

GETTING REAL- Public School Residencies

A residency begins with the conception and planning of how our art form can inspire and extend ongoing programs and objectives within a school. You arrive on site and in the act of introducing authentic humans and their environment into your grand scheme, panic ensues and plans often go to the bow wow. As you regain your balance and reassess your goals and techniques within the world they were planned to affect, mistakes are made. Mistakes, if acknowledged and addressed can be your best learning tool. The tender operation of maintaining objectives while responding to successes and failures and continually shaping and reshaping your work for the population you are working with will prove the measure of a residency's success. We all know that a story doesn't come alive without listeners, and so too a school residency does not take wing until you wrap what you can offer and what you have learned around the specific educators and students you will be working with.

Last fall I helped develop a grant proposal for work at a school in Lawrence, MA. Following is some of the beautifully flowered prose I assembled for that application:

Whereas:

- A majority of the student population (80%) represent learners whose primary/home language is not English
- The teacher population is not familiar with the culture of origins of most of the student population
- This particular student population reads English significantly below standard levels
- This particular student population has been slow to acquire social and communication skills necessary for school success

We propose a storytelling residency which will focus on language acquisition and communication via tales from the indigenous cultures of the student population.
bla bla bla bla bla

Completed by the principal and myself this was all well intentioned and accurate. Then I arrived at the Donovan School. The old brick schoolhouse resembled the tale 'Always Room For One More' as children seemed to be oozing out of and pouring into every nook and cranny of the ancient structure. The office was a tiny room jammed with the secretary's and principals desks, and 3 children at various levels of distress. "Oh sure, we're expecting you honey" calls the secretary. "If you can find your way in here, you can hang your coat on the rack next to the desk and I'll try and find Sherry (the principal). A few minutes later, with a child secured under her arm, who was biting and punching at her, the principal calls out from down the hall. "Judy, I'm glad to see you. You made it!" As she closed in she

explained, above the din of the angry 7 year old. "This is my buddy Diego. He's having a bad morning." She puts her hand gently on his head and lowers him to a standing position, his arms and legs still beating at anything nearby. She talks to him soothingly in Spanish but he is not to be dissuaded. I stick my tongue out at him and begin making weird faces and strange sounds. He jumps track to hone in. We start playing a finger game.

"Thanks" Sherry says without him hearing. "Part of it is neurological and he needs to have complete dissonance in order to change response. The other part is that he's just plain angry. He thought he was going to see his father this week, but it turns out that instead of being released from the Massachusetts prison he's been serving time in, they're going to send him straight up to New Hampshire to complete a term there. No home visit." During this explanation a few other students passed. Not one of them got by without Sherry riffling their hair or touching a shoulder gently, and offering an introduction. "This is Maria. She is a very good reader." "This is Pablo, wait till you see him running on the playground. He has feet like wings." "Jose, come meet the storyteller. Jose is a math genius." No sooner did she complete her explanation of Diego's issues than the sound of flying furniture was heard from a nearby 1st grade classroom. "Un momento," she said and was off to douse another fire. At the entrance a social worker was speaking Spanish rapidly with one of the mothers, and three children were sitting in a front stairwell, because it was the only space available for 'time out.' Now, what made me think that our little plan, which outlined exactly what would be accomplished in each classroom session and how, might require some flexibility?

Let me say here and now that this is a good school in the most important way a school can be good. The faculty and staff want to be there. They laugh, joke, share anecdotes about the kids in the tiny lunch room. The crossing guard and maintenance man are as integral as the language specialist. There is a sense of service to the kids and neighborhood, a warm cooperation among the people working there, and a belief in education. It's good they have these things, because schools, being based on property taxes, leaves the kids of urban Lawrence at an enormous disadvantage. They have a building so over utilized you'd need a shoe horn to get another human in there. They have a minimal budget for supplies. Field trips means that teachers and specialists pull their cars and we caravan. Parents, most of whom speak English haltingly, want their children to succeed, but in so much as they are disempowered politically, socially and economically, they will often defer to the system rather than take the middle class route and

advocate for their children.

Did I mention that I was here to organize troupes of story actors in grade 2, who would share their tales with 'underclassmen,' parents, and the community? My plan was to introduce the students to movement and story games, tell them stories from their parent's lands of origin, have them chose a tale to act out and finally facilitate and orchestrate each classes story play and share it at a grand finale to be held at the are library.

