

## **BLETHERS SPRING 2004**

### **Theatre of the imagination – dramatic new design for Old Town's favourite arts location**

As work continues on the redevelopment of the Scottish Storytelling Centre, Director Donald Smith explains how all that is best of the past and the future will be linked.

For many years the Netherbow was the only year-round live theatre in Edinburgh's Old Town. For the last twenty years it has been a prime and special place for storytelling, children's theatre, puppetry and community theatre. The £3.4 million development of the new Scottish Storytelling Centre retains the theatre at basement/garden level. The aim has been to keep the intimacy of the old space while thoroughly upgrading its access and facilities.

The main improvements are:

- Equal access for people of all ages and abilities
- An informal low stage with easy access to audience
- Modern technical support including better facilities for vision and hearing impaired people
- An increase from 75 to 99 seats

In addition, the Storytelling Theatre will have a new "daylight" identity with a window to the Storytelling Garden (shutters for blackouts), timber lining and a more spacious feel for workshops, readings and conferences, and children's theatre. In this guise the new space will host many new literature events while continuing the main strands of storytelling.

The aim of the redevelopment has been to build on the rich legacy of the past while ensuring that the new Storytelling Theatre will be a place of education and delight for generations to come – a true timeship of the imagination.

This theme is being recognised by the appeal to friends and supporters to name a seat in memory of a special person or association. Long-term Netherbow supporters and storytellers are already leading the way with dedications to relations (special storytellers in people's lives) and to storytellers and writers whom they wish to honour. Others have chosen to remember some of the early pioneers of both the Netherbow and The Scottish Storytelling Centre.

If you would like to name a seat, on your own or with others, please contact Donald Smith at the Storytelling Centre. The full cost of each seat is £275. However, there is also a list of "names" we would like to honour and smaller donations towards that list would also be very welcome.

At the end, every seat will tell its own story and be a bridge between the generations.

### **Magic, music and mystery**

The Tales at Martinmas caravan has been on the road again, drawing listeners and aged three to eighty-three to the fifth Highland Storytelling Festival across Ross-shire.

Friendly, old-style ceilidhs were on offer with great singing from Alison McMorland and Geordie McIntyre and tales from Janet Macinnes, Andrew Mackintosh, Martin Watsmann and newcomer Lesley MacLean. There were memorable highlights throughout the week which saw the Pictish Museum at Rosemarkie and Lochcarron Smithy Heritage Centre as fitting backdrops for stories of humour and pathos, ghostly tales and ballad singing.

Duncan Williamson, in a welcome return north, pointed to the spot at the Smithy where he, while still a lad, had had a horse shod for eight shillings.

At Cromarty, stories of the sea featured strongly with Chrissie Stewart and Ian Stephen while Alec Williamson and Essie Stewart brought images of black arts on the Black Isle to life.

The Perrins Centre at Alness was the venue for a virtuoso performance from Elizabeth Stewart on the piano. She first performed in public at the age of nine in her mother's Aberdeenshire-based Scottish dance band.

Teachers responded well to the Storytellers in Schools scheme during festival week. From the east coast to the western outposts of Achiltibuie and Applecross more than 2000 children were enthralled by a visiting storyteller.

Tales at Martinmas is part of the Merry Dancers Storytelling Project, a three-year initiative by Community Learning and Leisure in Ross and Cromarty, supported by RACE and made possible by an award from the Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund.

### **Blethers Stories Span the World and Keep You in the Picture**

If you still doubted that it's a small world, the autumn edition of "Blethers" provided proof positive.

To accompany an article on Tom Muir (Blethers 7), we used an illustration by artist Bryce Wilson of a dancing Orkney trow and on page four, a story on Marion

Kenny, which told of her visit to Whakatane in New Zealand to study Maori stories.

By a remarkable coincidence the original drawing of the trow is now the property of Gillian Molony who lives in – you’ve guessed it – Whakatane. Her connection with Tom Muir and Orkney goes back many years but they met only recently. Tom was born on the farm which his grandfather, Alfred Blaikie, the laird of Tankerness. Tom’s father met his future wife in Tankerness and Tom now works in the Orkney Museum which is based in Tankerness House, formerly the home of the Blaikie family.

