

Blethers Spring 2006

Culture report sees bright future for Scotland's storytellers

The Scottish Storytelling Centre has been identified by Scotland's Parliament as one of the national resources which will be "well placed" to assist in the future development of the nation's culture.

The Centre is named among those organisations which will be involved in "Creative Scotland" an all-embracing, new cultural development agency proposed in the Scottish Executive's published response to the review by a special Cultural Commission, set up in 2004.

With Scotland's Book Trust, Poetry Library and Publishers' Association, and a number of Gaelic and Scots projects, the Storytelling Centre will be able to assist in the promotion of literature, publishing and storytelling in schools, among other activities.

The new agency is to have a "pivotal role" in promotion, developing talent, supporting creative industries, offering business advice, in research and in links with education.

The Commission's study was based on the premise that the people of Scotland have rights of access to high quality artistic activity. Among its concerns it highlighted the need to examine the role of private and voluntary sectors.

In its response - "Scotland's Culture - Cultar na h-Alba" - the Scottish government agrees that voluntary effort and practice is a "key resource" to be valued, and that culture is central to the well-being of Scotland's citizens. " Its inspirational qualities defy measurement."

Among its proposals - which will affect every aspect of Scottish life - the Executive emphasises the future role of small groups, voluntary bodies and local government in arts provision.

Though a large number of the Commission's 131 recommendations have been rejected, the review declares the Government's commitment to culture as a vital ingredient in Scotland's success, here and overseas, and it intends to spend £234 million in 2007/8 in addition to local authority spending "of a similar order".

"All those with a role in the provision of culture need to work together - across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Equally, the Scottish Government cannot and should not extend its ambit to areas best served by others, whose expertise and knowledge is better suited to the task".

The parliamentary response lays heavy emphasis on the development and encouragement of the arts in enhancing the lives of Scotland's children and young people.

Projects that enable them to achieve high standards will be backed and, as part of a "curriculum for excellence", links between schools and the arts, screen, music and drama colleges will be established, in keeping with an "escalator" philosophy which will allow involvement in a full range of cultural activities and opportunities.

Small bodies, which seek to promote and support the Scots language should be given more recognition and will be involved in discussions on future development but it will be for Bord na Gaidhlig, set up in 2005, to help create a sustainable future for the Gaelic language.

However, the response adds: "The national role to promote literature and publishing should encompass both Gaelic and Scots projects." "Itchy Coo" and "Ur Sgeul" are quoted as examples.

Dr Donald Smith, director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, says that the report is "a real shift in tone and in policy. It asks arts organisations to link what they are doing in communities and schools with national and international excellence.

"That is exactly what the Storytelling Centre and Network are all about."

June opening for Old Town newcomer

The new Scottish Storytelling Centre will be officially opened on June 1st, 2006 by the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, Patricia Ferguson, who presented the Scottish Executive's report on the country's cultural future to Parliament earlier in the year.

The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Rt Rev Alan McDonald, will be among those involved in the special ceremony to mark the completion of the Centre.

This edition of *Blethers* highlights some international aspects of storytelling. New forms of training and skill development are outlined as an introduction to a year long programme of workshops and professional courses which will be of interest throughout Scotland.

Diary Dates 2006

Aberdeen Storytelling and Theatre Festival: February 21st to March 29th

Edinburgh Ceilidh Culture: April 1st to April 22nd

Glendale Gathering, Skye: May 17th to May 19th

Official Opening of new Storytelling Centre: June 1st

Deadline for next *Blethers*: July 31st

International Storytelling Festival: October 25th to November 5th

National Tell a Story Day: October 27th

Joyous role for Marita at the Pow Wow

Globe trotting storyteller Marita Luck found herself at the Sturgeon Lake Eaglenest PowWow as part of a tour that took in Singapore, where she was accompanied by storyteller Sheela Wee, Australia and Canada.

"It was the highlight of the tour when I was invited to be guest of honour at the Australian Philosophy, Science and Theology Festival in Grafton, New South Wales and at the reserve of the Canada Cree First Nations at the Lake in Saskatchewan," she says.

The invitation to take part followed the "Coming Home" pilgrimage of First Nations, Saskatchewan to the Orkneys in 2004 when Marita worked in a team with Cree storytellers, Rhonda Donies and Joseph Naytowhow and began a dialogue with visiting elders, musicians, dancers and storytellers. The Festival integrates Aboriginal Australian and artists of various ethnic origins to provide insights into their world views and philosophy. Over 1000 traditional dancers and singers took part, putting stories into action.

