

Questions for Evaluating Storytelling Performance

Along with many others in the storytelling community, over the past several years I have been giving thought to what are hallmarks of good storytelling. While storytelling is in many ways still a folk art, and because of that, something that many kinds of people do, there's a tendency to be lax in a discussion of what are measures of excellence. But if we are to encourage excellence in storytelling so that it is recognized as an art, we need to have a discussion about what we find in accomplished storytelling. This is not a question so much of what standards critics should use in evaluating performance (although they may do that), but a challenge to us as artists to search for some language to use in looking at our work.

In an effort to foster this discussion I've come up with a list of questions, or queries, a storyteller might ask of him/herself. These are not hard and fast rules, but rather a way of seeing. Not all the questions I offer here are useful in every situation, but I've tried to think about what I see in a good storyteller, and what I miss when I see a storyteller not succeeding.

For me, reading the list of questions makes me aware of my shortcomings and failures. But that's okay. I think the important thing is to become conscious of what we're doing and look carefully at our work. Nobody does all these things I've identified. Good storytellers may be so good in one area that we forgive their transgressions in other areas, or those areas simply become less important. But when something isn't working, and we know it, we should ask ourselves hard questions about why it's not working. These questions are a place to start.

Narrative form

Is the structure of the piece strong – does it show an understanding of narrative structure, even if only to make it possible to experiment with that structure? Is the structure flabby – are there parts that do not belong? Is there an awareness of narrative tension? Does the piece show an understanding of character's place in the narrative? Is there resonance in the piece, with elements introduced early bearing fruit later on? Is there an understanding of an underlying subtext in the story? Is it clear that the storyteller knows what the story is about? Has s/he made choices about what material to present to best serve the heart of the story? Is there a dramatic build that reaches some form of climax when a truth is revealed? Is this revelation presented in a way that delights or enlightens or moves the audience?

Language

Does the storyteller have command of the language used? Does the storyteller have an adequate vocabulary, and use the right word? Is the style of language consistent throughout the piece? Is it authentic – especially if it represents some culture other than the performer's own? If it is a caricature of a culture, is there an understanding of what that means? In the context of the choice of language used, is the grammar and vocabulary consistent and authentic? Is there a consciousness of it being an oral language, rather than oral presentation of

written language? Is there breath in the words, or do they sound as if they are coming from the page?

Voice and physical instrument

Does the storyteller have command of his/her vocal instrument? Is s/he understandable? Does the vocal instrument serve the story, or does it attract attention to itself? Is the voice flexible in its presentation of different aspects of the piece, varying in timbre, pace, and dynamics?

Does the physical movement of the storyteller serve the story? Is the storyteller conscious of how the use of his/her body is serving the story? Is the performer in control of his/her physical instrument, using his/her body to serve the presentation, or does the movement distract from the story?

Performance skills

Are all skills integrated into the story? (e.g. – music, movement, juggling) Are the skills used developed enough so that they are not hindrances? Are skills and technique transparent so that the story is served, rather than the demonstration of technique? Does the storyteller use different modes of presentation in the performance? Is there a spectrum, or vocabulary, of content and presentation? If the storyteller has committed to characterization in a piece, are the characterizations consistent throughout?

Relationship with the audience

What is the storyteller's relationship with the audience – is s/he telling to the audience present before him/her, or to the one in his/her head? Is the performer open to the audience – is there an awareness of the nature of the fourth, permeable wall between the audience and the performer? Is there a consistent understanding of where the storyteller is at any moment in the delivery of the narrative? Is there some understanding of the isolation of characters from each other and the narrator? Has the storyteller made conscious choices about those relationships?

Show structure

Does the performer have a sense of how an entire performance builds? Over the course of the performance, is there a flow from one piece to another, and some sort of arc? What is the performer's relationship with the audience between set pieces?

Aesthetic

Does the storyteller have a sense of his/her aesthetic – her reason for performing and how s/he presents her material? Are they consciously making choices about what they are showing and how they are showing it? Does the storyteller have a unique voice? Does s/he have something to say?