

FEATURE



THE OGRE AWARDS

Enid Davis
enidd@harker.org

I received my MLS from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, in 1970. I left New York with a husband and a newborn six weeks later and moved to San Jose, California. By May 1970, I was working for the Santa Clara County Library System as a part-time children's librarian. Then in December of that year I was asked to tell a Hanukkah story at the library's annual Christmas party. There were over two hundred people present. Up until that moment I would have described myself as shy. Fifteen minutes later, with a memorized retelling of Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The First Shlemiel" under my belt, I was a born again storyteller.

During my career as a children's librarian and manager, both in the public library and in an independent school, one passion stands out among my many interests: storytelling. Whether it was my first multimedia extravaganza called "Sesame Street Fights Pollution: a Puppet Musical



in Four Acts," my six-week "Anansi the Spider Storytelling Festival," or my "University of Reading Aloud" parent-children storytelling workshops, the soul work of my library responsibilities is storytelling.

My most ambitious storytelling event, however, is the one I developed for The Harker School during the 1996-97 school year. Although it has evolved over these twelve years, the concept is as follows: three of the four homeroom classes (averaging twenty-two students each) perform a segment of a dramatized folk tale. The fourth class acts as the hosts of the award ceremonies.

The Ogre Awards (think parody of Academy Awards for fairy tale characters) is a full-scale second grade production performed in front of 650 students, faculty, administrators, and parents on the lower school campus. Scenery, costumes, lighting, music, sound effects, a professional videographer and photographer create a storytime on steroids. I am also most grateful to the lower, middle, and upper school librarians and the lower school library clerk in our department for acting as stagehands. They are the best!

The seventy-five minute production is the culmination of the second grade library curriculum. Beginning in mid-August through December, second graders are introduced to a variety of traditional folk tales through oral storytelling, creative dramatics, and books. When they return in January, we distribute parts and start rehearsing in the library.

Rehearsals in the gym begin five days before the show.

The first week of a two-week unit



introduces three stories from one of seven categories: enchanted creatures, fools, heroines, magical objects, tricksters, witches, and wolves. Week two includes the discussion of these stories, the comparing and contrasting of the characters, and the casting of the secret ballot for the "Best performance of a witch (or wolf, trickster, and so on) in a folk or fairy tale." Children are assured there is no right or wrong candidate. Votes are kept a secret until the day of the performance. There is also a voting for the "Favorite Story" category which comes at the end of the seven units.

During this time, I seek to help children:

- form mental pictures while listening to storytelling and participating in creative dramatics;
- empathize with characters;
- draw distinctions of plot, setting, and character between different tales and similar motifs in different stories;

- understand classic fairy tales from a variety of cultural traditions;
- recognize archetypal patterns and symbols in fairy tales; and
- appreciate literature from global cultures.

Indeed, the discussions become more sophisticated as the weeks go by, as the tenets of fairy tale law (and lore) make their connections with the seven-year-old mind. Take, for example, the story “Lazy Jack.” In this humorous English tale, a simple, but well intentioned young man, marries the rich girl at the end of the story. “So, why is he rewarded if he could not earn a farthing?” I ask the students. At first, I get these responses: “Because all tales end happily” or “The father didn’t realize Jack was not too smart.” Then I ask the question this way: “Using fairy tale law, why did Jack succeed?” A chorus of “Oh, yeah!” greets me and I get these answers: “Because he tried his very best” and “The girl needed someone to make her laugh so Jack was the best choice!”

The children are delighted with the genre of traditional literature. They enjoy acting out the stories. Many children keep a running total in their heads regarding who has acted as what character in which story and how many times they have been picked. If, by error, I call on someone who is hoping for an extra turn, half the class leaps up to denounce the culprit.

Upon returning to school in January, the students are now ready to audition. They learn what part of the show their particular homeroom class will play: either the beginning, the middle, the end of the story, or the award presentations. I explain that some of the parts have more lines than others and some call for them to be more effusive, silly, and so on. The longer roles are auditioned first and those interested come up and read a line from the script. If there is a tie, a second librarian and I make the decision and everyone is invited to try again. The great majority of the roles are equal in length and if we have many takers we use their identification cards to select one at

random. Children understand and accept the luck of the draw.

By the end of the day we have given out eighty-eight parts. I absolutely relish audition day. I see shy children obtain dramatic roles and empathetic children exchange roles in order to make others happy. Satisfying so many children is proof to me that this process is magical.