"The amount of both traditional tales and of personal life stories I heard was overwhelming - I will be working on and with the material I gathered for years to come" she says. "I was also invited to share my own background experiences of Orkney, Scotland and Germany." Marita took part in traditional life at a cultural camp in the bush which was run by elders for Aboriginal and white adults and children.

"I feel very privileged. Many elders and children gave me the honour of sharing their stories in a genuine dialogue - they were the true builders of bridges between all cultures - to explore the past through stories that link us with each other in the present, and create visions for a better future."

Marita was moved to hear from the organising secretary of the Festival committee that her presence last summer had been significant and given hope, as well as encouragement to people to look at issues in a different light.

"This for me is another reason why our work as storytellers can be such a great joy and such a great responsibility. I am so grateful to the Festival in Australia, many private sponsors in Canada and the Scottish Arts Council."

The snail and the whale win book race for Scots storyteller

Storytelling Forum member and popular singer and author, Julia Donaldson, was among the winners of the Blue Peter Book Awards for 2005, alongside writers Michael Morpurgo and Simon Chapman, - and judges took a very high-minded view of the entries as the selection took place aboard the London Eye and lasted all day. But no going around in circles for them as they came up with winners in four categories.

From a shortlist of twelve challenging books they decided that Julia's *The Snail and the Whale* was the best illustrated book to read aloud.

Julia is no newcomer to national recognition, for her Gruffalo books and *Room on the Broom* have attracted honours. She also has many fans in Easterhouse, Glasgow where for three years she was writer in residence at the library.

Michael Morpurgo's book, *Private Peaceful* was overall winner and "the book I could not put down" while Simon Chapman took the award for the best book with facts, *Explorers Wanted at the North Pole*.

Dreams worth waiting for

Scottish Storytelling Forum chairman, Colin Mackay has thanked staff, volunteers, the Church of Scotland and everyone who has worked towards the development of the new Centre in Edinburgh's Royal Mile due to open officially in June 2006. He told the annual meeting that the new building, next to John Knox House, is an impressive flagship that goes beyond their wildest dreams in terms of appearance and facilities.

An impressive 'First' for the pupils of Castlevue

What do storytelling, printmaking, a gallery in Sussex and a finance company have in common? Answer: A desire to give an unforgettable experience to children in less affluent areas of Britain. Bea Ferguson was the storyteller involved in "Making an Impression" at the new Castlevue Primary School, Craigmillar, Edinburgh.

The project was funded by Provident Financial and managed by John Sheeran of Sheeran Lock Associates in Sussex and, although it has already been run successfully in primary schools in England, this was the first in Scotland.

Her remit was to tell Scottish stories to every class in the school, locally based if possible and with a very strong central visual element. "How lucky we are to have kelpies, selkies, witches and sea-monsters in Scottish folklore - all with fantastic imagery", says Bea. "Add fairies, ghosts and fat cats and it's amazing just how many of these stories actually took place in and around Craigmillar. Assipattle, Tamlin, Duncan's story of Maggie, the Fat Witch and my Edinburgh version of the Fat Cat were particular favourites with the children and produced stunning artwork."

After the storytelling, in the art room, all were given a "Making an Impression" T-shirt. The children made individual drawings from the stories they had heard and then, under the expert eye of Glasgow printmaker, Elspeth Lamb, they collectively created a giant class print.

Bea says: "We had three days of enormous fun and were greeted enthusiastically by the children, but the real excitement came on the final afternoon, with a tremendous community event. All the children's work was exhibited in the hall and parents were invited to a big tea party. We were overwhelmed by the turnout, and the air of excitement, as everyone assembled, was so rewarding.

There were a few very short speeches, and Provident Financial presented the school with a video camera and £1000 towards the development of the school library."

As a finale Bea led a noisy, interactive story with about 350 adults and children. The feedback from Lindsey Robertson, the headteacher of Castleview Primary was extremely positive, with the whole project being deemed a " huge success in raising the pupils' self-esteem" and "a high quality learning experience".

"It was a privilege to be part of a well-organised and very well-funded project where storytelling was used as the creative stimulus in developing the pupils' artwork," Bea says "and it was exciting to work with an artist of the calibre of Elspeth Lamb. Financial Provident assisted and enjoyed this worthwhile community project.

"I wonder if there are more firms out there who could be persuaded to fund similar projects in the future?"

