible on identifiable technical skill sets – and it is for an experienced and knowledgeable assessor to recognise the subject's relative operational competencies and their capacity to excel in any given area of practice.

Although the following criteria are largely our own, developed as the result of 25 year's experience of pioneering and developing the sector, in 2010 we engaged in additional consultation with several other promoters, peer artists, emerging artists, and long term audience members to see if there are any aspects of creative integrity and professionalism which may have been overlooked and which should be included in this document. That said, these criteria pertain to the vision and values of the Crick Crack Club, and, although we do not presume to speak for the whole burgeoning sector (professional performance storytelling as differentiated from the amateur, folk, educational and community storytelling sectors, see below), their publication can be viewed as a contribution to the developing critical discourse around the subject.

## What is Performance Storytelling?

Terry Pratchett suggests<sup>1</sup> that the human ability to tell stories is so ubiquitous as to be species defining; he calls us 'Pan Narrans' - 'The Storytelling Ape'. Therefore we need to narrow down the range of the storytelling being discussed here. All the narrative arts could be termed 'storytelling' as almost all narratives can be 'told' through diverse media such as dance, theatre, cinema, illustration, printed prose, etc... This is an unmanageably general vision of storytelling. However, all art forms can be discussed in terms of 'form' (medium or process) and 'content', and, accordingly, the Crick Crack Club locates itself within a sector that narrows the medium of storytelling specifically to narratives told live, by word of mouth: i.e. through the oral medium of the spoken word (and, please note clearly that the 'spoken' word is not to be confused with the 'recited' *written* word). And when we say 'live' we mean it, our storytelling is not storytelling unless the audience and teller are

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Pratchett, 'The Science of Discworld II: The Globe' (2002)

sharing the same air. Within this sector we further ally ourselves to those focussing on a particular content, specifically, the corpus of traditional narratives that have been 'passed on' rather than autobiographical and biographical reminiscences or original or literary tales (though many of the artists we work with augment repertoires rooted in traditional material with both autobiographical and original material). This 'oral literature' – much of which has been transmitted in forms and patterns that are expressly designed to assist its further transmission - is found throughout the world. Classed by UNESCO as 'intangible cultural heritage', it originates in (generally) anonymous tradition, and consists of numerous distinct genres such as folktales, jokes, fairytales, epics and myths. Although this repertoire of traditional narratives is oceanic in its scope, it is a repertoire with a range that is possible to contend with over a lifetime.

In Britain, the storytelling sector with a principle focus on the oral retelling of traditional tales is fairly well developed and varied. Because the medium of oral storytelling is extremely versatile, the sector includes storytellers working in a rich range of contexts such as education, mental health, literacy development, second language attainment, social inclusion, heritage interpretation, prisoner rehabilitation, entertainment, refugee settlement, business training, retirement, community cohesion, etc. Storytellers working in these various 'sub-sectors' of the 'storytelling sector' therefore need to develop skill-sets that match the specific contexts in which they work. The storytellers range from keen amateur enthusiasts for whom it is an entertaining pastime; to those who use it as a secondary adjunct to a main profession (such as a teacher, librarian or psychotherapist); to those whose full time professional career is telling stories. It should be stated that the vast majority of professionally paid storytelling work that happens today is invisible to the broader public because it occurs in closed community, educational or private settings. However professional performance storytelling, because of its obvious need to attract the attention of a public audience, is rendered much more visible through the work of promoters and the professional marketing and publicity departments of the venues in which it occurs.

'Performance storytelling' is a term coined by Ben Haggarty in the early 1980's and is located in the 'Professional Public Arts and Entertainment' sector. As such it has been eligible to receive the support of Arts Council subsidy since 1984<sup>2</sup>. The phrase has gradually come to differentiate performance storytelling from 'folk and community' storytelling. Folk and community storytelling generally occurs in a range of less formal contexts and often in venues where there is a pre-existing sense of social community within the audience (such as in community centres, pub club rooms, village halls or indeed, educational establishments). Such storytelling tends to be carried out on an amateur basis or by professional or semi-professional folk and community arts amateurs who deploy skill sets appropriate for contexts which often necessitate different aims, emphases, values and aesthetics (both marked and nuanced) than those demanded by a more formal performance storytelling context. In practice though, very many professional storytellers work in both contexts, (particularly in terms of educational work) and although there are large areas of expertise where the skills demanded by both sector contexts clearly overlap, nevertheless the particular exigencies of each contrasting context sometimes call for significantly different, additional skills.

