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Barbara Reed: Visionary Storyteller and Dramatist

Jane Gangi

Every generation of professionals has the opportunity to honor those who have gone before, those who, often at sacrifice to themselves, have created better circumstances for the next generation. Barbara Reed, now in her eighties, is one such individual. For over fifty years, she has been a leader in both children's drama and storytelling (for children and adults). It is because of her tenacious love of the performing arts that they flourish—albeit in some places more than others—for us today. Because of her, the imaginative lives of children and adults continues cyclically, each generation passing onto the next the rich experiences to be found in drama and storytelling.

In the spring of 1998 Barbara Reed stepped down as Artistic Director of the Connecticut Storytelling Festival, a festival she had initiated nineteen years before that has attracted thousands of storytellers and story-listeners, bringing about a revival of storytelling throughout the region. In the same year, Reed also celebrated her eightieth birthday, an occasion which has brought about a time for reflection and recognition of what this diminutive, white-haired, determined and visionary woman has accomplished in the performative arts of storytelling and drama, both for herself and for others in her long and fruitful life.

I first met Barbara Reed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut, during the mid-1970s, and our lives have intersected from time-to-time since. Like others, I have taken advantage of creative opportunities in the performing arts that Reed's sheer doggedness has created for those who are lucky enough to follow in her footsteps. We were both hired by Molly Boggis (another instigator of arts happenings) to teach in the O'Neill's Creative Arts in Education program. Throughout southeastern Connecticut, a handful of us—including puppeteer Margo Rose—conducted workshops as artists-in-the-classroom. For me, the experience was at the beginning of a career; for Reed, the experience was yet another phase of her development as artist, teacher and innovator.

Prior to teaching in the O'Neill program, Reed had instigated the first drama program in the Guilford Public Schools in Connecticut. Because of her leadership, drama classes were scheduled for all children each week, just as music, art, media and physical education are scheduled now

in most schools. This curricular development was, for Reed, the outgrowth of a lifelong love of the theatre and performing arts. Graduating from Vassar in 1939 where she had majored in Drama, Reed intended to become “the world's greatest actress” (qtd. in Palm 34). During the 1940s, Reed

studied in New York City with Madame Daykarhanova of the Moscow Art Theatre. Though much in demand, Daykarhanova was declining offers to perform, and often, when Reed auditioned for roles, directors would approach her, not about her audition, but instead to try to persuade her to persuade “Madame” to take the part. Reed says, “There were not many roles for a shy young college girl; the roles were for juicy prostitutes so you couldn't blame them for thinking I wouldn't do” (telephone interview).

Reed married a Yale sociology professor, Stephen Reed, in 1941. They had six children, now all accomplished in their own right, and spread from the East Coast to the West. From this lively household came a social worker, a professor of English, a maker of fine furniture, a salesperson for a marine supply company, a teacher and a classical violinist. In childrearing, Reed tapped into her storytelling talents. “From the time they were babies, I told them stories, sometimes just to keep them quiet,” she says, “It's a great way to occupy a child's attention” (qtd. in Palm 34).

During the 1950s most of her children were of school age, and Reed began volunteering in the Guilford Public Schools. “I started doing creative drama before I knew there was such a thing,” she says (telephone interview). At first, teachers and administrators were nervous about letting a parent in the



classroom, but soon the idea caught on. Administrators observed the values of creative drama and wanted the experience for all Guilford children. After six years of Reed's persistence at volunteer work, the program expanded to four elementary schools, and drama teachers—finally—earned salaries. There was a tragic impetus for Reed's insistence on paid work: Her husband was diagnosed with cancer, and, after several remissions, died in 1966. Barbara found herself facing the necessity of earning income.

At nearby Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Robin Hall had been offering courses in creative dramatics. Through Hall, Reed discovered Winifred Ward's books. "It was wonderful," reflects Reed, "here was all this stuff I'd been doing, only a lot more" (telephone interview). In the 1970s, Reed traveled with Hall to England where they both observed Peter Slade's child drama classes.

Reed became the Chair of the Guilford Public Schools Dramatic Arts Department. Had it not been for her work there, aspiring drama teachers like me would certainly not have found employment; I taught in the Guilford program in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Two of her other protégés, Katrina Van Tassel and Millie Greimann, co-authored their own book, *Creative Dramatization*. Van Tassel and Greimann have also for many years continued with dedication another program that Reed founded, the *Pickle Players*, an after school theatre troupe. Despite her successes in Guilford, Reed tired of the invisibility of drama teachers; in Connecticut, drama is still not a certifiable subject. She regretted not being invited to PPT's (pupil placement teams)—she could have provided a different perspective on troubled youngsters.

