

Narrative and Community

Alex Fancy

The Redbird

One day when I was in Grade Two a lady drove her Morris Minor into the yard of our one-room schoolhouse. Dressed in a plaid jacket, she asked us to sing, one after the other. Before she left, she assigned each of us to one of three flocks of birds: blue, yellow and red. I was very pleased to be a redbird. The bubble burst at recess when my cousin Ada, who was much older than me, told us that bluebirds are people who can sing, yellowbirds are people for whom there is hope, and redbirds should never try to sing. For many years after that day, I sang only when other voices covered my own: in church or during choral numbers in the Christmas concert. My Mother also instructed me to sing in the autumn when I walked through the thick woods that separated our house from the school, so I wouldn't be shot by an over-zealous deer-hunter.

This is the first time I have committed this story to writing, but it has been told quite often. In fact, I have shared it on occasion with large audiences, during talk-backs after school theatre performances. It has never failed to elicit a wave of compassion, sometimes punctuated by Ah's and Oh's of sympathy, among young listeners. Why are they engaged by the Redbird story?

My decision to tell this story is always made on the spur of the moment and usually involves a mood-swing: apprehension (maybe I shouldn't be telling this story), exhilaration (we're all on the same wave-length here), and fascination (why did we all seem to feel good about my sharing the story?) I think the answer to this question has something to do with community.

Performativity aside, other factors explain the appeal of the story, and I don't pretend to be able to figure them all out. As I have grey hair and am old enough to be the listeners' grandfather, I wonder whether the story invites them to enter another space, distant, long-gone and perhaps sub-conscious, where the young members of the tribe are listening to the village Elder.

From the moment the actors in my troupe step onto the stage, in full view of the students entering the theatre, to do their pre-show warm-up, they work to disrupt the 'fourth wall.' When the post-show discussion works best, it prolongs the dissolution of hierarchy and linearity mediated by the story of the show, and when another story, from the grey-haired director this time, engages the listeners it reinforces the fact that we have become a circle, a community.

When it works best, the story bridges gaps, levels the playing field, and unites us all in the feeling that marginalization can happen to anyone, creating a community that is sustained by both the experience of alienation and the realization that it can happen again. Disempowerment, even if it is only momentary, of the person with agency, serves to confer agency, even for a brief but enjoyable moment, on the disempowered.

Some people think that storytelling is a privilege of the aged, while others probably consider it an affliction. I do know that stories can be powerful, but the decision to recount a story, at least to an auditorium filled with teenagers, has to be made with care. For me they often involve risk and fear.

The Maid's Poem

A few years ago, we staged Eugène Ionesco's *Cantatrice chauve* (The bald soprano). In this absurdist play which caused a scandal in Paris in 1950, the Martins visit the Smiths, and have a discordant, discontinuous and disturbing conversation that reveals the emptiness in their lives. We presented the play as a commentary on post-war Europe, with people looking for meaning after the horrors of World War II. The Smith's living-room was a confining place, surrounded by the débris of war and consumerism, and was anything but comforting despite the middle-class dialogue that features things like soup and yogurt. The dialogue is, more often than not, a disconnected accumulation of things, things and more things; there seems to be no motivation or guiding principle; nothing is embodied. In our production pictures fell inexplicably off the walls, and we arranged to have one end of the living-room floor fall about twenty-five centimeters.

The play ends with a frantic disclaiming of disjointed phrases, the characters rush about, and one can imagine they are looking for referents in a world where there are none. In addition to the Smiths and the Martins there are two other characters. First, there is the Firefighter who arrives unannounced, is flirted with by Mrs. Smith, and pleads with his accidental hosts to find him a fire, even a tiny one, perhaps to give him a purpose. Then there is the Maid.

As the tension mounts the Maid recites a poem, a party-piece, it would seem. Her poem evokes a fire that sets itself on fire. Our Maid stood on the coffee-table, wearing the stereotypical outfit but sporting huge, furry boots covered in growths of green mold. Was this another meaningless moment? Not according to the actors who said this was a moment of calm, of focus, even of continuity, in an otherwise incoherent world. I don't know what the spectators thought.

For me the Maid's poem seems to offer focus and continuity at a time when life has become a discontinuous series of immediate experiences. It's like a story in a world where stories have disappeared. Perhaps, for a moment, she is even telling herself into existence.

Stories are an antidote to the absurd, that feeling that we are in the world but not part of it, an idea given currency by Albert Camus. Many teenagers know the absurd viscerally, if not intellectually. The absurd is a solitary phenomenon, whereas the story creates community.

My most disastrous teaching-and-learning workshop was given in an American university where I attempted to demonstrate that accepting the reality of the absurd is a pre-requisite to engaging students, that in our classrooms we are allies, not adversaries, who question together the pseudorationality of the outside world. One person thought this idea is "sick", and hijacked the discussion, arguing that our role is to convince students that the world is a rational, ordered place. Just as the absurd is something one feels rather than knows, this man felt so threatened by the very idea of the absurd that he could not even entertain the premise. And he was not about to agree that education can disguise the absurd.

As academics we often work in solitude until there is an opportunity to share, but when that time comes we talk too much. Lectures can alienate listeners while stories validate them, casting them in the role of mediator of significance. Academics live in novel languages whereas stories are told in a common language; commonality is a route to community. The academy is riddled with hierarchies that disrupt the idea of community: tenure versus sessional appointment, A+ vs C+, 3M National Teaching Fellow versus the others, and so on; an engaging story dissolves them for a time. Stories don't require the academic apparatus of footnotes and bibliography; like the Maid's poem, they are self-generating, a spot of time in a fractured world.

The Guy in the Basement

Once we toured to schools a play about teaching and learning whose set was packed in one large box that the actors emptied in front of the spectators as the play progressed. One memorable early morning we arrived at a large school that had, we discovered, very narrow doors. We trundled our box from door to door, became increasingly frustrated, and could feel the stares from droves of students disembarking from school buses at the main entrance. We were not cool.

Someone told us that our box might fit through a doorway at the far end of the school that led to the basement boiler-room. It worked! We began a trek through a labyrinth of pipes and piles of storage that led us to the nearest stairway. Leaning against a post near the furnace was a young man who did not look very welcoming. He was smoking something.

Are you with that fucking French play?

Actually, it's bilingual, I replied, confirming for sure my status of academic nerd.

We eventually reached the first-floor gymnasium, staged the play and had a good post-show discussion. I noticed the guy from the basement in the audience.

When we retraced our way through the basement he had resumed his original position. Should I look at him? Never make a spectator feel that you are anticipating a comment on the play they have just seen. But not wanting to be impolite, I looked at him. After all, we were alone in the basement together, except for three actors who were struggling with the box in the gloom.

Hey man, that was cool.

We then executed a clumsy high-five in the nether-school penumbra, I thanked him, and told him to have a good day.

The story-within-a-story, the play he had just seen, featured a French class where, one by one, students die of boredom. Fortunately they are resuscitated by the school janitor who enters the crime scene and strips off his coveralls to reveal a blue spandex suit adorned with a large, yellow "L". The janitor is really Linguaman, who studied, in Transylvania, the gesto-vocal-tonal method of learning French. The play ended with a cast rap: Linguaman, he's our man! He can find a poubelle in a garbage-can!¹

The guy in the basement became part of our community, at least for a little while.

¹ poubelle : garbage-can.