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<sup>2</sup> (Laurence Staig, then Literature Officer for the Eastern Arts Association was the first Arts Council representative to recognise professional storytelling as a distinct activity that fell under the remit of Literature).

The specific aim of performance storytellers is to formally entertain, with artistic integrity, paying audiences of strangers from purpose-built, professional stages (i.e arts centre, theatre and concert stages). It doesn't take a moment's thought to appreciate that the delivery of a two hour long solo show in such a context requires formidable mastery of considerable and particular skills. A successful performance storytelling event should be an inspired, emotionally engaging entertainment: at its best it can be a 'tour de force' – whereas a failed event will be, quite simply, boring.

## Critical Areas Examined

Unlike the performer of a theatrical 'one person show, the performance storyteller, as defined above, works without input from an external writer or director. Such storytellers are solo creative artists and like authors, comedians, painters and sculptors, they have sole responsibility for their work. The paradigm of performance storytelling demands that each performance has the freedom to be improvised in response to the audience and is not a fixed or set piece, (however, to be clear, the story itself is not being improvised i.e 'being made up as it goes along' – the improvisation lies in *the way* a composed and crafted plot is being told). The heart of a storyteller's creative challenge therefore lies in the simultaneous combination of the three separate functions of author, performer and director in one. At this point a slightly better word than 'director' might be introduced to describe the 'decision maker' who, knowing the whole story - its purpose, meaning and historical development - makes spontaneous deliberate choices affecting the areas of both performance *and* composition to produce intended results. The word, coined by Gotthold Lessing, is 'dramaturg'.

The praxis (from the Greek word meaning '*doing*') of most storytellers working in most of the sector contexts listed above, therefore falls into three core areas of work: Repertoire, composition and performance, and this document will explore these areas in the light of what we consider the aim of a professional performance storyteller to be, and that is: '*to deliver an inspired, emotionally engaging entertainment from a formal stage to an audience of paying strangers*'.

Simply beginning to master the highly varied skill sets that need to be developed in each of these three core areas takes at least five to seven years of full-time work - which is why the Crick Crack Club generally works only with either very experienced storytellers who have amassed a very great deal of live 'flying-time' with an audience, or with talented emerging storytellers that are either apprenticed to, or being mentored by, experienced performance storytellers. Having said this, 'naturals' (and even 'genii') occasionally appear, apparently born with all the necessary skills readily formed!

In addition to assessing key skills in these areas of performance storytelling praxis, the Crick Crack Club's criteria examine the *contract* established between performers and their audiences, as well as basic practical aspects such as presentation and the management of professional working relationships.

The criteria are presented in the form of nearly two hundred questions designed to spotlight competencies, skills, and expertise and signpost possible areas of weakness. These really are the sorts of considerations that a Crick Crack Club assessor has in his or her mind when watching a performance storyteller and listening to their work.

## Assessment Criteria for Performance Storytelling

### Repertoire

Performance storytelling is a *content* driven art form. The task of a performance storyteller is to entertain an audience with a narrative content that is largely unknown today, whereas it was once popular common currency. This is not the place to go into the multiple factors contributing to the decline of the oral tradition during the past three hundred years, but we now have a situation where public access to this specific corpus of narrative material is extremely limited. The publishing of the source material has been in drastic decline in Britain during the last 30 years and can now only be found in specialist libraries, second-hand books and on specialist internet sites. Even when it is found, such material often sits uncomfortably on the page, the language can be dated, and the content compromised by such things as bowdlerisation, overburdening personal or ideological agendas and censorship...

It's important to grasp that text was primarily used as means of recording oral narratives for preservation and therefore the status of that text is open to question. For example, when it comes to epic narratives, academic studies by Albert Lord, Milman Parry and their successors<sup>3</sup> have clearly demonstrated that these were never told through feats of prodigious 'rote' memorisation (a concept only conceivable to those familiar with literacy), rather each performance was a highly skilled improvisation, recreating much, if not all, the language that conveyed the story anew. This reveals that the real life of such stories has always been in the live exchange between people, where it can adapt to find renewed life and fresh meaning in the contemporary world. This challenging and difficult creative work results in an artistry that the Crick Crack Club is particularly keen to support.

Most storytellers have a *permanent* and ever growing repertoire. It is quite reasonable to expect that a storyteller, after a decade of work, will have committed the detailed plots of at least 200 stories to long-term memory and will be familiar with hundreds of other story patterns. A storyteller is therefore a walking 'library' and, as an ideal, should be able to find a story that seems to compliment almost any occasion imaginable.