When Tom set up a museum website, Gillian was his first caller, searching for anything on her ancestral home and it was at Tankerness that Tom and Bryce struck up their friendship which resulted in the publication of “The Mermaid Bride and Other Orkney Folktales”.

Gillian was in Orkney in 2003 to learn more about her roots and it was during that visit that Bryce gave her the original drawing as a parting gift. “She was so thrilled”, Tom Muir says, “to see the illustration of her dancing trow in ‘Blethers’.” Though she does not know the teacher, Poroto Ngawea, who was so helpful to Marion during her visit, she knows of him as an important figure in Maori society and, as she is about to start work with a local film-makers on a Maori story, feels she may well meet up with him to complete the “Blethers” link.

### **International Festival**

This year’s Festival will take place from Friday 22nd October to Sunday October 31st. Be sure to join in.

### **Duncan goes global with his traveller tales**

Scotland’s ‘king of the road’ talks to Ann Davies about keeping traditions alive. We managed to fit in an interview before he left for America where he was to be the revered guest at universities in Indianapolis, Wisconsin and Cornell. The traveller who grew up in a tent in an Argyll forest with his 15 brothers and sisters, is now feted all over Europe, Australia and Canada and has had one of his books translated into Japanese.

Duncan Williamson is now 75, but the travelling is in his blood and if Scandinavia or a Romany theatre in Germany are a wee bit different from Furnace in Argyll, he is as enthusiastic as ever about preserving the truly traditional tales of Scotland.

After a lifetime on the road and a multitude of jobs, from horse dealer to farm labourer, he can honestly claim to be an ambassador for an ancient culture.

"Wherever you go in the world, people ask, 'Who are the true Scots?' and I tell them 'The Travelling People.'" This is usually the preface to a lively history lesson which goes back before Roman times, brings in the Picts, talks about fear and then reminds you that in 1630 a traveller from France was hanged in Dumfries and Galloway. "It was enough to be a stranger", he says. He frets that people do not know their history.

Duncan, who eventually made his home in Fife, knew what it is like to be the object of fear and prejudice. He did what he could do to secure the provision of sites for travellers throughout Scotland. He served on the commission to explore possibilities but not one of his proposals was ever accepted he recalls. England does far more than Scotland for its travellers by providing more sites and schools, he says.

Fortunately, many of his stories have been published, as well as autobiography, and this success, he says, he owes entirely to his old friend, the late Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies. "He told me that I could tell stories only to a few people but the books would cover the world. That is how 'Fireside Tales of the Travelling People' came to be published".

"Tales of the Sea People" came later and was translated after a Japanese academic saw the links with his own people's stories of sea spirits. His collections are particularly popular in America.

Duncan's style appeals as much to children as to elderly folk and a week of storytelling in a school last year was broadcast by BBC Scotland in the run up to Christmas.

He can still tell a Gaelic tale when required and had enjoyed the opportunities of Tales at Martinmas in Ross-shire.

His contribution to storytelling in Scotland is well appreciated and he has taught many would-be tellers over the years. What he heartily disapproves of, he says, are storytellers who claim their tales are traditional and that they are preserving the culture when they are not. "Some call it traditional but it is not. They are making it up."

He was expecting some visitors from Holland – just one of many groups from all over the world who make their way to his home where they receive the warmest hospitality. Over the past six years he has made more than twenty trips

overseas, talking to Aborigines and Maoris as well as the Ivy League students in the fashionable colleges of America.

Nowadays, there are no travellers living in tents, he says and a new generation can be found in jobs like banking and police service. Times have changed and he knows that he is probably the last of the bearers of the travelling tradition.

I watched recently as he turned up for an evening of storytelling in Scotland. There were kisses and hugs, a sense of someone important, admired and loved having appeared. He has a fan following everywhere – in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, in English theatres and in the Indian University of Vancouver. When he is around, you learn a lot – and it's fun, as many of his younger listeners will confirm.