Reed left the Guilford Public Schools in 1973 to teach both at the O'Neill and at Connecticut College, where she offered courses in Children's Literature for the next nineteen years. In 1974, at age 56, Reed took a course in Storytelling with Mara Capy at Wesleyan University: "I walked out of there thinking, 'I'm a storyteller and have always been a storyteller'" (qtd. in Kemper, n.p.). Of course, her dramatic arts background shaped and informed her storytelling. "Coming to storytelling from creative drama," writes Reed, "I found it natural to involve the

audience in adding sounds and movement, creating characters and dialogue, contributing ideas and solutions" (1). While continuing her studies with Capy, Reed also studied with the nationally-known Laura Simms, and launched yet another career, this time as a free lance storyteller. She performed throughout New England in libraries, schools, churches, festivals, museums, parks, coffee houses, senior centers and small theatres. Not only did she perform in every nook and cranny she could find, but also she usually found a way for others to perform in those same places.

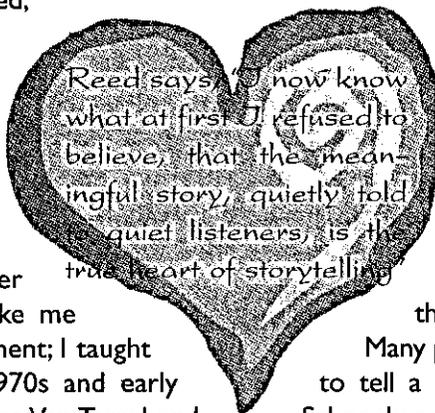
In 1979 Reed organized a conference at Connecticut College called, "From Puss-in-Boots to Superman: What Value Have Myth and Folklore for Today's Children?" The overwhelmingly positive response to this conference provided the impetus for the creation of the annual Connecticut Storytelling Festival. In 1982, she added a graduate course in Storytelling to her teaching load at Connecticut College. About this course, she says, "Mainly, I help them find the storyteller in themselves . . .

Many people have built up this thing that it's difficult to tell a story . . . but you do it naturally" (qtd. in Schoenberger, 7B). Students are usually inservice or pre-service teachers; however, librarians, therapists, chaplains and museum professionals have also taken the course.

Storytelling was just beginning to gain national attention. Robert F. Baldwin writes, "... a folk medium as vital and creative as storytelling has proven too powerful to ignore, and for the last fifteen years the American appetite for storytelling has been growing faster than Jack's beanstalk" (30). Reed attended storytelling events in other states, including the National Storytelling Association's annual festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. She thought, "There's never been one in Connecticut. I'd better hurry up and do one quickly before somebody else will" (telephone interview).

So, she did. In 1982 the First Annual Storytelling Festival was held at Connecticut College. Overlooking Long Island Sound, the spacious campus has since then been an ideal setting for the event, held in late April of each year.

The shape of the festival has remained fairly consistent: A nationally known teller is the featured performer (or,



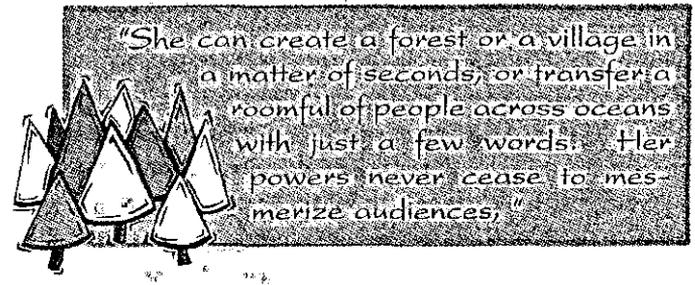
some years, two performers), holding concerts and workshops throughout the weekend. Over the past seventeen years, those artists have included Jackie Torrance, Laura Simms, Donald Davis, Carol Birch, David Holt, Milbre Burch, Bill Harley, Jay O'Callahan, Patricia McKissack, Ed Stivender, Peninnah Schram, Jamal Koram and Carmen Deedy. The range of storytelling styles includes puppets, mimists, dancers, and actors. However, there is also a place for modest and nontheatrical tellers of tales. Reed says, "I now know what at first I refused to believe, that the meaningful story, quietly told to quiet listeners, is the true heart of storytelling" (1).