A performance storyteller doing a one or two hour performance (or even longer) will either run a number of stories in sequence, combine stories under a framing device or the story will already be 'epic' in its length – with a single story or cycle being told. In addition some storytellers, despite the obvious fact that it may restrict their programming opportunities, specialise and dedicate themselves to becoming expert in a particular repertoire, for example an epic such as the Mahabharata, or a genre such as comedic folktales, or a repertoire linked exclusively to a single national or cultural heritage.

### Assessing Repertoire

Before promoting a piece of work the Crick Crack Club asks:

- Is the material well chosen?

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<sup>3</sup> c.f Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (1960) and the subsequent work of John Miles Foley, Director of the Centre for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri.

- Is it well researched?
- Is there an audience for it?
- Does the artist understand its place in the canon of traditional narratives? Is the diffusion of the story understood?
- Is the storyteller aware of others who may be working with the same material? If so, what are they bringing to the telling that is distinctive?

Also

- Sometimes the performers are chosen because they are working with culturally specific material or else they are masters of a specific genre.

It goes without saying that the assessor should be sympathetic to the form and content of traditional narratives. The assessor needs to be 'well versed in' and very familiar with, the broad canon of oral narratives; for example, there are many recognisable robust variations of basic narrative patterns commonly known as 'International Tale Types' and it's always interesting to see how these have been approached. Many contain testing compositional and performative challenges...

In an ideal situation the assessor ought to be familiar with the narrative being told in its 'primary source' state (if such a record exists), so that he or she can determine and appreciate how much of the composition witnessed is the result of the artist's own work.

When the Crick Crack Club takes an overview of the versatility of a performer's complete repertoire, we consider such questions as:

- Does it include a broad and flexible range of different narrative genres? i.e from jokes and fables to wonder tales and myths, etc.
- Does the range of their repertoire cover many moods and evoke different worlds? i.e from metaphorical and magical to naturalistic and literal.
- Does their repertoire include short and long stories?
- Where there is specialisation, does the storyteller's choice of repertoire limit him or her to being a one trick pony? (Though it might of course be an excellent trick!)
- Can the storyteller contextualise their choice of story?

**Negative aspects of story choice that we look out for include:**

- Is the material dull, obvious, weak, poorly researched, bowdlerised, obscure, pretentious, contrived, artificial, fake...?
- Has the story been 'stolen'? Does it feel 'stolen'?

There is a paradox in working with tradition, in that (most of) the material is an ancestral heritage that belongs to all humankind, yet the storyteller's etiquette or 'honour code' demands that storytelling be an interpretative art form and that each individual adapts the material to make it his or her 'own'. Some storytellers, particularly novices, find it hard to separate the 'story' (plot) from another teller's ornamentation of the story and their compositional work. This means that the assessor needs to be aware of the work of as many artists across the sector as possible in order to recognise whether or not a story and its performance has been lifted 'lock, stock and barrel' from another artist.

They also need to know stories well enough to be able to spot what unique compositional work a storyteller has done (see composition below).

- Is the material something the storyteller really wants to tell? Or has the choice of material actually been determined by pragmatic financial considerations – such as an ‘easy sell’ or ease of securing funding?
- If a traditional narrative is being told, is the storyteller serving the material or is it only being appropriated as a vehicle to deliver personal agendas or political, religious and other ideological propaganda, etc?
- Is the storyteller contributing fresh material to the collective pool of oral literature in current circulation or simply feeding from it? Are they ‘paying their dues’ to the development of the sector by helping to research and revive little known or dormant material?
- It should be noted that claims to possess a large repertoire don’t necessarily indicate the storyteller’s ability to perform all that repertoire immediately and with consistent quality.

## Composition

The art of storytelling is interpretive. The storyteller retells previously existing stories, but reshapes them extensively according to his or her own individuality and creativity to make their own version.

The process of ‘spinning the yarn’ afresh, consists of many steps including researching primary sources and variants, the deconstruction, editing and recombination of stories; temporal, geographical and cultural translocation; the merging of multiple versions, traditional tropes, images and motifs with original material, and imbuing it all with subjective insights and values. The Crick Crack Club likes to work with artists who are highly individualistic and who are clearly saying something unique through their resulting work. Paradoxically, the fact that contemporary audiences are generally unfamiliar with this material can be used to immense positive advantage.

The storyteller’s main tool is their imagination and we consider performers as much for their ability to convey the quality of their imagination through their compositional skills as for their performative skills.