We use the weekly forty-two minute library period from mid-January to mid-March to select books, rehearse lines and songs, try on costumes, and discuss the mechanics of the performance. Issues unique to second grade performers are also hammered out. I convince the boys that it is okay to wear make-up and assure them that playing a farmer marrying the heroine does not really mean you are married. However, it does mean that you cannot stand two feet away from her on the stage.

The entire four classes, known as The Ogre Academy, come together in the gym for the first time during the





rehearsal one week prior to the show. We rehearse five mornings for ninety minutes each. We do not have a dress rehearsal. In addition, during the rehearsals and in the performance, the children who are not on stage sit in the auditorium watching the show from the first six rows.

In rehearsal, students work on performing arts skills, strengthening their abilities to

- speak clearly and with confidence in front of a large group;
- use voice and body language to create a character;
- memorize lines and learn songs;
- participate as a team member in a large cast production; and
- empathize with and encourage fellow actors.

Fitting eighty-eight children into a sixty to seventy-five minute production, each having an individual speaking part, is the kind of brain candy I enjoy. Here is some more detail on how it all fits together. This year we dramatized “The Twelve Months,” a tale from old Czechoslovakia. The first homeroom

class introduced the story’s characters and sent Marusa to find violets in the snow. The twelve months provided the violets and sang her a song. In addition, the stepmother and stepsister met the three heroines nominated for an Ogre Award and Marusa met the three fools.

The second homeroom class had Marusa seek out the twelve months for strawberries, shared a song between the trickster nominees and the magical object nominees, and portrayed an encounter between the stepmother and stepsister with the enchanted object nominees.

The third class sang a song with the stepmother, stepsister, witches, and wolves, and then continued the tale by sending the stepsister and stepmother into a blizzard after a nasty encounter with the twelve months (great effect!). Marusa married the farmer, and they managed to stand only eight inches apart. By the end of the third classroom’s performances, all the nominees had interacted with the folk tale’s characters.

In the past twelve years, I have written dozens of parodies to popular and traditional music. Some titles include “I’m Dreaming of a Smooth Mattress” (for a scene from *The Princess and the Pea*); “Everything’s Coming up Beanstalks” (for a *Jack and the Beanstalk* spoof); “Don’t You Dare Call Me Grumpy” (for a scene from *Snow White*); “I Wanna Be Baba Yaga” (for a scene from *Bony-Legs*); “Bring Back My Siblings to Me” (for a scene from *Mrs. Goat and Her Seven Little Kids*) and “She’ll Be Climbing up the Tower” (for a scene from *Rapunzel*).

This year, I tried my hand at writing original music. It was very satisfying.

The songs included were “Violets in the Snow,” “What Are We Doing in Czechoslovakia?” and “We Are the Bad Folk in Fairy Tales.” I send a big thanks to musician Jeremy Erman who has the magical powers of taking my taped songs and transcribing them to paper.

He assures me that many song writers, such as Dolly Parton, cannot

A Memorizing Guideline

My storytelling repertoire contains about fifty folk tales. My ability to retell so many tales at the drop of a request relates to this guideline on when to memorize stories.

Memorize a story when . . .

You are memorizing highly literate original tales, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer stories or some of Hans Christian Anderson tales.

Memorize parts of a story . . .

When there are rhymes, spells, and sayings within the story.

Do not memorize . . .

The great majority of folktales that one finds in collections that are retold by others. The important thing here is to tell stories you are excited about sharing. Selecting tales you like enables you to spend time with the story, getting to know its plot and retelling it to yourself several times. It is through the subconscious learning and retelling process that the story becomes yours to share with others.



wins or loses it is neither a reflection on your popularity nor your acting ability. At the cast party held the following week, each child is awarded a mini-ogre (a troll) for their contribution to the show. These are pencil top favors that have a minimal cost but a great deal of meaning.

In addition to recognizing fairy tale characters, we present Special Ogre Awards to real people who “love our library.” Their statue is engraved with their name, and can be spotted on desks all over the three campuses. Two months before the show, there is an e-mail sent school-wide to announce these winners. The awardees come to the performance and express their gratitude. Winners have included a head of school, teachers, students, maintenance staff, technology personnel, and parent volunteers. This year, for example, the Special Ogre Awards went to the manager of the Receiving Department who works closely with the library staff in such an efficient and friendly manner and to an upper school music teacher who collaborates with the librarians on a semester-long research project and gives workshops on information literacy with us.