At the beginning of the festival, Friday night, children and families are treated to a variety of tellers in a program called, "Once and Twice upon a Time"—an addition created by Connecticut storyteller Peg O'Sullivan in 1994. On Saturday mornings, Connecticut tellers are highlighted, generally for adult listeners, in "A Gathering of Tellers." These notable tellers have included Synia Mc Quillan, accompanied by her husband, percussionist Jeff Mc Quillan; Joseph Bruchac and, more recently his son, Jesse Bruchac, who tell tales from their Abenaki heritage; Sara deBeer, a professional storyteller with arts-in-education interests. Carol Birch; Peg O'Sullivan and Lorna Stengel have also told. Anyone associated with the storytelling scene in Connecticut has made the spring pilgrimage to Connecticut College and the Storytelling Festival. Reed herself, of course, tells stories during the Gathering, too: "She can create a forest or a village in a matter of seconds, or transfer a roomful of people across oceans with just a few words. Her powers never cease to mesmerize audiences," says Kim Hirsch (25).

On Saturday afternoons workshops are held which help aspiring storytellers find their styles and their voices, whether through puppetry, mime, movement, creative drama, masks, or simple, quiet tellings. Story-listeners have a host of options as well. Whether as tellers or as listeners, many types of storytelling are also explored: stories from the community of the oral tradition; personal stories; family stories; oral history—all culminating in a Saturday evening performance by the headliner artist, an event open to the greater New London community.

In 1994 Sacred Tellings—tales from the Christian,

Jewish, Native American, and other spiritual traditions—were added on Sunday mornings. "Stories for Littlest Listeners," a program for preschool children in collaboration with Head Start, began in 1998.



From the popularity of the festival evolved the Connecticut Storytelling Center, now a nonprofit organization and housed in the Winslow Ames Building on the campus of Connecticut College. Serving as a clearing house, the newsletter, *Hear Say*, is published four times annually, keeping members informed of storytelling happenings. The *Listing of Tellers* provides schools and other organizations with profiles of available professional storytellers. While noting her tendency as an administrator to "lose checks in the parking lot," Rosalind Hinman, storyteller and dramatist, says of Reed: "... her strength lies in her ability to enthuse everybody around her" (telephone interview). In addition to promoting the Festival and other storytelling events throughout the region, Reed and other storytellers have offered through the Center numerous programs in the public schools, especially New London. Of her program in the New London schools Reed says, "It's been newly rediscovered that it's not enough to teach children skills. You have to give them a reason for learning. And there's a great deal of attention being paid to the psychological aspects of fairy tales. [Children] need to experience the hero overcoming obstacles . . . In these stories, the weak, small character prevails" (qtd. in Schoenberger B6).

Presently, Ann Shapiro—who was also an O'Neill artist in the 1970s—is the Executive Director and Education Director for the Center. "I love Barbara Reed," says Shapiro. "She's been a mother to many people in many ways . . . Without her nurturing, the work of the Center in the schools never would have happened" (telephone interview). A culmination of the Education program was in the

Center's storytellers audiotape recording, *The Listening Tree* in 1995, followed by the publication of *The Listening Tree* teacher's guide in 1997 (edited by Katie Herald). Reed herself published articles in the *National Storytelling Journal* and the *School Library Journal*; she also published a chapter in an anthology compiled by Teresa Miller, *Joining In: Anthology of Participation Stories and How to Tell Them*.

When visionaries like Reed act, the impetus is often created for others to act as well. In 1984 Dr. Gail Herman helped found the Connecticut Student Performing Arts Festival, modeled after Reed's work at the Connecticut Storytelling Festival. This festival has allowed thousands of Connecticut youngsters to see, experience and perform stories. To provide access to different regions of the state, the student festival has been held at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Wesleyan University in Middletown, and Trinity College in Hartford. Hinman, former Artistic Director of this festival, says, "Barbara is responsible more than anyone for the revival of storytelling in Connecticut. She single-handedly started the festival and the Connecticut Storytelling Center which have grown into a considerable and reputable institution and festival. She has the vision to want these things to happen" (telephone interview).