In a genuinely oral culture, composition has two basic stages. The first is ‘deep structural composition’ – deciding what happens in the story and how. This requires a clear understanding that *the story is not the words – it is the plot*. The second stage is the spontaneous composition, in performance, of the actual words spoken to communicate the story in response to the response of an audience. This can be termed ‘surface text’<sup>4</sup>.

Today, the reality that much of our contemporary society is literate, gives rise to (at least) two polarities in terms of the creation of the communicative language and surface text that a performance storyteller’s audience hears... and a spectrum flows between them. At one end is the orality of the genuine spoken word – extemporised in the moment and responsive to the audience; at the other end lies, literally, self-scripted work - the recitation of crafted writing. In between lie degrees of surface texts that have become more, or less, ‘fixed’ by oral repetition. Individual contemporary performance storytellers work across this entire range according to their type and inclination.

However it is important to underline that The Crick Crack Club does not consider the verbatim recitation of a text authored by someone *other* than the storyteller to be storytelling at all – as it completely ignores the self-expressive compositional, element of the praxis. Text recital of another’s writing is an aspect of an *actor’s* work with narrative monologue. To cite an obvious example, Dario Fo is undoubtedly a storyteller, but someone performing Dario Fo’s scripts is an actor.

## Assessing Composition

The assessor needs to be attuned to the work behind both the composition of the story and the language that he or she is hearing. The assessor needs to understand the difference between written and spoken language use.

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<sup>4</sup> A J Greimas (1917 – 1992) worked with Roland Barthes to develop an approach to semiotics. He distinguishes ‘deep structural narrative’ from ‘surface text’. He applied his studies to Lithuanian myths.

The storyteller's aim is to awaken their story's full capacity to be interesting (appealing and accessible without compromise). It should express meaning (even if that meaning is absurd); be clear, dramatic and lively – and have space to include and respond to the audience.

### **Deep Structural Composition**

- Have primary sources been studied?
- Have a multiplicity of variants been considered and choices been made accordingly?
- How has the material been sequenced?
- Has the emotional life and latent drama of the story been fully recognised and released?
- How have patterns been treated? Added, discarded, played with, etc?
- What techniques of adaptation such as deconstruction, recombination, and translocation have been used?
- Has the material been adequately 'harmonised and synchronised'?
- What work has been done on the story's metaphorical levels?
- How has it been given dramatic pacing? By, for example, the use of juxtaposition, set up, reveal and reincorporation?
- How has the narrative been 'chaptered'?
- Has the length of time the story takes to tell been managed appropriately? Has it been padded or glossed over?
- Has metaphorical imagery been harnessed appropriately to maximise emotional mood?
- Has space for the audience response been incorporated? For example, by the overt use of interrogatives, cumulative participation or call and response?
- How is humour achieved? By the internal events of plot and character, by the external commentary of the narrator or by both?
- Are humorous 'gags' well conceived?
- How are archetypes and stereotypes used?
- How are expectations played with? For example, have opportunities to subvert them been explored?
- How intentionally nuanced is the piece?

### **Language Composition**

- Is the text improvised spoken word or recited writing?
- How dextrous is the use of language? Is the language used appropriately, precisely and effectively? Is it articulate?
- Is the vocabulary and language use both expressive and 'true' (authentic) to the storyteller?
- Does it have appropriate wit?
- Are the technical functions between different types of language understood? For example, the difference between reported speech and direct speech or the different effects achieved by using different tenses?
- How deft is exposition?
- Are dialogues convincing?
- How is idiomatic and vernacular language used?
- Does the language have the qualities of written language or of oral language? (Typical attributes of oral language are sonic, kinetic or physical: c.f rhyme,

alliteration, assonance, repetition and listing. Literary language, particularly in styles evolved for silent, solitary reading, necessarily compensates for the absence of the body and is therefore heavy in adverbial and adjectival use.)

- Are oral devices such as 'ranns'<sup>5</sup> and 'accumulations' used well?
- Is the language rhythmic and related to the storyteller's physicality?
- Does the combination of narrative structure and spontaneous language contain both dramatic and poetic sensibilities appropriate to the nature of the story?
- How is rhetoric deployed?
- If the 'surface text' is crafted script, how free is the storyteller to adapt their performance according to audience response?