From a family of pipers, musicians and storytellers, Duncan also uses instruments and songs. His son, Jimmy, carries on the tradition, collecting music and stories. He too has fans in many parts of the US.

Lots of Duncan's best recollections are personal, moving and memorable – of his mother, born in a cave as her parents sheltered in a storm, of his Black Watch piper father, granted land for his forest tent by his former C.O. the Duke of Argyll, of his encounter with an American Indian chief. Duncan had been playing the Jew's harp. "But where do you store the music?" the chief asked when he saw the tiny instrument.

What does the future hold for traveller Duncan? He is fit and in fine form. When I met up with him he had just renewed his passport.

### **Programme proves a moral booster for budding storytellers**

The What's the Story? Project run by Children 1st, has just celebrated its first birthday. Claire (Mulholland) McNicol reviews progress and explains why one customer says "I'd gie that ten out of then and a wee bit mair" and "I thought it was going to be boring but that was wicked!"

Children at two Galashiels primary schools waxed lyrical about storytelling after a visit by the "What's the Story?" group, with two local Children 1st workers. The pupils were delighted to answer riddles, solve puzzles and tell a story of their own. One teacher reported her astonishment that a boy who is normally incapable of sitting still, sat motionless for an hour, enthralled by the stories. He received a huge boost to his self-esteem when he was first in class to solve a riddle. The teams will return later this year to run programmes over two terms. "The storytelling is good. Everyone gets a chance to talk. When you grow up you can tell your kids stories and they'll go to sleep."

Fifteen children from St John Vianney School, who took part in a storytelling group from April to October, spent a summer week at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, where they were treated to a tour with story and music and were involved in story creation using leaves, flowers and berries. A drumming workshop proved popular as did an outdoor performance for friends and families. Later, the teacher working with the group commented: "I don't know what you have done with these children over the summer but I hardly recognise them. Their confidence is so markedly improved".

In consultation with the children, we developed a 'Passport to Storytelling', identifying skills of listening, co-operation, telling a story or rhyme, and giving and receiving feedback. Every week a gold star was awarded for achievement. They explored story alongside music and drama, while model-making was one of the most popular activities and a great bridge to the children creating their own stories.

Our final evening performance featured many original stories created in teams. "I never knew Gilmerton was such an exciting place to live before" said one enthusiast.

If you had ventured into Ellen's Glen in Gilmerton last summer you might well have fallen in with Robin Hood, Friar Tuck and Maid Marian, who told their stories to fourteen local children. They learned how to shoot arrows, smuggle gold and leap across burns. Robin Hood plays were re-ignited this interest. A stunning conclusion was reached when the children appeared in Royal Green, tales of Robin through story, drama and music to parents and friends.

Two boys who took part in the week recently appeared at an educational conference and performed their story before an audience of 250 people. One said the group received an award for pupil of the term. The other boy said: "I find telling stories really calming."

"You've inspired me to get up in my attic and dig out all my old story books and toys."

A storytelling training day in September for sixteen staff and volunteers was a roaring success, with the emphasis on roaring. Everyone got into the spirit of the day and the role-play of fairytales were performed with great hilarity and enthusiasm. Two Children 1st staff from the Barrhead Project were so inspired that they put on their own event for National Tell A Story Day.

"Thank you for everything you have done."

We have run two storytelling groups, for parents and children under five in Tranent and Dunbar. We shared lunch and had time for parents and for children and parents together.

One mother was concerned as her little girl was very withdrawn and initially refused to participate. However, with the assistance of Ruby Rabbit, who stayed for a week with each child in the group, the little girl began to talk during the group circle time. She was so keen that she found a baby Ruby in a bookshop and bought it. By week six she volunteered to lead a song and sneaked across the circle to have a second chance to contribute. She began to smile and laugh and her mum did too!