Audrey's new CD links the nations

Popular storyteller Audrey Parks brought off an exciting double to begin the new year. "On the Tip of My Tongue" - a collection of favourite stories - has been released on two CDs and it is sure to win her even more admirers.

Audrey is a master of the craft, a writer and poet. Born in Belfast she has a store of Irish and Scottish tales to tell - many of them learned from her paternal grandmother as well as friends and neighbours.

Though she and her husband, Raymond, have spent many years in Edinburgh she continued to add Irish stories to her repertoire but over the years has extended her interests to other countries, including Norway.

Several gifted friends joined her on this two-parter with an excellent accompanying booklet of useful background notes.

Cara Lockhart Smith did the cover illustrations and Kyloe Records of Spittal, Berwick on Tweed, produced the album's seventeen tracks.

New stories and experiences never cease to delight Audrey who celebrated the last Tell-a-Story Day at a church " campfire" with friends from Liberton Church. Primary school children and their parents and grandparents all turned up at the hall - but it was the children who were the traditional tellers, Audrey recalls. "They went on and on and on.....the story became a saga to be continued - but isn't that as it should be?"

Ruth Davies had the idea and everyone joined to help her, Margot Brandie, Jess McIvor and Audrey as they told stories from the British Isles, Australia, Scandinavia and America - "as well as the best storybook of all - The Bible".

Changing role for Pollok Villagers: Unique project to focus on training as demands increase

St. James's Church, Pollok was moved there, stone by stone, to serve a developing community, from its original home at Pollokshields, four miles away. Now, sixty years later, it is also home to "The Village" a unique storytelling venture which is putting Greater Pollok on the map and also broadening training opportunities for storytellers.

At night, in the distinctive turret of St. James's Church, the brilliant stained glass windows shine out like a beacon. The effect is of a magical lantern and it is an appropriate symbol of a thrilling venture that began through the initiative of members of the church and former minister, the Rev. Helen Hamilton.

They saw that the large building could be used during the week in innovative ways and The Village grew inside. It is now run as a charity with volunteers and a board of directors, but is still an integral part of the church building. It includes a local, global and Bible village which form backgrounds to every sort of story and activity.

Schoolchildren, elderly folk, asylum seekers, banner makers, refugees and ceilidh enthusiasts have been quick to realise the potential of the project. The director, Rachel Smillie admits: "There is no end to what you can do with stories".

Projects with businesses, homeless people and prisoners have all been on the agenda and on the immediate horizon are major training projects for the whole of Glasgow and beyond, the first of which was a day event in February on storytelling with a therapeutic intent, led by a consultant clinical psychologist who works with young people with severe mental health problems and organised by the Scottish Storytelling Centre.

Seventeen primary schools send pupils to The Village and twelve schools send all their classes. More than 2,000 will attend during a year and many more will also visit Crookston Castle where storytellers in residence, Alan Steel and Gerry Durkin lead the tours. Floodlighting at the Castle and road improvements mean that residents are getting a whole new perspective on their own "stately home". Developments have included storytelling in schools, stories and song projects and a scheme funded by the Greater Pollok Integration Network.

"I have always loved working here," says Rachel, "but the work I have loved more than anything has been with asylum seekers and the opportunities to encourage relationships across the communities." Their artistic gifts have been recognised and one volunteer, refugee Londi Beketch Luyuye from Congo, has been particularly influential as artist and cartoonist. He was a contributor to "Buffalo Horns" a collection of stories told by asylum seekers from 17 countries.

As a follow-up, school children have taken part in storymaking - interviewing local people and newcomers from many nations on their backgrounds. Story collector, Liam Stewart will again be involved in seeing the collection through to print. Behind all the ideas and the initiatives is the endless question of funding. Rachel believes this is not just a challenge but can be inspirational as backing is often available for short term projects. "We have to show we can do this" she says. "We recognise that we need to be able to generate income ourselves like all voluntary organisations.



"Our big thrust has to be developing storytelling training services to businesses, libraries, schools, museums and individuals. We are going to be knocking on doors. Maintaining our general funding is another part of it and encouraging young people. Our job is to inspire and enchant them in every way we can."

Life stories will form part of national archive

A major storytelling project, celebrating the personal and local histories of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community in Scotland, has received substantial backing from the Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund.

