



Stories that Move

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“Relevé, little matches! Stand on your tippy toes!”

My teacher, Miss Yumeko, calls out to us. I am 5 years old, wearing a red tutu, in the dress rehearsal for my first ballet performance. It is an ensemble piece based on *the Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen. I am one of the matches, along with four other girls. A pretty 12-year-old is playing the title role. Two tall boys are acting as the Christmas Trees. The 3 and 4 year olds are the Turkeys.

“Don’t just stick out your arms! Reach out with your hearts!”

I am loving it. I love the story, the sweetness and the tragedy of it all. I love the music, especially the tinkling high notes that mark my entrance. Having taken the lessons for only about six months, I am so proud to be a match!

I stand high on my toes trying not to wobble. I extend my right hand, palm up, toward the Match Girl, imagining that my eyes and my heart are attached to my fingertips.

“Good, Motoko!”

The teacher, dressed as the beautiful Grandmother, smiles at me. Suddenly I feel as if curtains parted in my head, and a wonderful secret is revealed to me.

I understood why I was doing what I was doing. By being a little unsteady on the tip of my toes I was expressing the flickering of my flame, threatening to go out any moment. With my arm reaching out and chest thrust upward I was yearning to burn longer, just as the Match Girl longed for happiness. My dance as a little match was a metaphor for the Girl’s life and destiny.



Of course being only five I could not articulate any of this. Yet in my young mind I clearly saw the connection between the narrative (story) and the kinesthetic (movement.) This was such an epiphany that a profound joy rose inside me.

Looking back, it was that moment that I found the flame of my passion, which continues to burn today.

The moment humankind moved beyond its most primal mode of communication (“Danger!” or “Food!”) and began exchanging ideas and emotions, storytelling was born. For the survival of humans, stories are as essential as food and water. We live on stories in order to make sense out of the chaotic world. This need to recognize, seek out, and appreciate stories is indeed what makes us human.

Not all art requires narrative, but there are those of us who treasure characters and setting, plot and morals, conflict and resolution, the hero’s journey and the powerful feminine. We call ourselves storytellers.

Sometimes an everyday language would not suffice for our ideas, feelings, and emotions. Throughout history we have enriched our work in order to more effectively entertain, educate, motivate, and inspire. Our means can roughly be divided into four categories:

1. Literary (through crafted use of language in various genres)
2. Vocal and Musical (by using character voices, sounds, songs, and instrumental music)
3. Kinesthetic (through dance, movement, mime, acting)
4. Visual (by using costumes, props, puppets, masks, lighting, pictures)

While some of us may feel more affinity toward one category over another, everyone has the ability to appreciate all four.



In a live storytelling performance, the audience is constantly guided by the four elements coming from your presence. Even if you don't sing, dance, or wear a costume, the audience listens to the tone and resonance of your voice, and watches the way you stand, turn your head, or raise your hand. Your height or hairdo may distract them, or help them get deeper into the story. They can read you like a book. (How frightening, yet exhilarating, is that?)

I am 20, an exchange student at the University of Massachusetts. Although I am a poli-sci major, I am looking for a dance class to take just for fun. I stumble into a classroom, where a handsome, wiry, dark-haired man is demonstrating to a small group of students something I have never seen before.

He lifts his hands and freezes them in the air, palms flat and facing outward. Suddenly I see an invisible wall in front of him!

"That's what I'm going to do for the rest of my life!" I gasp.

The next thing I know, I am sitting only 5 feet away from him, trying to absorb everything he does. It is truly love at first sight.

The teacher's name was Jody Scalise, a nationally known performer of mime and circus acts. From him I learned basics in mime illusions, juggling, and clowning. I went on to study with more great teachers, including Kiyoshi Shimizu of Tokyo, Rob Rivest of Massachusetts, and late master mime Tony Montanaro (1927-2002).

The art of mime includes the whole gamut of expression from abstract, dance-like ("corporeal") articulation to Marceau-style, silent theatrical storytelling to improvisational clowning with focus on interaction with the audience. While I admire the whole spectrum, I am naturally most attracted to character work in which the physical movement embodies the narrative. I love creating and telling stories without words, often playing multiple characters.

Meanwhile my partner Eshu Bumpus introduced me to the world of American storytelling. I began telling folktales in schools, using mime to illustrate my stories.



Children love mime! Many young people today feel uncomfortable and awkward about their own bodies, and meaningful, live physical expressions are unusual and refreshing to them. And of course they love stories! As I watch them listening to me I can sense their multiple intelligences actively engaged. I know they do not get that from watching TV at home.

As I expand my repertoire and my audience, I have come to use a few guidelines for incorporating mime and movement into a story.

1. The story comes first.

Everything I do must serve the story, and each story demands different things. My job is to take my audience on a journey into the world of the story, not to distract them with “the clever things I can do.” I would like my stories to have their own merit with or without movement, songs, or props.

I go by what my teacher Tony used to say, that movement you use must either (a) provide a beautiful image that helps the audience into the story, or (b) move the story forward, or (c) reveal something about a character.

2. Develop physical vocabulary, not “techniques.”

Tony also said that once you fully imagine your characters and understand their situations and objectives, the correct “techniques” will follow. Gestures and movement should be a natural and effortless demonstration of your (or your character’s) soul. By exploring your soul (or your character’s) you will widen your range of physical expression. This will allow you to go beyond the limits of techniques for a particular art form (ballet, for example) and develop your own rich physical vocabulary. As a storyteller I hope to continue to grow more eloquent, verbally and physically.

3. Look for gestures that work as a metaphor.



When I mime an invisible wall, I realize that it is not just a wall of a castle in a fairytale, but a symbol of all obstacles we may encounter in our own lives. When I mime flying as a bird, it is not just the specific bird in a fable but the bird in all of us, yearning for freedom. In my telling of Japanese folktale *Urashima the Fisherman*, I mime as the character of the fisherman sipping water out of a bottle. He finds the bottle empty, and it shows that his life is empty, devoid of nourishment and excitement.

I prize these moments of revelation, when a physical action deepens my understanding of the text, and spend hours exploring them in rehearsals. In performance, the gestures form subtle clues that audience reads clearly, if subliminally. This helps the audience connect with the story at a more profound and meaningful level.

“Old Woman and Mosquito,” I announce in my broken Mandarin. I feel the gaze of 300 Chinese villagers and 40 American storytellers fixed upon me.

It is the fall of 2006. I am visiting China as part of an international storytelling and cultural exchange tour. We are in the traditional storytelling village of Gencun, about 200 miles south of Beijing. After several days of swapping tales in small groups with the village master tellers, we are now in their public event hall holding a special concert for the whole community.

Communication in rural China can be a formidable task. Because many village elders only speak their traditional dialect, we have two groups of translators: local librarians to translate the dialect to Mandarin, and guides from Beijing who speak great English. Thanks to their hard work, we have managed to learn a great deal from each other. The process is at times cumbersome and frustrating. The atmosphere however is buoyant, filled with the people’s goodwill and love of stories.

It is my turn to tell, and I want to create a small occasion for everyone to forget the language differences and relax. What better thing to do than mime?



I proceed to tell a simple 3-minute story without words. An old woman is awakened from her nap by a buzzing mosquito. She goes crazy trying to slap it and spraying it with pesticide. The mosquito begs for mercy, explaining that she has many children to feed. Finally, the old woman, feeling sympathy, lets the mosquito go.

The 300 Chinese villagers and 40 American storytellers all laughed, sighed, and applauded at exactly the same time! What a delicious moment!!