











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 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

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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.

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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.<sup>3</sup>*

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.

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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