My first mistake was trying to be a dove among hawks. I am not a yeller. It plays havoc with your voice, and more significantly I find it an offense way of interacting. Well, people in this school yelled. The students could work themselves into a wild frenzy in mere seconds, and to reestablish order one needed to be heard. I tried all my Wheelock College tricks. I whispered in hopes that they would quiet to hear me. I made myself physically small to try and draw energy in. I turned off lights to try and physically calm the environment. Go ahead, ask me how well these techniques worked. One day I finally yelled to establish order at a given moment in the session. Later the teacher whole heartedly thanked me.

"Thank-you for taking control. My voice was just shot, and it's the only thing that seems to work."

I had not been a full teaching partner, relying on her to do the 'dirty' work of maintaining order and control. It was time to participate fully in this world and realize that a heightened voice, in this palace, carried no more emotional overtones than exactly what it was, a heightened voice.

As part of the residency I would not only work intensively with the 2nd graders, but would also share stories in the other classrooms. Out of the gate it was clear that these kids needed gripping tales that would speak to their lives and the strengths that would see them through to adulthood. "Sally has a good time on her summer vacation at Disney World" would not cut it. Two of the first grades were crushed into one end of a small classroom, and in the rear, hiding behind a chair that a teacher sat in was a child of 6 with the hardened angular face of a 19 year gang member. Challenging dark eyes and little features held so tightly they appeared like a bow string ready to snap, darted out from behind the chair and retreated again. He would not join the group and one of teachers, before I began, asked if I wanted him removed. "Na, just let him do what he needs to. This is supposed to be fun." The warm up story was short and funny and during it he darted from one spot to the other, one step ahead of the enemy. Then I

blew into *Hansel and Gretel*, only the names were changed to engage the innocent. It became *Juan and Maria*, and with a few cultural twists, they were served rice and beans at their last meal, it was the traditional story of betrayal, abandonment, survival, and celebration. As the story progressed, little Mr Rebel with a cause, crept closer and closer to the action until he was seated on the edge of the group. By the time the brother and sister had been dumped in the forest for a second time, the rigidity in his body had evaporated, and as Maria pushed the witch into the oven, his face soft and shining, looked like that of a 6 year old again. For a brief few moments he allowed himself to enter another world worthy of his own.

I wanted each class to choose a tale that we would then develop into a story-theater presentation. Finding authentic Puerto Rican and Dominican tales was not easy. I had to have them in place prior to working at the school, otherwise I could have tapped teachers and parents as resources. Thinking I could add some desperately needed authenticity to the tales, parents were invited to the classroom session where I shared the stories and asked them for theirs. The bilingual class, taught by a stunning woman from Puerto Rico, was highly structured. In an attempt to learn stories from the parents of these children I made my second mistake. The largest number of parents came to this classroom session. I felt like a water buffalo in so much as I barely knew their language. It was this self-conscious nervousness that led me to begin the session by 'performing' the stories. When I then asked them for stories from their growing up they were predictably mute. Already intimidated by this world I basically offered them an opportunity to compete with my telling skills. This was not fair, and of service no one. Given this opportunity again I would break the class and parents into small groups in which they could share stories from their childhoods and ultimately reassemble with a single representative from each group to share with the larger class. The period would be dedicated to them, not me. As Gilda Radner often said "Never Mind." Their teacher never cracked a smile. Beautiful, carefully tailored, I was sure she thought me the ditz of the western world.

Eventually I did find and learn appropriate stories for the students to choose among for their reenactments. One story, **The Chili Plant**, was a prototypical hard core folk tale. It involved a step mother abusing her adopted daughter because the child looked like her birth mother. One day the girl is left to guard the step-mother's greatest treasure, a fig tree. When an old man comes, begging water, the girl immediately goes into the house to fetch some for him and in her absence he sees no harm in eating one of the

figs. He blesses the girl for her kindness and leaves. When the step mother returns and discovers the missing fig, rage overwhelms her and she kills the girl, burying her in the back yard in a hole with a chili seed. Deeply missed by her father and brother, who are lead to believe that the girl is just visiting relatives, they watch as the season passes and a remarkable chili plant grows in the back yard. When the father asks for one of the chili's, the son goes to pick it and plant sings its anguish to the boy, then the father, then the step-mother who falls into a dead faint at the sound of the girl she had buried. The girl is dug up. Safe and sound, protected by the old man's blessing, the family, sans evil step mother, lives happily ever after. The other stories were sweet sequence tales and fools tales. The bilingual class choose a sequence tale, *The Big Bed*, but this one was made for another class. When this particular second grade classes heard **The Chili Plant** a shiduck (Yiddish for match) was made on the spot. As a group and individually their visceral response to this tale was so powerful it became clear that it was theirs to work with. When the session was over the teacher took me aside and registered serious concern:

"I don't know if this is such a good choice for my class. A lot of the children are coping with domestic violence issues in their homes."