OurStory Scotland, a recognised Scottish charity, is to provide archiving resources, creative platforms and storytelling events. The project will allow unfamiliar voices to be heard, telling " queer tales" that are poignant, moving, sad, funny and heroic. Stories, materials and documents will be archived at the National Museum, and at the Mitchell Library, where OurStory Scotland is based. "The project is genuinely inclusive and welcomes support from all who have sympathy with its aims," says Jaime Valentine of OurStory Scotland.

www.ourstoryscotland.org.uk

Museums offer thrilling challenge to their own storyteller

The Museums of Scotland have a new storyteller in residence and Marion Kenny says she cannot believe her good fortune. "It is a huge honour and I am absolutely loving my new post," she says.

Over the next year she will be working at the Royal Museum in Chambers Street, Edinburgh, at the National War Museum based at the Castle and in the three museums of Flight, Costume and Scottish Country Life.

She will also work with an outreach team to take exhibitions to communities unable to access the treasures - including prisons, Travellers' sites and remote communities.

"It's very exciting to be researching such a vast range of subjects and with incredibly inspiring teams of work colleagues from the Royal Museum," Marion says.

Her current work includes a focus on farming themes for nursery children, collecting music and stories based on World War Two and working alongside teachers developing the school curriculum.

She is also involved in music and tales from Arabia and creating workshops for Adult Learners' Week while scaring herself with tales of creepy crawlies for a new exhibition at Chambers Street.

She has been greatly helped by storytellers, Millie Gray and Noel Cochrane with her research and stories of the second world war. "They have been so generous with their time," she says.

Getting the Museum post was not the only excitement for Marion. In September she was in Australia to take part in the International Festival and mentor in Aboriginal stories and tales of early settlers. She was kept busy throughout the festival with workshops, concerts, compering and performing fire-dances and tales of fire and light.

As Scottish storytellers are so well travelled these days she was not surprised to meet up with writer Jess Smith whose contributions to the Festival were a sell out (see Double Delight below). Marion and Jess and her husband, David, travelled with Native American storyteller, "Idaho Jack" to the deep south west of Australia and to the Pinnacle deserts of the central plains during their stay.

Marion was able to hear Tribal Elder, storyteller and academic Noel Nanup of the Noongar Tribe telling stories. "It was an experience that was totally mesmerising and moving," she says. "They have so much to teach us."

Island hopping will aid cultural exchange

"Go and meet" is an exciting venture throughout Scotland's islands which is to be further developed after successful pilot schemes.

Small groups of storytellers have been travelling to neighbouring islands to exchange songs and stories and at the same time enhance and promote their cultural links.

The scheme covers the Hebridean Islands but a grant from Highlands and Islands Enterprise will enable extensions to be made to include Orkney and Shetland and eventually mainland Highland areas too.

George McPherson of Glendale on Skye hopes that a concordat with Ireland could be a possibility in the future.

From Fife to the Far East - a thrilling adventure for Senga

When Fife storyteller Senga Munro heard from Jill Bush at the Netherbow that an Asian Congress of Storytellers was to take place in Singapore in November with contributors from many parts of the world, within a week, she had booked a place, accommodation and a flight. She recalls her experiences.

Twelve hours is a long time but with the time difference I arrived early at the Furama Riverfront Hotel where the congress would take place. A message had been left for me by Sheila Wee, who met many Scottish storytellers at the 2004 International Festival or the Skye Festival in 2005. She was welcoming me to Singapore and suggesting I might like to contact John Hockney, an Australian storyteller who had also arrived early. The name seemed familiar and I discovered that he was the brother of artist, David Hockney, who had emigrated to Australia from Bradford.

The next morning, in a temperature of 38 degrees Celsius, I was surprised to find the streets decorated with Christmas trees, sleighs, Santas, elves and myriads of lights - and the shopping was good. By the evening many of the workshop leaders had arrived and I was invited by the members of the committee to join them at one of the many eating halls to try the local food which was a mixture of Malay, Indian and Chinese cuisine. Things are the same for storytellers wherever they tell. A girl who was eating with her family became very agitated and started waving to one of the committee. "That's my storyteller! That's my storyteller!" She came over and was introduced.

When the Congress began the atmosphere was rather like our Development Day, but with twice as many delegates, coming not only from Singapore but Malaysia, Thailand, India, Hong Kong and even Scotland. It was opened by the Conference Weaver, Jeeva Raghunath from South India. Then there was a Story Campur, when some of the Congress presenters told stories from their own cultures.

This was followed by workshops. Making choices is always difficult but all of the workshops were of a very high standard including opportunities for participation and discussion. As usual, the discussion carried on through coffee, lunch, tea and dinner. There was also a story swap and a storytelling clinic.

