



## **Finding Your Own Voice: A Storyteller's Process**

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*Once there was a king who had twelve daughters, who escaped their locked chamber every night unbeknownst to anyone. In the morning twelve pairs of dancing shoes, completely worn out, were found at the foot of their beds. Perplexed, the king proclaimed that any man who could discover his daughters' secret within three nights would marry one of them and inherit his kingdom.*

*A poor soldier came across an old woman in the woods. She gave him an invisibility cloak and told him about the king's promise. The soldier went to the palace and, pretending to be asleep, kept an eye on the princesses. He saw them escape through a trap door on the floor. He donned the cloak and followed. The passage led them to a magical land underground, where the princesses danced all night with handsome princes in a splendid castle.*

*For three nights the soldier followed the twelve princesses and brought back precious objects from the magical kingdom as a proof. He presented them to the king and told him what he had seen. The princesses admitted to the truth. The soldier married the eldest princess and became the heir to the kingdom.*

The Oklahoma City Storytelling Festival, formerly known as WinterTales, has a unique feature. It is a workshop called "Finding Your Own Voice," in which three featured tellers each tell their own version of the same folk or fairy tale, and discuss their methods and techniques for putting their own "voice" into the story. In July of 2009, Susan Klein of Massachusetts, Kevin Kling of Minnesota and I agreed to work with "the Twelve Dancing Princesses," a German fairy tale originally published by the Brothers Grimm, to present it in September.

At first I was not without apprehension. I had little experience working with a European fairy tale, and the prospect of having my work compared with those of such luminaries as Susan and Kevin seemed daunting. In addition, the idea of a deadline in two months worried me, although the festival's contract did say, "The story may be developed to any degree of completion, as the emphasis is on process rather than product."



I said to myself, however, “A group of story lovers in Oklahoma is waiting for me to tell this story in such a way that no one else can.” That sounded like such an enchanting promise that I set my insecurity aside and got down to work.

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My first step was to read several different versions of the tale. I started with the Grimm’s, and moved on to Andrew Lang’s in *The Red Fairy Book*, in which the soldier is replaced by a cowherd. I also read Patricia A. McKillip’s thoughtful adaptation in the anthology *A Wolf at the Door*, in which the princesses were lured by the vengeful ghosts of men who had been killed by the king. I listened to a colleague tell Kate Crackernuts, the story of the Scottish heroine’s rescue of a dancing prince. (From Wikipedia I even found that there is a Barbie movie version, although I did not watch it.)

Then I started asking questions about the tale and brainstorming with my partner Eshu Bumpus. Why twelve princesses, instead of one or three? What was the meaning of their escape? What did the dance symbolize? What had happened to the girls’ mother? Who was the old lady in the woods? Did the hero marry the princess out of love, or out of greed? Whose point of view should I tell the story from? In a free-form exchange we came up with some hilarious ideas, such as “the Twelve Pole-Dancing Princesses,” whose sexualities were so repressed by their father that they would go to an underground night club to dance the night away!

After much musing I began to make some decisions. First I chose to use just one princess, in order to make her a fully individual character. (Twelve connotes abundance, but it also reduces most of them into objects without personality, except for the oldest and the youngest princesses.) Then I decided that the princess’ dance was the symbol for the freedom from her father’s control. The old woman in the woods would be the spirit of her deceased mother, who picked out the particular young man to love and help her daughter. I would make him a cowherd, someone who nurtures, instead of a soldier.

Next came the most crucial choice. I decided to set the whole story in ancient China, and use foot-binding as a symbol for women’s oppression.



Many years ago I had learned that the oldest version of “Cinderella” was from China, where a woman’s bound feet encased in tiny silk slippers were revered as the emblem of feminine beauty. I had done some research into the history of foot-binding, and could hardly believe the cruelty and injustice of such a practice. Yet my goal was not to vilify a particular culture, but to turn my audience’s attention to the universality of female subjugation and to focus on the women’s resilience and their spirit of resistance. (Who among us indeed, in this modern world, is completely free from patriarchal domination?)

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***This is a story about a Queen who wished to have 12 daughters. That was her dream, 12 daughters who would travel the world and visit all the places she imagined but could never see because of her bound feet.***

***When she gave birth to her first child the king was bitterly disappointed because it was a girl. The queen was secretly overjoyed, however, and hoped 11 more would follow. She would not conceive again, however, and the king soon lost interest in her. He went off to conquer other territories. The queen named the daughter Bao Bei, Precious Treasure, and tried to put all her dreams for 12 daughters into this one.***

I decided to start my story with the image of the mother queen holding her baby, wishing to give the baby the freedom she herself never had. When the time comes for her daughter’s feet to be bound the queen would do the binding herself, carefully and gently so as not to break any bones. The queen passes away when the princess is twelve, leaving her twelve pairs of silken shoes and a secret instruction.

