Tips for Telling

By Bob Pegg

Once you have tracked down your legend you’ll need to give it life, and one of the best ways to do this is by telling it to others, who, if they enjoy listening, may pass it on. Many local legends exist in very brief forms – a paragraph in a guide book, perhaps, or a couple of spoken sentences from someone who remembers hearing the tale when they were a child. How can the storyteller grow flesh on such bare bones? Here is a handful of suggestions:

- Visit the location where the story “happened”, and get to know it well. There may be features of the landscape, or buildings, which you can incorporate, and which will help anchor the story in your own imagination. You will be able to see them in your mind’s eye while you’re telling the story.

- Make sure you have the correct pronunciations of place names, and names of characters.
• If you have the opportunity to tell the story on site, so much the better. This gives a wonderful opportunity for the physical and the imaginary to intermingle – for you to conjure up spectral dramas that will change your audience’s perception of that place forever.

• Try to stick to the basic structure of the story as you first read or heard it, but if part of it doesn’t make sense, either acknowledge this in the telling, or alter the story so that it becomes more coherent.

• If your story has a number of different sources, bring the “best” bits from all of them together to make your own version.

• Feel free to describe the appearance of the characters as you see them in your head (it’s important that you do have an idea of what they look like), and to give them dialogue. Your source material may not contain such details, and they can help make a story more palpable. BUT – and this is very important – don’t over describe. You’re not writing a novel. Your task is to give your audience just enough information to stimulate each individual’s imagination into creating his or her personal scenario in “the cinema in the head”. The most you might need to say is, “He was a big man, like a bear…” or “She was a beautiful woman, but it was a cold beauty”. Again, try and keep dialogue terse and to the point. If it’s used sparingly it will be more effective when it is used. Some storytellers favour more elaborate description, and might disagree with the above. My own view is that, in storytelling, paring down is generally more effective than bulking up.

Finally, some advice for beginner storytellers:
• Before you tell your story in public for the first time, tell it to yourself often enough to feel that you are comfortable with it, and with the sound of your voice. Tell it ALOUD (very important), not in your head (though you can do this too). Tell it when you’re driving, taking a shower, going for a walk – or find a special private place where you feel safe to practise.

• As you’re telling your story aloud, stop and go over again any parts of it that you don’t feel are quite right; it may be that the narrative is confused, or an important phrase hasn’t quite gelled. Go over these sections of your story until you’re happier with them, before continuing to the end. If you use this method you’ll end up with your own version of the story which you will have shaped like the sea shapes a pebble.

• DON’T attempt to learn a written version of your story word for word. Use the method above and you will acquire a flexibility to circumstance when telling that learning a script won’t give you.

• Pay particular attention to the beginning and the end of your story. Tell them over and over again when you’re practising (as well, of course, as the bit in the middle) until you no longer have to think about the words.

• When you’re confident with your story – but before telling it in public – find a sympathetic friend, partner etc to try it out on; perhaps another storyteller so you can practise turn and turn about. Tell your story while looking into their eyes.

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