## **International Storytelling Festival**

Thousands agree this one's a winner

Some facts and figures:

- a total audience of 10, 523 enjoyed the events
- 7, 218 pupils involved in nurseries and schools
- 62 public events and eight workshops attracted 2, 721 adults and children
- Almost 100 elderly residents took part in day centres and homes through outreach programmes
- 321 pupils made eight visits to Edinburgh Castle events

As October nights turned cold and dark, the Scottish International Storytelling Festival blazed to life with ten days of exciting events in atmospheric venues ranging from the Scottish Seabird Centre to Edinburgh Zoo. Alongside programmes that honoured Scotland's Gaelic and Traveller communities, guests included Native American Dovie Thomason of the Lakota/Kiowa Apache tribes, Afro-Caribbean storyteller, Carol Russell and environment teller, Susan Strauss (USA). Czech film director F A Brabec added his own distinctive contribution. An extensive schools programme ensured that young people, aged 3 to 18, benefited from visits, including those in special education, while workshops were so popular that extra ones had to be organised.

Sell-outs included spooky stories in Glentress Forest in the Borders and Native American tales in an authentic tipi as part of the Royal Museum's Trailblazers exhibition. The Festival strengthened relationships with other organisations and explored new partnerships with venues across Edinburgh – particularly important while major re-building goes on at the Storytelling Centre. Among these were St Cecilia's Hall, the City Art Centre, Scottish Book Trust, Hermitage of Braid, Hindu Mandir, cultural centres and Edinburgh churches.

Storytelling for families in libraries all over the city supported librarian's own skills while "Gold of Scotland" was a collaboration with Historic Scotland to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the Union of the Crowns.

An innovative Festival Club gave members of the public a chance to shine and many overseas contributors took part.

Edinburgh's Czech community turned out in force for F A Brabec's award winning film "Wildflowers". A discussion on links between Scottish and European story and song was appreciated.

### **Books, Games and Mermaids's Tails**

Beth Cross, Training Facilitator for StoryMakers, introduces some of the resources now available for to help and encourage all who work with children. Information gathered as part of the Story Makers Project includes a data-base of storytelling resources held by local authorities in Scotland, indicating a variety of interests.

Drawing on the experience of several tellers who work in schools, a document has been prepared which argues the benefits of storytelling in the curriculum with a number of example illustrating how this work is developing. Now, an innovative section of the website includes children's suggestions, with their artwork on stories of the sea.

A number of books are available at the Centre, and if you want a mermaid's tail, a giant's whiskers or a monkey's nose, you should ask, because we have a wide range of materials as well as membership of "Bits and Bobs" which allows access to an even larger selection.

"Creativity in Education" is a policy research document developed by the IDES network of Learning and Teaching Scotland, which argues eloquently for creativity in the classroom from personal experience. Chris Powell gives an account of "Storytelling in Schools and Some Stories About It" which will encourage others. Sue Ellis at Jordanhill in Glasgow has developed a collection of letters written by story characters to children, asking for help in solving some of the dilemmas that arise in story life. "Teaching Citizenship through Traditional Tales" is a thought-provoking read and useful in developing children's responses. Resources are available to all and we welcome your creative news and views.

### **A Signal Experience**

Cartoon characters spell out a brighter future

A new dictionary is spreading British Sign Language in schools, libraries and homes all over Scotland and making life richer for deaf children and their families.

The BSL Dictionary, now in its second edition, is the creation of Dr Rob Clyde whose company Dunedin Multi Media in Edinburgh, has co-operated with Donaldson's College for the Deaf and Stories in the Air, the forum for storytelling in sign language.

Dr Clyde has been involved with founders, Barbara McDermitt and Brenda Young even before Stories in the Air was set up as a charitable association almost four years ago. (Blethers edition number one, Autumn 2000). The dictionary, on CD Rom, is a natural follow up to their work and has been funded by the Scottish Executive as an innovative project to benefit children with special educational needs.

Because of financial support, organisations have been able to receive the CD free of charge.

"Above all it is aimed at families" says Rob. "Ninety per cent of deaf children have hearing parents who have difficulty in communicating so anything that will help them to learn together is welcome."

Because children are so at home with computers, the CD has widespread appeal. The various signs in the dictionary are animated and children love the cartoon characters. In schools where deaf children are being taught alongside hearing ones there is great fun to be shared as they all learn together.