"Why do you think they choose this story? This story accepts that very fact, and then offers a model of how they can survive that violence by acting with a good heart. Please, let them do this."

With some reticence she agreed, and I sure hoped that Bruno Bettelheim knew what he was talking about!*

The only place to work was in the already over crowded classrooms. Creating space to move and play story games took 10 minutes of our time and left teachers with utter chaos when we were finished. Once on their feet, these students, bounced off the walls, ceilings, lighting fixtures, and doors. I crawled out of our first sessions, spent, exhausted, and a failure. It was clear that additional structure, strict, specific, structure would be required but something else was missing. Of course I was out of breath at the end of each class. Working in a vacuum does that to you! Mistake #3, thought I could do it all by my little old self.

I asked for a lunch meeting with the second grade teachers, brought home made cookies, and pitifully begged them for their ideas, techniques, and visions for what we could do **together**. As I listened to them talk, it became clear that each of three classes had their own nature and style. The bilingual class taught by stunning Puerto Rican woman kept her students on a very

tight rein. When discussing the possible ways they could reenact a story, she quickly chose the most structured option, and was essential in casting the children in the parts that they would have the greatest success in. The other teachers were equally adept at knowing their students and helping me discover techniques and styles that would best work with them. What had taken me so long to do this? Now, we were a team, instead of a specialist coming in to work with their students.

I am preaching the perks of storytelling so often that I forget it's real. One day on my way to lunch I see Diego (he spent a lot of time outside the classroom) at a little desk in the hall pretending to read a book about Michael Jordan.

"Hey man, what ya reading?"

His face is a tighter network of rage than any 7 year old deserves to experience. I look at the book.

"Hey, he's the man isn't he? Find out anything interesting? Hey what's that?" There's a sketch book on the table. "May I take a look?" He ascends with a nod. "Wooo these are great drawings. You do them?" Another nod.

"Cool! What's happening here?" And he starts to tell me about a kid climbing up a building to escape and how the guards are trying to shot him, and that's what the zig zag lines are. But there's a really bad man in there and the kid's got to get away."

"Hey want to here a story about a really bad man?"

You bet he did, and without knowing exactly why, I launched into *Bluebeard*. Sitting in the basement hall with kids, adults, lunch aides traipsing back and forth, his attention was riveted in that little circle of energy that the story created between us. I had barely finished when the principle (by all reckonings a woman soon to be sainted) appeared with Diego's mother. I wanted to tell her what an important part he had in the story we were acting out (he was in the "The Chili Plant" class), but my Spanish was much too halting and she was feeling diffident because he had disrupted his classroom.....again. He is taken away. The next day though, once again sitting in the hall, Diego called me over.

"Hello my man. What's up."

"I want to tell you a story."

And pulling up a chair I hunker into the intimacy of our created circle. He takes out his sketch book, opens it to the same picture we were looking at yesterday, and begins;

"This here is a castle and a really bad man lives in there. He has a black beard, so I call him Blackbeard. See this kid climbing the wall? He is super

kid and he is climin' in to save a girl from Blackbeard....."

He went on until school life imperatives forced us to break the circle. The circumstances of Diego's life will only be deeply affected by a new trend in social, political, and economic justice. I'm not holding my breath. His ability to see himself as a hero rather than a victim in his world can be affected by storytelling. I pray that this slight switch in vantage points will give him one more strength to work with in his world.

As we s-l-o-w-l-y wended our way towards a cohesive reenactment of a story props and costumes were needed. An art teacher came to the school each week to work with the students and I assumed that he would love to be part of this project. Mistake #4, don't make assumptions about other people's commitments. Some folks are just dog paddling through this life.

"Well I was thinking that they could create their own images of dogs or cats or birds or bees on cardboard and we could staple them to these paint mixers that I got at the hardware store. The kids who need crowns, well maybe you'd have a good idea...."