Then I introduced my kind-hearted cowherd, named Strong Spirit. He meets a mysterious old woman in the field, who gives him a white silk fan. “*Open this fan, and you will become invisible,*” she intones, “*Follow the princess, wherever she goes!*”

***At midnight the princess stirred and rose. As her feet encased in embroidered silken shoes touched the stone floor, the floor opened without a sound to reveal a spiral marble staircase. The cowherd quickly opened the fan and followed the***



***princess. Down, down, down the stairs they went, into the dark, deep hollow of the earth.***

***The Princess moved with surprising agility, with her long black hair trailing behind. Strong Spirit lost sight of her at the bottom of the staircase and found himself in a magnificent forest. The sky was luminous although he saw neither the sun nor the moon. The leaves of the trees were of sparkling green jade, their branches sterling silver.***

***Suddenly he heard faint voices in the distance, women singing a joyful melody. He followed the voices and came to the edge of a clearing, and saw the Princess standing in the center. She was surrounded by 12 women seated in a circle on the forest floor. The women, some young and some old, were of every shape and size, wearing such colorful dresses as Strong Spirit had never seen before. The language of their song sounded strange yet familiar. Their voices rose and fell, and the princess swayed and spun in radiant bliss, her eyes closed as if in a trance.***

***Then one by one the women stood and joined the princess in the center, some whispering mysterious words into the princess' ears, while others chanting and humming all around her, until the whole group danced together as if of one breath, one body.***

The cowherd becomes so captivated by the dance he accidentally lets the fan close in his hand and reveals himself. The princess, surprised, tells him that the fan belonged to her mother, and he realizes that the old woman who sent him was the spirit of the queen.

Out of his love and respect for the princess, the cowherd refuses to tell her secret to the king. The king in his rage tries to kill the young man. The princess saves him by telling the truth herself.

***“When Mother died she left me with 12 pairs of silk shoes, one pair to be worn each night to bed once I became a woman. Those shoes took me to an enchanting forest underground, where I met 12 women each night. They were my grandmothers, my great grandmothers, and my sisters that were never born. For 12 nights they told me stories of the earth and the sky, of people and***



***places, of plants and creatures, of the past and the future as they sang and danced with me.***

***“And each night my feet healed and grew. Now I can run like wild wind and dance till my heart is content! Father, it is time for me to lead a new life without your protection.”***

***(King) “Absolutely not! I forbid you!”***

***“I am sorry this hurts you. But I must go. My feet are unbound. I am ready, to be free.”***

The cowherd decides to follow the princess. The two leave the king’s dominion behind. My story ends with the image of the queen, dancing with the silk fan to celebrate the courage, love, and freedom her daughter has gained.

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I spent a few weeks writing the script, sharing parts as they came with Eshu and a few other friends. Images came easily, while the language was harder. I tried to keep it simple and fluid, moving the story forward.

The ending posed interesting choices. Since mine was not exactly a “Happily Ever After” story, what final image should I leave my audience with? The independent princess walking bravely off into the sunset? The princess and the cowherd lovingly looking into each other’s eyes? Or the distraught king being left alone, with no hopes for an heir? Each option seemed valid. I finally had to ask myself, “Who is this story about?” and realized it was primarily about the mother queen and her dream coming true. I decided to finish the story just as it started, with the queen singing a special lullaby for her daughter.

I found a beautiful Chinese love song on the Internet and decided to use it for the queen’s lullaby. Eshu helped me write a verse to the song in English. I practiced singing in both languages, exploring ways to use it for transition between the scenes.



I devoted the last part of the summer to working on choreography. I bought a large dancing fan with billowy, translucent white silk. Nancy Wang of EthNohTec from San Francisco generously gave me a basic lesson in Chinese fan dance. Leland Faulkner of Maine, who has directed many of my stories, taught me how to use the fan throughout the story, treating it as my performing partner. The fan became the baby, the cowherd's prod, and then the king's sword. We tried to make the piece theatrically intriguing, while maintaining the direct rapport with the audience.

The final help came from my mentor Elizabeth Ellis, who drove in to Oklahoma City from her Dallas home to emcee the Festival. Two nights before the workshop she kindly came to listen to me rehearse in my hotel room and gave me advice. Then I was ready to face my audience.

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The workshop was held in the state-of-the-art Stage Center in downtown Oklahoma City on a Saturday morning. A large group of story enthusiasts gathered and, following the full house Humorous Stories concert the night before, the atmosphere was buoyant and exciting. I was a bundle of nerves. Would my audience like my piece? What were Kevin and Susan going to do?

Well, the Muses were certainly with us that morning. Kevin told the tale as the Story of Jack, focusing on the young man's journey down to the ethereal kingdom underground. The hero, as he watched the princesses dance, found himself irresistibly drawn to that deathly world. What kept him anchored in the world of the living was a clump of dirt in his pocket, dirt from his homeland. The poignant imagery stemmed from Kevin's own experience of survival from a near-fatal motorcycle accident, which made his telling uniquely personal and powerful.

Susan told the fairy tale from the point of view of the eldest princess. The absence of the mother queen (who obviously had been banished due to her inability to produce a male heir) left the eldest daughter responsible for protecting and guiding her sisters. The nightly escape was their own ploy, a device for eliminating unwanted suitors and maintaining control over their own lives. Hers was a darkly humorous tale about the hidden power of women, and the knowing, complicit, and desperate ways women tried to achieve autonomy in a patriarchal society.



Everyone's story was eagerly received, and a lively and thought-provoking discussion ensued. The three of us fielded questions from the audience about our methods of research, what inspires and motivates us as artists, and the importance of finding new meanings in old tales. The audience's responses to my tale were the most gratifying. I felt a deep sense of satisfaction and saw numerous possibilities for further quests.

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"The emphasis is on process rather than product," the Oklahoma City Arts Council judiciously stipulated in the Festival contract. Indeed, I have discovered a few things about my own process from this intense two-month project.

First I found out that once you set aside your fear, ideas abound. Creative sparks fly only when you stopped worrying if your work would measure up to someone else's expectations.

Another thing I realized was how collaborative my creative process is. I am grateful for my partner and the small group of mentors to whom I turn for guidance and inspiration. Being a solo performer does not have to be a lonely venture.

Lastly I learned that a dedicated audience and a special opportunity like this truly help me grow as an artist.

And the product? I have a new 15-minute story I cannot wait to tell again and again!