Every year a few faculty members request and/or are invited to play a part. A former upper school division head was a big fan of the program and once played the part of a temperamental choir leader. The director of instructional technology has sung a ditty dressed as a troubadour. We have a resident giant in the performing arts department, who has sung and danced with his two daughters during the years. This year, one of the auction items in the annual family picnic was a small role in The Ogre Awards.

transcribe their own tunes. However, Mr. Erman was kind enough not to add that since I cannot carry a tune, his work was rather challenging.

When the fairy tale is concluded, there is a brief intermission as we set up for the Ogre Award ceremonies. The stage hands draw a glimmering aqua blue “rain” curtain across the stage and add huge bouquets of balloons to the scene. Two dozen fairy tale characters are now ready to be introduced. Eight sets of

characters kibitz with each other, read the nominations, open the sealed envelopes, announce the winner, and stand ready to present the lucky fairy tale star with an eight-inch troll figure mounted on a painted gold column.

There is a great deal of lively music accompanying the performers as they march up and down the red-carpeted steps at stage center. I carefully select the music to match the fairy tale characters. For example, when Little Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks are introduced to present an Ogre, they emerge from the audience to the briefly played tune “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.” The Fisherman and His Wife skip up the steps to “Down by the River-Side” and Baba Yaga and the Troll woman are accompanied onstage to “Oh, You Beautiful Doll.”

Drummed into the head of each second grade class is the understanding that the ogre statue is not theirs to keep, but a prop to be returned to the library after the show. Also reiterated is the fact that all votes were cast before any child accepted a role. No one knew who was going to play a character when the votes were cast. Therefore, if your character





Through the years, parent volunteers have helped with this program in many ways: sewing, ironing, fitting, donating costumes and dressing the children before the show. You can see some of their work in the slideshow www.harker.org/page.cfm?p=511.

The Ogre Awards is an integral part of the entire school's culture. As of last year, every child from grades 2 through 12 has gone through this literary rite of passage. A high school student might greet me with "Do you remember me? I was Jackal or Anansi or Molly Whuppie in the Ogre Awards." One boy admitted to me

that he traded his ogre for a baseball card in the 4th grade and still feels badly about it.

The Ogre Awards has enhanced the image and expanded the role of the library in the eyes of the Harker community. It has enabled us to collaborate with the performing arts department and share our talents with each other. In fact, our lower school librarian, Kathy Clark, will be narrating the upcoming kindergarten performances. It has garnered the support of the administrators who budget generously for this production and provide moral support. Indeed, we call Sarah Leonard, the lower division head, our theater angel. Again, without the teamwork of the second grade homeroom teachers, the library department, and parents, it could not happen.

The show, as designed now, takes an enormous effort on my part. It is, however, a labor of love, my way of saying thank you to this literature that when linked with children of all ages bring so much happiness to our lives. For any that may want to adapt The Ogre Awards, this program can be molded to fit the needs and reality of your library and your school. The essence of The Ogre Awards is not in its glitter, but in its gold. It is in the telling of the tales, the thinking aloud

about them, the presenting their worth to the school community, and the celebrating the joy and lessons they so graciously serve that allow us to meet our goals. And working with second graders is a delight unto itself.



Enid Davis is the Library Director of The Harker School in San Jose, California. The library department of five, full-time professional librarians and five part-time library clerks (equivalent to 3.5 full time employees) serves a population of 1,780 K-12 independent school students on a tri-campus facility. Davis, along with the other librarians, leads the school-wide Information Literacy Committee. You can find the words to her Big6 and Super3 songs on the Big6 website, <www.big6.com/2006/12/10/sing-a-song-of-research-turning-the-big6-into-a-tune>.

Works Cited

- Ayer, Nat. D. 1911. *Oh, You Beautiful Doll*.
Bashevis, Isaac, singer, Elizabeth Shub, trans. 1966. *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories*. New York: Harper & Row.
Cole, Joanna. *Bony-Legs*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1983.
Down by the River-Side. Traditional.
Haviland, Virginia, reteller. 1966. *Favorite Fairy Tales Told in Czechoslovakia*. Boston: Little, Brown.
Loewe, Frederick. 1958. *Thank Heaven for Little Girls*.
Werth, Kurt. 1970. *Lazy Jack*. New York: Viking.