What were the highlights for me during the two full days? Watching one of the delegates from a college for the deaf in Bangkok tell an extremely funny story to the whole congress was definitely one and so was seeing forty twelve-year-olds from a local school, who had been working with Cassandra Wye for four sessions earlier in the week, performing two movement dramas based on traditional stories. The blend of enthusiasm, creativity and humour was inspiring.

I shall also always remember watching Hiroko Jujita, a Japanese teller, relate in her own language a story of a greedy granny who didn't want to share her favourite goodies with her grandchildren. As she opened her box of goodies, out jumped hundreds of origami frogs. Was it worthwhile going to Singapore for four days? I am looking forward to the next congress.

Traditions and Skills Training: Something for all in year-long programme

The 2006 training programme is now available. It covers workshops, development days and residential courses through to May 2007. The full programme is on the web at www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk and is also available from the Storytelling Centre in leaflet form. Additional events will be arranged and published individually and programmes can also be ordered and tailor-made for local venues and needs. "Why consider storytelling skills?" is a question posed by the new programme, which replies as follows: Storytelling skills are used in every walk of life. They are the foundation of effective interpersonal communication and also feed into printed and other multimedia forms of storytelling.

Courses

Many of the following groups have benefited from workshops and courses:

Professionals: teachers, social workers, nursery nurses, counsellors and care workers, ministers and priests, interpreters, museum guides, countryside rangers, community workers, tourist guides, youth workers

Artists: community and professional storytellers and emergent trainee storytellers, artists, actors, community arts facilitators and amateurs

Volunteers: all those involved in heritage and environmental projects, volunteer guides, those working with elderly folk, children's volunteers and church guides.

Traditions and Skills Training has something for everyone - just like storytelling!

Blethering on about books and rattling good reads

Storytelling is, of course, about not reading from books. Nonetheless, the fertile oral soil gives rise to a host of books and CDs and this issue of Blethers reports on a bumper crop!

Mercat Press has produced a beautiful new edition of *The Folk Tales of Scotland* collated by Norah and William Montgomerie. This is, in fact, the book previously entitled *The Well at the World's End* which now becomes the subtitle.

The collection was a labour of love which contains a host of classic Scots folk and fairy tales ostensibly for children.

More importantly for storytellers, the versions are beautifully spare and elegant and an ideal frame on which you can build your own personal telling. The tales are not in themselves oral transcriptions, but draw sensitively on their traditional

language and contexts. Well done Mercat Press. Obtain from Storytelling Centre or from bookshops. ISBN 1841830909

Next up is *Rosslyn and the Grail* by Mark Oxbrow and Ian Robertson, from Mainstream Publishing. This accessible read explores the actual storytelling traditions of Rosslyn rather than the 'Da Vinci code' hokum and puts them in historical context. The result is a rich brew of tradition, legend, and genuine cultural achievement. Not to be missed - again it is on general release.

Elsewhere in this *Blethers*, Audrey Parks' double CD 'On the Tip of My Tongue' is highlighted (page 3). This has been produced by the admirable Mike Yates of Kyloe Records. But Mike brings the same sensitivity and skill to his two volume collection of Travellers' Tales featuring Stanley Robertson, Duncan and William Williamson (Vol 1), Duncan Williamson, Stanley Robertson and Gabrielle Ijdo (Vol 2).

You can get 'On the Tip of My Tongue' (double CD £15.00), 'Travellers Tales' (£12.00 per CD), and George Macpherson's fine Kyloe CD 'Swans on the Loch' (£12.00) post free from the Storytelling Centre, or order through record shops who stock folk and traditional material.

A rarer buy is the CD of stories, memories and song gathered in the Mearns by 'Persephone', a project of GAS, the Grampian Association of Storytellers. 'The Butcher, the Baker and the Candlestick Maker: luggin in tae Mearns fowk' is a rich harvest of local lore, humour and magic. You can get it for £10 plus £1.95 P&P from GAS. Contact Maggie Fraser on 01569 730195 or www.grampianstorytellers.org.uk for an order form. Congratulations to GAS.

A useful recommendation has come from Sibylle Alexander for a German publication released for the first time in English by Floris Books. *Autumn Nature Activities for Children* by Imogen Kutsch is the first of a beautiful seasonal series which gives constant inspiration for story activities. The price is £12.95 from bookshops or contact Floris directly on 0131 337 2372. The books reflect the 'Nature Kindergarten Workshops' movement which has done so much to enrich early education in Germany and beyond.