New projects in numeracy and literacy are planned for the future.

### **Become a Board Member**

Ever wanted to share your storytelling experience with a wider audience? Have you a question about a particular story? Do you need advice on any aspect of storytelling? If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions you now have an alternative to asking the Centre.

The "Blether Board" is on the website of the Centre and is available to network members only as an ideal source of information and opinions, presented in an accessible and personal style.

The more taking part the better so if you are a network member join now. Think of a password between eight and twelve characters and send it to Jill at SSC and

she will do the rest. In no time you will be a bletherer. The Board has the potential to be a great networking tool for amateur and professional tellers alike.

### **Scotland Comes Alive with Stories**

Like Topsy, National Tell A Story Day has just grown and grown. This feast of fun gets better every year and the 2003 event involved 4,500 people in storytelling celebration that reached from Huntly to Iona and Campbeltown to Shetland. It was the most multi-cultural event yet, with Native American storytellers and toga-wearing Romans taking part. Feedback to the Centre has been very enthusiastic and augurs well for 2004. The date is Friday October 19th and if you want to be involved please contact Jill.

### **Andrew Douglas**

The storytelling network was very saddened to hear of the death, just before Christmas, of Andrew Douglas. Andrew had not enjoyed good health for a long time, but he died unexpectedly, after a short illness, in Perth Royal Infirmary. Andrew was a teacher, storyteller, poet, champion of Scots and ceilidh-maker extraordinaire. He was an early pioneer of storytelling at Traditional Music and Song Association Festivals and, with his wife Sheila, presented the Douglas Cup, for TMSA's first storytelling award. Andrew was also a founding father of the Scottish Storytelling Forum and a participant in succeeding storytelling festivals. His accessible humour and wise advice were appreciated by many.

Andrew's funeral, at Perth Crematorium, was an uplifting event conducted in Scots, with a lament, played on Neil Gow's fiddle, by his son, Colin.

Everyone's thoughts are with Sheila and the family at this time and we look forward to having an opportunity to celebrate Andrew's rich contribution in the future.

### **Next Edition of Blethers**

The Autumn edition of Blethers will appear in September and carry an update on Storytelling Centre developments. If you have an item of news that might interest others, please send it to Ann Davies, editor, at the Storytelling Centre.

### **Turning Into Stories Attracts Critical Acclaim**

Ewan McVicar was startled, if not alarmed, to be consulted by violinist Hector Scott about the prospect of telling a series of nine stories, interwoven with specially composed contemporary music.

Hector and his clarinettist wife, Shinobu Miki, have for some years championed new music with free monthly concerts in Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art, under the banner of Two's Company.

Last November, Ewan found himself in a GOMA gallery, presenting three World Premieres of pieces which integrated his versions of traditional stories from Scotland and Greece with specially composed music from Scottish composers Eddie MacGuire, David Dorward and Derek Ball. They had each selected a story from a one paragraph synopsis and Ewan had recorded a full version. Then, after hearing the compositions, Ewan amended and adapted his stories.

The first performance won the event a five-star review and a feature in the Herald, which called the project "brilliantly effective.". Two hundred people attended the next performance, in Edinburgh's City Art Centre. Another three works, with other Scottish composers, were premiered in January, with three more to come in March. Ewan encountered one of the hazards of innovation and co-operation when he was criticised for over-extending on of the January pieces, though the length of the music had been the deciding factor.

What's next? Hector suggests a collaboration that also includes modern dance, apparently inspired by Ewan's impression of a dancing tortoise!

### **Orkney at Centre of International Project**

Donald Smith reports on a thrilling development in which Scotland's northern isles are playing a leading role.

January saw a remarkable gathering of Norse countries in Orkney. They were there from the Scandinavian heartland but also from Shetland, the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland and much of the discussion was about storytelling. The reason for this "confluence of the sea-roads" was a project called "Destination Viking" which is exploring heritage and cultural tourism. The partners are searching for better ways to "tell their story" and to engage their own communities in understanding and sharing their own narratives.