"Ah" he replied hesitantly "I don't know if I'll have enough time for that kind of thing. I have to complete this lesson now."

And I watched as he distributed 6 crayons and a single sheet of manila paper to each student and demonstrated how they could draw the Easter Bunny. I wondered how you say 'Easter Bunny' in Spanish.

With the principals help, teachers digging through their closets, and me hitting resale shops, we assembled the needed items. Traditionally I hate to ask for help. Have no idea why the culture of 'do it yourself' is such a powerful one, but it not only puts undue pressure on one person, it denies the community an opportunity to invest in the project. One of the Dominican aides found just the right hats for the **The Chili Plant** at her home. Everyone was searching for **Juan Bobo** hats, and the crossing guard helped us out with squeaky door. With everyone pitching in the emotional investment actually increased for the entire school.

Some days I would walk out of this classroom and just cry, having absolutely no idea if we had gotten any closer to our goal of internalizing the story, creating scenes, choosing characters and acting out the scenes. The chaos, constant talking, little spats of rage, anger, disappointment, fatigue, were as prominent as spots on a leopards skin. In the bilingual classroom, when their teacher, the structured Puerto Rican woman, walked out of the classroom, chaos always broke out. The aid tried to reign them in, but eventually my

only workable ploy would be to walk out of the classroom after instructing them to pull out their math books. Upon reentry we could work for a whole 5-7 minutes until the tactic would be needed again. Have a sneaky suspicion that this sequence is not authorized by state curriculum standards or mandated regulations. In the class where we were working on **The Chili Plant**, the scenes where the step mother hit the step daughter were reenacted with such brutality that it made me wince, but I just kept chanting to myself 'They need this story.' The classroom that was acting out a *Juan Bobo* story would often disintegrate into such chaos:

"I don't want to be a dog any more!"

"I want to be the princess. She stole my part."

"I'm not doing nothing!"

That I wondered if we would ever have anything to share.

Well, knock me over with a feather, when it was actually time to put all the scenes together and have the entire tale reenacted by each classroom, they did it. They did it with panache and power and commitment. The flakiest of students remembered their parts. Diego, who was portraying the buried girls brother in the last scene of **The Chili Plant**, had missed the last two rehearsals. "Diego, do you think you can do this in front of an audience?" All he did was nod 'yes,' but on that day, with 50 people and local TV cameras running he stepped to the center of the stage and proclaimed loudly that his sister had been wronged and was alive. He brought his 'father' out to the plant and demanded justice. He acted as a member of a team for the first time that anyone could remember, and his mother was there to see it. The bilingual class filed into the four rows of actors representing each scene, and at one point their teacher, who I had feared thought the whole process fool hearty anarchy, prompted one of her students with their line and smiled radiantly throughout their performance. Sherry, the sainted principal, was still emerging with last minute props and enough pride in her students to launch a thousand careers out of the dust.

After the sharing of the stories with the rest of the school and larger community I was down in the teachers room.

"Judith, **The Chili Plant**, that story, my mother used to tell it to me all the time when I was growing up in the Dominican Republic."

"Me too" said a woman from across the table, "In Puerto Rico, my grand mama told it to me all the time. I cried like a baby when the kids acted it out."

Then they both spontaneously began singing the song that the chili plant

sings to the brother and father. They were singing the traditional tune that I did not know.

"Would you sing that again, so I can learn it." I begged

Through all the chaos things were happening. I just needed to develop the eyes and ears to see and hear them with. I needed to let who I was and what I could do soak in this world and re emerge as a hybrid that would both unite and stretch all parties involved. I used every bit of knowledge and trick I knew, but not one of them looked like the things I had done before with young people. This was a new place with it's own needs. It wasn't perfect, but the bilingual class understood and told a tale out of their culture in English. Both they, their teacher, and parents beamed with pride. A class fraught the victim's of domestic violence experienced a way to digest the realities of their lives and imagine new futures. The chaos of dogs chasing cats, who chased birds, who chased bees, who chased Juan Bobo, who made the sad princess laugh, fell into place and made everyone laugh. Not to mention that we also fulfilled our outlined objectives.

Before lunch ended I noted. "You guys don't need me here. You know all the stories. You just need to start telling them."

* Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Uses of Enchantment* speaks to the cathartic value of the ancient tales to accept, play out, and offer models for surviving growings most traumatic stages.