Tellebration, a multi-regional event, began in 1988, initiated by J. G. Pinkerton, another long-time Connecticut Storytelling Center member. Now an international affair, one evening in November each year is designated as a time for storytellers to gather in their own regions to simultaneously tell stories. Also for many years, because of Reed's leadership, story sharing groups have met regularly in different regions of Connecticut. In 1991 Dr. Gwendolyn Nowlan, professor of library science at Southern Connecticut State University, began offering a Storytelling Institute, a three-credit summer graduate course. Like the journey-cake in the old Appalachian folktale, wherever Reed rolled along, others rolled, too.

On afternoon in late summer, I had the opportunity to spend time with Reed, who was recuperating from hip replacement surgery, on the porch of her Guilford home, overlooking Long Island Sound. Stopping our conversation occasionally to watch the graceful movement and stark whiteness of the egrets and great herons, Reed spoke of her ongoing concerns and interests.

High priorities, as they have been for many years, are her projects in the schools, especially the poorer ones, where she continues to perform because she believes all children should have the opportunity to hear storytelling. In addition to storytelling performances, she still offers the occasional drama session, finding that fifth and sixth grade African American students especially like "fooling with words" and enjoy the humor of Lewis Carroll.

Reed spoke of her concerns about the training of librarians: Their fidelity to the text keeps them from telling as many stories as they could-storytellers should feel free to change tales when they tell them. After all, stories that come to us from the oral tradition have been changed in the telling by the community of tellers many times. More tales would be told were there less rigidity in their training.

About the teaching of drama, Reed believes children need performance. She doesn't agree with the "extreme British approach" of not letting children perform, though she is sorry so many of the performances are "glitzy musicals." About the teaching of children's literature, Reed is concerned that education students often bring a shallow knowledge of literature to their teacher education programs, though she makes it clear that she regards teachers as "heroines." Children's literature is itself often "entry level." She is not opposed to Judy Blume and Shel Silverstein who, she says, "made poetry possible for children" she hopes, however, that children "move on." It seemed to her when she was teaching children's literature that *Charlotte's Web* was the only book in the world teachers who go through teacher training knew.

As a child herself, Reed remembers often being read aloud to by her father: *Old Curiosity Shop*, *Pickwick Papers*, Rudyard Kipling, and the King Arthur books. By herself she read Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* and much of Dickens. A quiet, bookish child (which might come as a surprise to those who know her now), she thought that "anything I didn't learn to do, I wouldn't have to do, like cook," a theory, she says, that has been disproved many times over.

The electronic age has left her behind. To this day, she can't bring herself to watch television, unless someone is sitting with her, although she does keep in contact with her many friends through email. About academia, Reed regrets that it seems the "entire process of education is looked



down on" in higher education. "I don't know where they think their students came from," she said of academics, "just sprung from Jupiter's brow, I guess."

Turning our thoughts to the Festival, I asked why she had stepped down. "Because," she said with her customary self-honesty, "I found myself making snide remarks to the very people who were trying to help me. I've always thought one of my strengths was my kind nature and I found myself losing that." We spoke of the many people who admire her, and who came forth eloquently with that admiration during the celebrations surrounding her eightieth birthday which, Reed thought, were "blown out of all proportion." I asked her what she most admired about herself.

Without missing a beat, she replied, "Persistence."

I asked her what she would like to see happen to the Festival in the future: There has been some talk of Reed writing a manual on how she put it together for seventeen years. "That manual may not get written," said Reed. "The Festival has to reinvent itself because there is no joy in doing something when somebody has told you exactly what to do"—a profound existential statement.

Her hopes for the future include the financial survival of the Connecticut Storytelling Center. Throughout her life, whether pursuing creative drama or storytelling or the arts in general, she has found that she has had "to create the demand." Those who carry on her work at the Center will have to continue to create that demand.

In 1985 Reed was presented with the Faith Hektoen Award, an award given for the significant and creative impact on library service to children. In 1994, Southern Connecticut State University's Storytelling Institute presented her with the Outstanding Leadership Award and, in 1996, the National Storytelling Association presented her with the Service Award for the Northeast Region. Beth Hannah, retired Connecticut College education professor, says, "What she is is a definition of an educator in the best sense: she is the inspiring kind and the mentor kind, a whole different level than most educators" (telephone interview).

Barbara Reed can reflect on a life well-spent in creating opportunities for others in the performing arts and giving others the gift of herself in her stories. Says percussionist Jeff Mc Quillan, "She's like the mother storyteller of Connecticut" (qtd. in Hirsh 26). Though she has laid aside some of her for-

mer responsibilities, those who know her well eagerly await just what she will do in the next decade.*

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