### **Compositional Weak points to be wary of:**

#### **Structural**

- Unclear and confusing structural composition
- Visible 'stitching'
- Unconsidered loose ends
- Overworked/Underworked material
- Anachronism
- Contrivance
- Gratuitous (as opposed to purposeful) shocks
- Repetitiveness (rather than play)
- Didacticism

#### **Linguistic**

- Arbitrary use of tense
- Slavish attachment to script
- Disregard of audience response
- Vague or lazy language use (e.g: 'great, big, huge')
- Disparate language quality between 'scripted' and 'ad libbed' work
- Pseudo literary language; 'purple' prose, affectation and over ornamentation.
- Cheap commentary that undermines the values of the story
- Cheap commentary in general
- Humour at the expense of the material

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<sup>5</sup> *Rann* - a repeated recited refrain, from the Gaelic word for a verse stanza.

## Performance

Once the story has been chosen and its deep structure composed, then it needs to be performed. The paradigm of storytelling embraces the audience – the storyteller being the mediator of the story. As no two audiences are the same, the storyteller is invited, every time the story is told, to improvise the retelling of the story uniquely and specifically for the listeners – and this happens to a greater or lesser extent depending on how often the story has been told. In this way the storyteller tries to dissipate any barriers between the performer and the audience (popularly referred to as the ‘fourth wall’ – after Diderot) and allow the dynamic between the triad of story, storyteller and audience to influence the telling of the story. This requires a thorough knowledge of the story; versatility; the willingness and courage to take risks, and technical dexterity. A dramaturgical instinct guides both the pacing and shaping of the narrative, and simultaneously the timing and delivery of the performance. This ‘Dramaturg’ or ‘Self-Director’ works at *incredible* speed making spontaneous, conscious decisions about what is being said and how, and about what the body is showing at any given moment, how and where, in relationship to space, audience and narrative arc. Every skill, trick and technique the storyteller can muster is put to service of the story – in order that it be told clearly and well, creating a satisfying, well-paced entertainment that interests the mind, convinces the senses and engages the emotions.

## Assessing Performance

Much of what has been said above about repertoire and composition, could apply to all the sub-sectors of storytelling, however a performance storyteller has ambition to work for two hours, solo, ideally without amplification, on a formal theatre stage for audiences of between 100 and 500 strangers who have paid to attend. Therefore the promoter and the audience and any funders, are obliged to ask, ‘what are we paying a performance storyteller for?’ The Crick Crack Club would suggest it is excellence in their choice of story, their artistic take on it, and their ability to create a successful performance event around it. At the very least this means the performer has to be able to command the space, with the volume of their voice and the physicality of their presence. This means that the performer has to possess appropriate stagecraft: technical knowledge of how to move, how to be heard and how to use a space, and dramatic knowledge of how every sound or movement made (including silence and stillness), both serves the story and affects the audience. The ideal is that the performance should appear natural, flowing and free - almost effortless, yet the audience should also have the subtle sensation that such magic is only possible because controlled technique and much work lies behind it: in other words - that the storyteller has done something that the audience could not have done.

It should be noted that the majority of the storytellers that the Crick Crack Club promotes have some sort of performing arts training in their background and most have been working with the narrative arts from a very young age. The decision to become an artist has been an early career choice...

- Is the storyteller at ease on the given stage? Are they confident? Can they ‘wear’ the stage?
- Do they have ‘presence’?
- Is he or she fully visible?
- Is he or she fully audible?

- Do they have activated attention?
- Do they have technique?
- Can they access, control and release energy as required on demand?
- Do they have 'attack'?
- How are poise, pause and silence used?
- Do they have the stamina and sense of pacing to hold the stage for two hours on their own?
- Are they versatile?
- Do they have a ready command of the material, the stage and the audience?
- Are they able to create consistent geographies on and from the stage?
- Do they have a light touch? Playfulness?
- Can they create rapport and complicity with the audience? Can they work with interrogative call and response?
- Do they have good 'timing' in the delivery of jokes, visual gags, dramatic shocks and reveals?
- Can they make spontaneous decisions and follow them through? Are they quick-witted?
- During improvisation, from what variety of perspectives is the story being told?
- How is 'cinematic' visualisation being used in the composition, for example, the use of subjective camera, long shots, tracking shots, close ups, cuts and juxtapositions?
- Do they have corporeal expressiveness? Can they be both grandly expressive and contained?
- Are they aware of all the movements they are making and their meaning?
- Can they clearly distinguish movement and gesture variously assigned to direction, spatial depiction, character, narrator, etc
- Can they use both stillness and movement?
- Are they a competent mime?
- Are they able to be equally precise in language and physicality?
- Words do what words do; the body says what the body says. Are these two languages combined economically and supportively without duplication or redundancy?
- Do they have a deft ability to handle character/narrator exchanges?
- Can they suggest distinct characters? Are they a good mimic?
- Are they in command of body rhythms and vocal inflections?
- Do they have vocal range? In terms of volume, pitch and timbre?
- Do they have a fluid/ready command of language?
- Does their manner hold respect for the audience, the material and the occasion?
- Do they inhabit the story? Is the story alive inside the storyteller?
- If music is being used, how is it being used?
- Is the possibility of song present?
- If props or objects are being used, how are they being used?
- If lighting is being used, how is it being used?
- If set is being used, how is it being used?
- If costume is being used, how is it being used?