Finally, advance notice of an expanded edition of Alison McMorland's *Herd Laddie o the Glen*. This is a magnificent collection of the songs and ballads of Willie Scott the Borders shepherd and songster. A landmark publication.

Scottish International Storytelling Festival: Crossing the water - a meeting of cultures

The 2006 International Festival will run from Wednesday 25th October to Sunday 5th November. The extended dates mark the first Festival to have the new Storytelling Centre as its anchor venue. The theme of the event is 'Scotland - Ireland' and the ways, past and present, in which these two cultures have fed each other. National Tell-A-Story Day will be on Friday 27th October - just before

the Hallowe'en weekend. People will be free to choose their own Tell-A-Story Day theme. The 2005 events attracted over 20,000 people. The Middle Eastern and Hans Christian Andersen themes proved very popular in Edinburgh while the "Leith Lives" festival events were a particular success, attracting people to local community venues.

For 2006 Donald Smith will resume his earlier responsibilities as Festival Director. "When the Storytelling Festival began," commented Donald, "the links with Ireland were central so, in many different ways, this year's Festival feels like a homecoming."

Council puts storybags on priority list

North Lanarkshire Council has undertaken a major initiative with its Storytelling Workshops for Parents and Carers of Nursery and P1 children. The aim of the training sessions is to help encourage more contact and communication between parents and their children. At the height of the project, which ran from January to May 2005, up to ten storytellers were involved and well over one hundred nurseries and primary schools participated.

Inspired by the success and impact of "Storybags" which have been in schools for five years, they provide a fun incentive for families to get involved in sharing books and related activities at home with nursery and infant children. The story and family fun bags, produced and distributed throughout their area by the Council, contain books, glove puppets, fire engines, aeroplanes and dinosaurs.

The Council felt it was time to address the "Talking and Listening" areas of the curriculum in the hope that parents and carers at home would be able to support the work of teachers in the classrooms. Storytelling was the obvious medium.

Such was the success of the project North Lanarkshire is to run the programme again with even more schools joining in. It will be another long-term scheme. Judy Paterson, based at Inverkeithing in Fife, was asked to compile a handbook as the main printed material supporting the project. Hints and tips are included with stories, riddles and rhymes to encourage parents to be involved in listening and talking and telling stories at home.

Storytellers went into the nurseries and schools and ran workshops for parents and carers. The usual format involved telling stories to the children with the parents and carers as part of the audience, and, after a coffee break, there would be a relaxed, informal and fun workshop for the adults. Part of the brief required the storyteller to discuss and underline the importance of the storybags and to encourage questions and comments from the adults.

Some storytellers can now find their way around this large region without maps we are told!

Double Delight: Oz welcomes Jess to festival as her books top the best sellers

Storyteller and writer Jess Smith has enjoyed the thrill of a life-time by seeing all three of her books listed first, second and third in Ottakar's top-selling biographies in the same week. "It was the joy of my life," she says.

"Jessie's Journey", "Tales from the Tent" and "Tears for a Tinker ", which all recall her life as a Traveller are not destined to be her only books however. Her first novel, "Bruar's Rest" has been accepted for publication and a collection of short stories, "Sookin' Berries" follows.

Her stories have also taken Jess and husband David to Australia - "a memory to keep forever," she says. The trip to the Seventh Australian International Festival in Perth was thoroughly enjoyable, though she admits when she saw the life size posters with her picture welcoming her, she got a bit nervous. However she was soon among friends and, with three others, was opening the Festival programme with a Pandora's Box of outrageous tales.

The co-ordinator of the Festival, Mabel Kaplan, has spoken of the gratitude the organisers feel for the Scottish Arts Council's support which enabled Jess to take part.

"Her contribution was quite exceptional," she says. "Local promotion of Jess as a featured artist created a special place for a previously hidden cultural group within the Western Australian community - the Romani/Gypsy folk - and gave them voice and a legitimacy they had not previously experienced."

In the weeks before the Festival enquiries came from all over Australia about her "Falling Feathers" presentation that explored the ancient art of storytelling within the culture and traditions of Scotland's Travelling people. Her sessions were sell outs and there was so much interest that an extra spot, during which Jess was able to talk and answer questions from packed audiences, had to be set up.

The community is the richer for Jess's visit, says Mabel, who hopes that the links forged and threads woven will continue to stretch between the countries and reach into the next festival in Victoria in 2007.