



A Sapling in the Woods: Mentoring Dustin

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Young trees in a forest clearing have one advantage that makes all the difference.

--- Eric Booth, *The Music Teaching Artist's Bible*

“Hi, I’m Dustin. I want to grow as an artist. Would you be my mentor?”

Who could say no to this, coming from a bright-eyed twenty-year-old? Thus began what I hope to become a lifelong connection between Dustin Loehr of Mesa, Arizona and me, initially sponsored by the National Storytelling Network’s 2009 JJ Reneaux Mentorship Grant.

I first met Dustin at the 2008 National Storytelling Conference in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. In my workshop, “Bodystories: Mime and Movement for Storytellers”, there was this young man who eagerly raised his hand every time I needed a volunteer. He was adept at everything I asked him to do, and I very much enjoyed working with him. Afterward he introduced himself as a professional tap dancer and storyteller. His youthful energy and enthusiasm captivated me. I also met Kim, his then-fiancé and business partner. What a lovely couple! I could not help but smile.

When he decided to apply for the grant and chose me as his mentor, I was more than delighted to oblige. Dustin struck me as an artist who is immensely curious and willing to put in the hard work it takes to hone his craft.

Dustin had been telling stories for five years. He started as a youth teller for the Mesa Storytelling Festival under the tutelage of Don Doyle. He had also been tap dancing since age 3, and he and Kim had recently opened their own dance school called RhythmSoled. He already had considerable stage experience for his age, and was attracted to storytelling for the freedom and autonomy it allows. He had found me something of a kindred spirit as we share affinity to movement, and



hoped that the way I use mime in my stories would give him helpful hints as to how to utilize tap in his storytelling.

In the application process we planned an intensive, five-day coaching session in the summer of 2009 in my partner Eshu Bumpus' studio in Holyoke, Massachusetts. We set our goals for Dustin to:

1. Increase physical vocabulary in order to better express the characters and situations in stories by studying basic mime principles and techniques.
2. Explore ways to incorporate his tap dancing skills in his storytelling as a means to strengthen his character portrayal.
3. Develop ideas for stories that use tap dancing as a metaphor for life.

Between January and June we communicated by phone and emails and solidified our plan. Dustin sent me texts and video clips of his performances, and we began to ask questions and define objectives for ourselves. Here are bits of my "musings" taken from my emails to him:

"I love your joyful energy and the easy, natural way you communicate with young children. Your strength is the simplicity and imaginativeness of your stories."

"The highest praise I can receive after a show is not, 'You mimed so well,' or 'Your voice was beautiful,' but 'Those were good stories.' What makes a good story? That is the \$million question."

"Read and listen to lots and lots of stories. Talk with people about what each story means, and begin to develop your own criteria. Question common, pre-conceived notions about folk and fairy tales. Your own values, beliefs, and upbringing all have a place in your stories. Dig deep, then deeper."

The actual intensive took place on July 20-24, 2009. My partner Eshu gave us the great gift of housing and feeding Dustin. He also participated in most of the sessions, and generously shared his knowledge and wisdom. In fact Dustin got two storytellers (for the price of one!) breathing down his neck all week long. Boy, was it intense!



We began each morning with a series of physical warm-ups invented by my own teacher Tony Montanaro (1927-2002) that included lots of rolling across the floor. We rolled pretending we were croissants coming out of the oven. We oozed as if we were sticky glop of rubber. We became elephants lumbering on all four, and cart-wheeled like a monkey. These exercises not only increase our flexibility, strength and control, but also teach us the principle of what Tony called ‘premise’.

A premise means “a mission that remains consistent and unbroken during the various states and stages of our work.”¹ The notion is akin to Stanislavski’s “super-objective” but reaches farther. For example, when we roll across the floor as croissants, the premise is that we must keep our bodies crescent-shape at all times, no matter the contortion. When I portray an evil queen in a fairy tale, my premise may be constant jealousy and fear. As storytellers our premise is that we take good care of the audience in front of us. A parent’s premise would be to always think what is best for his child. I have found the concept to be a useful tool, for it has helped me in the face of obstacles both on stage and off. I wanted to cultivate in Dustin a habit to always clearly define and follow his own premises.