That aim brought in a rich Scottish network, including Orcadian Tom Muir and Shetlander Lawrence Tulloch, who were in the thick of the action as both community mainstays and leading storytellers.

Also present were Bob Pegg from Ross-shire, celebrating music and stories as well as the Highland connections and your own enthusiastic correspondent, to give the enthusiastic support of the Scottish Storytelling Centre and Network. Orkney, even in January, is inspiring, but to see Orkney and Shetland leading the way in this international, made Ann proud.

It is also moving to see other communities, such as Greenland, beginning to search for ways to recover, in contemporary terms, the pulse of their own cultural traditions. It was a privilege to be alongside people on that journey. Watch this space – the Vikings are coming, but they have turned their swords into stories.

Also on board was a talented bunch of local children who presented their own version of the St Magnus story in the nave of his cathedral in Kirkwall. To see the colour, energy and life of that performance, filling this spectacular historic space was quite something. St Magnus's skull, buried in his pillar, was, I am convinced, smiling.

### **Villagers' Glespin on the world map**

Glespin Village has been forgotten – but not for much longer if the 200 people living in the community have anything to do with it.

Their “blink and you miss us” village has been designated “Storytelling Capital of the World 2004” by storytellers and organisations in more than twenty countries. Thanks to the wonder of email, contacts have been made with volunteers and visitors who want to help Glespin tell its own story over the coming year and encourage the skills of the residents.

The main Edinburgh to Ayr road runs through Glespin in South Lanarkshire, which was once a thriving place until it lost its rail link and local industry. It became a “deprived community”. Its neat row of houses, school and community hall on one side of the road, is balanced by one of the biggest opencast mining sites of its kind in the world on the other.

Visits last spring by storytellers from Fife, Galloway and Lanarkshire not only proved successful but inspired the villagers and planted seeds in the minds of local children and their parents. Glespin decided it must become part of the world storytelling circle.

Planning quickly went ahead and in January Ewan McVicar kicked off the weekly after-school story club. A varied, all-aged programme is planned which will include the visual arts, creative writing and local and family history. In April they hope to have good news from various grant-making bodies to assist them in their efforts. A data-base of supporters is also to be set up.

More details about the village ‘capital’ are available from Anne Sangster at 28 Hillview Crescent, Glespin, Lanarkshire ML11 OSE.

## **Training is tailor-made**

The Scottish Storytelling Centre's 2004 Traditions and Skills training programme is launched in April when new topics will include a workshop exploring how to create your own simple songs and music to accompany stories. Rhymes and Raps for those working with nursery children and practical tips for storytelling with elderly people are on the programme of events which is available online at [www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk). Contact the Centre for a printed leaflet. Over eighty training themes, which organisations can use in their own area are offered on a "we'll come to you" basis for those who cannot travel to Edinburgh for workshops.

Advice on training packaged, tailor-made to the requirements of your own group, is readily available too. The Centre is an approved member of the National Register of Continuing Professional Development Providers.

## **Sibylle's Lessons in Loving**

Sibylle Alexander, mum to five, grandmother to twelve and the author of eight books, offers tips to parents based on her own experience. She writes on education matters and is a member of the Edinburgh Storytelling Club.

Whether a family is rich or poor, lives in town or country, parents can show a child how to love the earth – make mud pies, build castles in a sand pit, grow flowers or radishes in a pot or the garden, allow hands to get dirty without scolding. This is how boys and girls learn to love Mother Earth.

How to find courage to face the future? Balancing on a tree trunk, or on a small wall, sitting on a swing, climbing a tree and looking out far over roof-tops or fields. This conveys love for the future.

Most important of all is teaching the little ones to love darkness. Talk about the velvet cloak of night, of star-spangled skies, of the gentle moon. Provide a corner to hide by throwing a rug over the kitchen table where your toddler can play. Have some shrubs at the bottom of the garden to make a den and switch off the light and use candles while saying prayers or telling a story. This helps children overcome any fear of death.

A profound sense of gratitude pervades a home where these simple things are being done.