

## **Report on Dingwall Tale Gathering project, October – December 2007.**

The aim of Artsplay Highland's Tale Gathering project is to promote the awareness and practice of storytelling in Highland communities, and to find ways of realising stories in terms of visual and other arts. There were five participant groups in the Dingwall Tale Gathering: the Croileagan Gaelic Medium pre-school group, the Dingwall Library readers' group, St Clements' School, the Three O'clock after-school club, and a group of children from upper Primary and Secondary Gaelic Medium education units. The substance of each series of workshops was arrived at by discussion between myself as storyteller and facilitator, the artists involved, and the staff of the bodies that we worked with.

### **The Croileagan Gaelic Medium pre-school group.**

The children of the Croileagan number around 15 and there are three teachers. We decided to try putting together a Christmas performance in Gaelic, based on the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, which would be attended by parents and other relatives of the children. This presented a challenge for me, because I have no Gaelic, and for the staff because they had never before attempted something so ambitious (previous Christmas productions had consisted of selections of songs).

Working together, over the weeks we were able to devise a modus operandi that made the teachers integral to the performance, kept the children (who were very young) engaged (most of the time) and allowed me to make a strong musical contribution. We even wrote a song in Gaelic specially for the show. The final performance, to an audience of around twenty five, was enhanced by costumes made for the children by Tara Hearne.

### **Dingwall Library reading group.**

For three full days over a four week period I worked with Joanne Kaar - at the core of whose work is the making of paper and things made out of paper - seven members of the Library reading group, and two librarians, to make books of around 12 pages which would tell a personal story for each of the participants.

During the first session we made the paper which would be used for the covers of our books. For the second session people brought in photographs or objects which were relevant to their stories – these Joanne photographed – and texts, including verse, or ideas for texts, which I then worked on with them, and typed up on the laptop in a format which Joanne could take away and print out in layouts agreed during the session. For the third session Joanne brought in the printed-up pages, demonstrated different ways of binding, and the books were assembled.

It was quite intense work for both of us, and Joanne had a lot of work to do between the second and last sessions, but the enthusiasm and warmth of the group members made it a delightful experience. Duplicate copies were made of each book. In some cases at least they were put together to be passed on through the family, and one book was sent to a brother in Australia who had played a major part in the story the book told.

### **St Clements' School.**

This is a school for young people, up to late teenage years, with additional needs. I worked closely with the staff, and with musician Alpha Munro, who holds workshops in the school once a week. We decided to devise a musical drama with the children which would be given an informal performance some time before Christmas. The drama was to be based on the Scottish traditional tale, the Hobyahs. The story is about a family who live in a house

made of turnips in the middle of a wood (where Dingwall is today), who are terrorised by a band of savage creatures – the Hobyahs – that comes out of the woods each evening and threatens to tear down the Turnip House. The story is particularly suitable for work with large groups, as it has the capacity to give everyone taking part an opportunity to make a prominent contribution.

Meeting during Alpha's regular Friday afternoon sessions in the school, I first told the children the story. We then acted it out in a big circle, everyone taking every part, improvising movements, with the opportunity for anyone who wanted to contribute to the scenario.

Over the next few weeks Alpha and I wrote some songs, Alpha convened a percussion band to play during action sequences, and the parts of individuals living in the cottage were cast, with everyone else forming a lurking, sinister mass of Hobyahs. We were also helped by Jo, a newly-appointed Eden Court Theatre outreach worker who was able to come to some of the sessions.

Although I'm used to working with large groups in this loose, semi-improvisatory way, it was new to the St Clements children (although they do have regular drama sessions). It gives enough flexibility for individuals to blossom unexpectedly. For example, during the first of our two public performances, one of the older boys suddenly became a show-stealingly terrifying Hobyah; similarly, it was possible for a very talented girl to step into one of the major roles at the last moment and have the space to interpret it in her own way.

Of the two public performances, the second was in the school itself, for quite a small group of (mostly) parents (though an MSP also turned up). The children performed well, and it was good fun, but the first public airing, a few days earlier, was exceptional. It took place before a large group of

mature trainee teachers (maybe a hundred or more) and, in spite of the fact that one of our major players was missing, the support of the audience spurred the children on to give a performance which made you remember what theatre, at its best, is all about – a transaction between artists and audience which generates a kind of electricity one-way media, however powerful, can never produce.

### **Dingwall Primary School 3 O'clock Club.**

The 3 O'clock Club is an after-school club which meets between 3pm and 6pm during term time, catering for children aged from around seven to upper Primary. Most of the children aren't there for the whole three hours, some arriving late and others being taken away early, nor are the same children there every day. This presented a challenge to find a way of working which wouldn't fragment the project.

My artistic partner was Jane Bregazzi, who is primarily a felt maker, but has wide experience working with community groups and children, using other visual and plastic media. We decided that our aim would be to make clay models based on scenes and characters from an old Viking story, set initially in Denmark but ending at the bottom of the Pentland Firth, which tells how the sea became salty. The story is episodic, and I began by telling only the first part of it, revealing the rest during the next session after children who knew the beginning of the story had told it to those who hadn't heard it before.

Over four sessions, as well as painting backdrops, the children made dozens of clay models, of human characters, skeleton warriors, animals, magic millstones, gold coins, giantesses, Viking galleys. A wide age range of children took part, some drifting in and out, others spending a whole session working on one piece after another, and some even persuaded their parents

to let them return on days when they weren't normally booked in. The club staff remarked upon the industry that was shown, and upon the large number of children that had been engaged by the project. One little boy, who had listened to the story and then shown no interest in model-making, went away and constructed an elaborate scene from the story out of Lego blocks and figures.

Finally the models were painted. After I had photographed them, the children took them home.

If there had been more time to work with the children, I would have liked to explore the possibility of animating the models using stop motion.

Something to explore in the future.

### **Gaelic Medium.**

This was a one-off workshop with me, Jane Bregazzi, and Alec Williamson, the Edderton based Traveller storyteller. It came out of a discussion with the historian Susan Kruse, who is involved in promoting activities for children from Secondary Gaelic Medium units. Nine children and a parent were involved. Alec talked to them in Gaelic about his life, and told them some of the traditional stories he first heard by the campfire when he was a boy. The children were then introduced by Jane to techniques of painting on specially treated cloth, and they made images based on the stories they had heard. We were greatly helped by Shona Campbell, the Development Officer from Commun na Gàidhlig in Inverness, who circularised all the Gaelic Medium units.

Bob Pegg – 24/1/08