**Weaknesses to look out for:**

- Static
- Stiff

- Casual
- Mannered
- Complacency
- Passively formulaic
- Unconscious physical 'ticks'
- Poor command of energy, lack of stamina
- 'Auto pilot'
- Rigid adherence to preconceived text, routines and gags
- Monotonous
- Inaudible
- Artifice/Artificiality
- Pretentiousness
- Vanity/Narcissism
- Timidity
- Unconsidered illustrative movement
- Redundant gestures or language
- Over realised characterisation/bad 'acting'
- Weak mime
- Exclusion of the audience
- Alienation of the audience
- Poor placing on the stage
- Blurred or smudged character/narrator exchanges.
- Poor pacing and timing
- The unintended triggering of a 'Fourth Wall' – which turns an audience of listeners, completing a story within themselves, into spectators watching a spectacle on a stage.

## The Contract with the Audience

In order to succeed, performance storytelling demands possibly more active attention from a formal audience than any other performing art.

A storytelling performance should be witnessed as a raw and immediate *mediation* of intangible cultural heritage and narrative artwork. Some of the artworks in this repertoire are very powerful and extremely ancient: they could be termed 'psychic artefacts' and have the potential to overwhelm and occupy the audience's imagination, transporting them into different, liminal worlds. Through conjury and evocation, a storyteller's work suggests whole worlds – but these have to be completed in real time, within the audience's imaginations by whatever inner resources they can bring to bear to the situation. This points to a fundamental difference between theatre and storytelling: whereas in theatre the story generally happens as something to observe on the stage – in storytelling, the story actually happens *inside* each individual audience member. The sense conveyed by the words and gestures is completed within the audience imagination by what they individually have to bring in response to those words and signals - the experience is co-created.

The process of storytelling has also evolved around a potential act of transmission of ownership. It is generally a solo art form – one person transmits everything in the story. As a result of the internalisation inherent in the experience of hearing the story, it has the potential of being carried away by the listener, who is also one person, to be retold. In this way an ambiguous, yet generous, communality of ownership surrounds storytelling

All the above means that the process of oral storytelling is centred upon the induction of mild hypnotic states (states of entrancement/enchantment/wonder - which imply fundamentally altered states of consciousness)<sup>6</sup>. In a large venue with a large audience this involves mass hypnosis and a huge play of energy. Both performer and audience are working with the flow of their attention. To keep the mass attention of strangers alive, with little more than a story, a voice and a body, requires great presence, skill and agility otherwise boredom will, all too readily, bite. To bore an audience is to waste their time.

## Assessing the Contract with the Audience

The mutual investment of attention means that, from the moment the audience meets the storyteller, a contract of trust and complicity has to be rapidly established between them, because the audience members are ultimately going to permit the storyteller to place a potentially powerful story right inside them.

- Is the work engaging and entertaining?
- How is overt and subtle call and response managed?
- Is the audience in a safe and appealing pair of hands? Will they be returned from wherever they might be taken to? Will that journey have been worthwhile?
- Has the story been overburdened by an unwelcomed or unwarranted personal or ideological agenda?
- Is the storyteller in some subtle way repelling the audience? Are they abusing the power of being the centre of so much attention? Are they manipulative,

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<sup>6</sup> The Enchanted Imagination: Storytelling's Power to Entrance Listeners  
Prof Brian W. Sturm, AASL Journal Vol 2 1999

needy, neurotic, preachy, sanctimonious, smug, offensive, aggressive? Are they on stage merely because they want to be liked?

- Are they confident? Lack of confidence within the performer creates a lack of confidence in the audience.
- Is the storyteller his or her 'self' (albeit an enhanced or 'super' self)? Are they playing an intentional and purposeful role in a consensual game? Or have they adopted a false persona? Where is the truth in all this? Are they deceitful?
- Is spending time in their presence worthwhile?