After the warm-ups we did solo improv exercises. In an exercise called “Flow” Dustin had to keep moving without rest for a few minutes at a time, following every impulse as it occurred to him. I asked him to stay away from his tap routines and surprise himself by going out of his comfort zone. Then he tried the verbal version of the same exercise, in which he had to keep talking and moving without stopping, without making any sense, without any idea what he would say or do at any given moment. Many performers would find this scary, but Dustin tackled it with guts and gusto!

These improvisation tasks were also developed by Tony and his students. They are designed to allow a performer to minimize his ego (what makes him feel self-conscious and afraid) and maximize his awareness of, and connection to, everything in and around himself. They remind us that we are safe and free on stage, and our job as artists is not to impress ourselves and our audiences, but to generously share our gifts with the world.



Our goal for the week was not for Dustin to learn mime illusions (such as an invisible wall) but to expand his physical vocabulary. At first, due to his extensive tap training, his movements tended to be limited to upright and frontal, well-balanced and centered. Through the exploratory improvisation his “other sides” emerged. He could be off-balance and twisted, feathery and frivolous, heavy and awkward. This in turn will increase the range of his character portrayal, for physicality is the outward manifestation of a character’s soul.

We also spent time discussing the history of modern mime and a system of analysis of human body and movement developed by François Delsarte (1811-1871). The French philosopher and scientist observed and examined human gestures and motions, and interpreted them according to the body parts involved and the body positions taken.² He provides another essential tool for a storyteller who wishes to create body language and gestures that accurately represent the characters in his story.

Since Dustin had taken my introductory workshop at the NSN Conference, he was already familiar with some of the theories. He took in the rest quickly. He also clued me in on the history of tap dancing and ideas in contemporary tap. (I was fascinated, for example, to hear about the function of the upper body and arms in different schools of tap.)

At the heart of our time together, however, were the critique sessions. Over the course of 4 days Dustin shared 7 pieces from his repertoire, including folktales, stories from his childhood, and original poetry. He used tap dancing in 5 of them. Dustin was initially concerned that tapping might get in the way of some of the stories and overshadow them, but this hardly was the case. Most of the time he found ways for his tap dancing to benefit the story without dominating it. Tap added rhythmic beat and charming visual effects to his folktales. (In fact, tap is the only dance form that can also create music.) In his “Strength”, an African folktale adapted by Margaret Mead McDonald, he used tap to rhythmically describe the different animals. Dustin’s tap dancing skills certainly make him



unique among storytellers, and I saw many possibilities in combining the two art forms.

With that said, it is also true that his well-practiced tap sometimes gives his story a prescribed, presentational feel. A hint for a solution to this pitfall emerged when Dustin was performing his original poem “Shim Sham Shimmy,” based on the tap routine created by Leonard Reed (1907-2004). At the end of the poem I suggested that he gave himself a “private moment” to just dance, like a jazz musician improvising a riff. It was just him and his tap. He made the moment so personal, his love for the dance so deep, that it connected him powerfully to those of us who watched.

As for our goal #3, using tap dancing as a metaphor for life, we found one answer in his personal story titled “Just Keep Dancing”. It is about him performing tap dance in his 10th grade talent show. In front of the whole school he falls on his face and is humiliated. With much gumption he gets up and completes his dance, and is stunned to see the entire audience in a standing ovation! It is a beautiful, evocative story, perfect for a middle and high school audience. It reminds us that life is like dance: It is not our pride or eagerness to impress others that carry us through. It is the grace of those around us that supports us and makes us succeed.