## Presentation

The contract between the storyteller and the audience is partly signalled by the presentation of the event.

A performance storyteller with ambitions to work in a formal theatre, needs to be able to respect the expectations of a formal theatre audience and accept the paradigm of the venue. Although there is much play to be had in subtly subverting the traditional conventions of performance in a theatre, many of these traditions have evolved for a reason. One recurring example, which highlights this, is the use of houselights. Some storytellers, whose skills have perhaps been honed through daylight work in educational and community settings, unaccustomed to not being able to see the faces of their audiences in a formal theatre, propel the audience out of their comfort zone by leaving the houselights on. However, survey evidence demonstrates an overwhelming preference of audiences to be seated in the dark at performance storytelling events<sup>7</sup>. This is an organic preference as humanity has been listening to stories from the shadows since time immemorial, the teller illumined by firelight. For a storyteller to turn the lights on a theatre audience is to reject the very purpose of the specially constructed venue and the contractual context they have consented to work in. Instead the storyteller needs to develop new skills and learn how to adapt their performance to the new paradigm – just as comedians bedazzled by spotlights learn how not to let on that they are blinded by the lights, so storytellers need to learn to sense their audience by *listening* to them. Tradition models overt "Crick?" and "Crack!" and other more oblique forms of interrogative call and response, which make the audience audible. Furthermore, developing technical knowledge can help storytellers develop a 'work around' – bouncing lighting from the stage floor onto the audience (for example) will leave the audience feeling enclosed in darkness, whilst placing them in some light.

- What is the storyteller wearing? Is he or she fully aware of the semiotic significances of their appearance? Is it considered or casual? Which world is it appropriate to: the world of the event, the world of the storyteller or the world of the story - one or another; all or none?
- What is on the stage? Is there a set? Is it of appropriate quality? How are objects handled on the stage? How do set and objects relate to the performance – do they add anything, do they detract?
- How is lighting used?
- Can the storyteller sense the audience despite the discomfort of not seeing it?

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<sup>7</sup> A 2010 Crick Crack Club internet survey revealed that 96% of over 200 audience respondents preferred to be enveloped by the dark during a performance rather than have houselights turned up. 2% had no preference and the 2% that preferred to be in the light turned out to be, themselves, storytellers...

- How has the marketing (provided by the performer) served the event? Did the performance match the audience expectations raised by the marketing?

## Professionalism

As a promoting organisation there are also practical considerations that bear on the Crick Crack Club's choices.

- Can the storyteller carry out the basic administrative aspects of their work with procedural thoroughness? Do they read their contracts? Do they have the necessary insurances, etc? Can they provide the venue with appropriate technical requirements in advance, etc?
- Can the storyteller provide effective and necessary marketing materials, images, and copy for press and publicity?
- Are they reliable? Are they self-sufficient? Do they have a reputation for being 'low' or 'high' maintenance? If they are high maintenance, is the maintenance worth the effort?
- Are they capable of managing time – from arriving at the venue punctually to ending their performance on time?
- Can they work professionally with venue staff, such as the technical and front of house teams?
- Do they have a sense of the place of their work and repertoire within the wider performance storytelling sector?
- Do they have firsthand experience of the work of their peers?



## Conclusion

Inevitably the cumulative effect of listing these criteria results in the expression of an extraordinary ideal and I don't think there's a single artist with whom the Crick Crack Club works that can actually do all of these things; however I believe we work with many artists who can do much of this or who are developing in such a way that they will be able to... As with any set of criteria, there will always be brilliant exceptions to any rule; so it should be said that some artists, depending on their nature and type, also work purely instinctively and wouldn't even consider analysing their work in these terms, but there are those who very consciously do. And then there are yet again others who are fortunate beneficiaries of the continuity of the distinctive cultural modelling of surviving traditional oral linguistic and performative styles - such as those prevalent in Ireland and the Caribbean.

Despite the emphasis on using relatively objective skill based criteria to guide decision making, it is nevertheless also the prerogative and responsibility of an organisation with an Artistic Director responsible for its vision and viability, to determine its own aesthetic values, create a recognisable 'house style' and develop and sustain its audiences. This means the Crick Crack Club has aesthetic preferences that favour repertoires and performance styles that are magical, dramatic, epic, cathartic, catholic, and cosmopolitan.

Given the above overview of the research, compositional and performance skills required by a storyteller who wishes to perform successfully on the sort of public stages the Crick Crack Club seeks to provide, it is evident that performance storytelling is a demanding art. Those who harbour ambition to stand on these, or similar, stages need to understand that to do so requires talent and technique, the commitment of effort and studious dedication over a long period of time and a palpable love for the material. There is no place for complacency or laziness and in truth those who can do it really well are few and rare individuals, yet where we sense talent and potential we try to nurture it as best we can.

The deciding factor as to whether The Crick Crack Club chooses to invest work in someone – the ‘X’ factor, if you must – is whether he or she possesses a masterful and lively combination of physical presence, intelligence and skill placed in service of a burning passion to tell a great traditional tale, convinced that whatever is being expressed through it, is worthwhile. This can appear in several forms.

- Does the storyteller have an engaging personality, charisma or ‘super-self’? Would one wish to spend two hours in their hands?
- Does the storyteller have the spirit of an artist? Are they driven by the artistic imperative? Do they take nothing for granted? Are they creative, questioning and able? Are they inspired?
- Does the storyteller value the sense of occasion attached to being in the highly privileged position of standing before a paying audience of strangers? Do they understand the myriad responsibilities that this situation entails?

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*The ideas contained within this document represent a key element of Ben Haggarty’s book ‘The Secret Art of the Storyteller’, which is currently in preparation.*

## Ben Haggarty

Ben Haggarty is a performance storyteller with a repertoire of over 350 traditional narratives ranging from 3 minute fables to 3 hour epics. This repertoire includes many versions of Indo-European wondertales, the Fionn MacCumhiall cycle, The epic of Gilgamesh and modern myths such as Frankenstein and Mr Sandmann: Bringer of Dreams and Nightmares. He has been a guest artist in over one hundred International Storytelling Festivals in 25 countries.

He trained with Welfare State International theatre as their first 'apprentice Image Maker' in 1978 and at East 15 Acting School as a Theatre Director in 1979. He counts the writers, Alan Garner and PL Travers and the Theatre Director, Peter Brook among his mentors.

In 1981 he founded Britain's first professional storytelling organisation, The West London Storytelling Unit, which pioneered multicultural storytelling work, mainly in educational contexts, until 1985. In 1985, WLSTU was disbanded and along with Hugh Lupton and Sally Pomme Clayton, Ben Haggarty formed The Company of Storytellers which pioneered the touring of professional storytelling for adult audiences in Arts Centres and Theatres for 15 years. He organised, directed and curated, Britain's first storytelling festival at Battersea Arts Centre in 1985. This week long event was followed in 1987 by a further 7 day festival at Waterman's Arts Centre, and a 15 day festival at the South Bank Centre in 1989. These groundbreaking festivals were highly successful and international in their scope.

In 1987 Ben Haggarty founded the Crick Crack Club – a peripatetic venue that creates events to showcase and develop performance storytelling. As well as working with dozens of regional arts centres and festivals, it programmed regular events at the South Bank Centre from 1989 – 2000 and at the Barbican Pit Theatre from 2002 – 2010. The Crick Crack Club currently programmes monthly events at the Soho Theatre, an annual three-week family season at the Unicorn Children's Theatre, and programmes events in a national circuit of regional theatres and arts centres.

In 1993 Ben Haggarty co-founded and co-directed the annual Beyond the Border Wales International Storytelling festival in Wales and curated the storytelling programme until 2005. In 1997 he set up an experimental research studio at his home in Worcestershire, where, each year, selected students and groups of emerging artists gather to study performance storytelling in depth.

In 1985 he was involved with the selection of stories for Jim Henson & Anthony Minghella's children's television series 'The Storyteller'. From 1987 – 1992 he was a consultant for the SCDC National Oracy Project. During the 1990's he made research trips to India and Central Asia to study Epic Singing traditions. From 1995 until its restructuring in 2008, Ben Haggarty was the British Council Literature Department's specialist advisor on Storytelling. In 1999 he was one of four featured storytellers in a 90 minute television documentary about the world wide storytelling revival made by ARTE in France. From 2001 - 2011, Ben Haggarty was the official storyteller with Yo Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble in the USA. In 2007 he was appointed Honorary Professor of Storytelling at the Arts University of Berlin (UDK). Ben's graphic novel, 'MeZolith', was published by Random House in 2010. This exploration of the archaeology of the imagination was selected as TheTimes' Graphic Novel of the Year 2010.

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The ideas contained within this document represent a key element of Ben Haggarty's book *'The Secret Art of the Storyteller'* which is currently in preparation.