One of the long-term goals Dustin had set for himself was to establish his own “voice” as a storyteller. This led us to focus not only on his performance style, but also on his writing. As storytellers we do not just speak words. Our job is to create and transmit meaning, with a clear and deep thought behind it. With Eshu’s help, for example, we explored Dustin’s use of words in his tale for children about the origin of tap dancing. The story depicted the African slave trade. What words could he use, when telling to young children, that would not objectify the African captives but show their humanity, resistance, and survival?

To grow as a writer is the biggest task that Dustin faces. (It is my biggest challenge as well.) I tried to emphasize that he must discover for himself what each story meant, even if it was a well-known folktale. How he understands history and envisions the future must be reflected in the way he tells. That will be his “voice”.

It will color his language and delivery, and will stay with the audience long after the show is over.

Eshu and I also made a point of introducing other storytellers in our area to Dustin for additional guidance and inspiration. One evening we invited two of our dear friends, Onawumi Jean Moss (Amherst, MA) and Bob Reiser (Easthampton, MA) and had a dinner and story sharing. They fielded Dustin's questions and shared their thoughts on the art and business of storytelling. I also invited Rob Rivest (Springfield, MA), one of my mentors in mime, to give us a lesson in mime techniques. Peg O'Sullivan, the Director of the Connecticut Storytelling Festival, graced us with her presence as well and participated in a critique session. In addition, we went to a story concert by local tellers Tom McCabe and Mary Jo Maichack, and Dustin learned much from their work.

It was an intense, productive week with a whirlwind of activities. We had so much fun! Dustin enjoyed the physical rigor of our sessions. He asked many questions and took copious notes. My only regret for our time together was its briefness. We may have erred on the side of doing too much, trusting that he would have plenty of time afterwards to go over again and digest what we did.

So what did I get out of all this? Well, A LOT! First of all I got the pure joy of working with Dustin and getting to know him. He is a mature, hard-working, and well-organized young man with a strong spirit of entrepreneurship. As a performer he has what I consider to be most important: a sincere desire to connect with the audience. I am convinced that he will succeed in many things in life, and make valuable contributions to the art of storytelling.

The summer session also gave me an opportunity to take a critical look at and organize my own body of knowledge. My own teachers and mentors taught me a great deal, but I can only teach it as well as I understand it myself. For the first time I saw myself in a lineage of artists, responsible for passing on my skills and craft to the next generation. Furthermore, the experience compelled me to stay

current in my effort to create new material, so that my work will continue to speak to young people like Dustin.

2009 turned out to be such a momentous year for Dustin, for he and Kim got married in the fall! I had another chance to spend time with him in October, when I performed at the Mesa Storytelling Festival. Dustin emceed one of my shows, and I had the pleasure of meeting his whole family. (Now I saw where he came from: such talented, generous, supportive people!)

Eric Booth, in his book *The Music Teaching Artist's Bible*, quotes a conversation he had with a botanist, in which he was surprised to learn that a young tree sprouting in a clearing in the woods grows faster and stronger than an identical sapling alone in the middle of a meadow.

The tender roots of that (young) tree will "find" the old roots of trees now gone, and then grow along those old roots to quickly reach deeper, richer soil.³

I agree with the author that this is an apt metaphor for the power of mentoring. I thank the National Storytelling Network and its JJ Reneaux Emerging Artist Fund for giving us the Mentorship Grant. I feel honored in the role of mentor, a conduit through which Dustin can connect to the legacy of great teachers such as Tony. I hope to continue doing my small part in helping him reach deeper, richer soil in the art of storytelling.

Notes:

1. Montanaro, Tony. *Mime Spoken Here: The Performer's Portable Workshop*. (Tilbury House, 1995) p.31
2. For more information on Delsarte, see Shawn, Ted. *Every Little Movement*. (Dance Horizons, 1963)
3. Booth, Eric. *The Music Teaching Artist's Bible*. (Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 117