

*'...at the core of the arts are discoveries: our potential to think, to imagine, to be and to make. It's about how we can extend our minds and bodies beyond what they did yesterday.'*

*Michael Rosen, Poet, Children's Novelist, Children's Laureate 07 to 09.*

As the 2021 Waterford Healing Arts Trust *Artist in Residence* at University Hospital Waterford, my goal was to offer the staff opportunities to encounter, and engage with, storytelling. I wanted to offer something that would support them in some small way during a very challenging time. I also wanted to listen to the stories people had to tell me and observe life in the hospital with a view to responding to my experience as Artist in Residence with a traditional style story.

### **Why storytelling?**

Stories have so much to offer the listener. They offer the opportunity to sit back, if even for a few minutes, and take time out from our busy lives. The opening line of a traditional style story, whether it be 'Once Upon a time' or 'In my father's time' or my own, 'Once there was...', elicits a reflex reaction in people to relax. It is recognised as an invitation and the listener has a sense of what is to come. I believe we are hard wire to respond to narrative.

Stories distract us. Although a better word is attract. They attract us away from the present reality, offering the listener an alternative space to occupy. To be taken away on the wings of imagination. And each listener has their own unique encounter with the story and the teller. The pictures they see, and the sounds they hear, are their own private, personal version of the story.

Stories are transformative, capturing and exploring the myriad experiences of being human. They offer the listener an opportunity to reflect on these experiences, especially those that resonate personally. As the story goes, 'Sitting behind every story is Truth. Sometimes the Truth is ugly, and we don't want to see it. But she is always there, waiting for us.'

### **Artistic Endeavour**

In my creative practice, as a teller, a writer and as a facilitator, I strive to create the space where people can encounter stories in the way described above. It is their experience of the story, and the telling, that is upper most in my mind. It is the space and setting of the telling. It is the interaction between the audience and myself which allows for the selection of the stories I will share. It is the sharing of the space, and the listening, which is both communal and individual.

It is my experience that this encounter allows people to make discoveries that '*can extend our minds and bodies beyond what they did yesterday*' as Michael Rosen articulates.

## The Plan

In order to achieve my goals for my residency I set out a threefold plan:

*Thursday Tale:* A series of pre-recorded stories would be posted online for 8 weeks for staff to enjoy. This would introduce me, and traditional storytelling, to the staff.

*The Storytelling Lounge:* Following on from the recorded stories, these live sessions would be longer and give the staff the opportunity to interact with the stories and me.

*Tell the Tale:* This 12-week series of workshops offered staff the opportunity to develop their own storytelling skills.

In addition to this engagement with staff I planned to develop a story in response to my residency.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge for me at the outset was the fact that the sessions would have to take place online. The live interaction with an audience is a key element of storytelling, to feel the energy of the room and see the faces of the listeners. It guides my selection of stories. So, when it came to selecting the stories to record for the **Thursday Tale** I fell back on my 20 years of experience to guide me in my choices. And once I was on site at WHAT, that also helped. What was an issue was the recording of the stories.

It is difficult to tell stories to a camera. I can see my face looking back at me, but it just doesn't help! The result was lacking and hollow. I am so used to doing things for myself as a freelancer, but I was delighted when it was suggested that someone would record me. This made the world of difference. Having someone to tell to, and to be out and about for the recording, allowed me to inhabit the stories with the vibrancy they deserve.

Without having contact with staff, it was hard to judge how the stories were going down but in time feedback began to filter through. People were enjoying the stories and awareness of the residency was growing.

The **Storytelling Lounge** was a live event, and I found it extremely unsatisfactory for what I hoped to achieve. I had done storytelling events over zoom but they were mainly performance based. With these sessions I wanted to engage with the audience directly and I found myself struggling to feel really present in the way I would during such sessions. Maybe it would have improved but thankfully summer had arrived, restrictions eased, and we could meet outdoors for the sessions.

The rest of the sessions took place in the Healing Garden of the hospital, and it was fabulous. It was a joy to tell stories outdoors, allowing the surroundings, and weather, to suggest themes and stories. Some weeks I finished a story with the mizzle gently falling, trying to get to the end before the rain arrived. The sessions were great with lots of chat and fun. We had regulars who came most weeks and sometimes people discovered us by accident as they came to eat lunch. We even had some members of the public listening in too.

I would have loved to have bigger numbers attending. I always want to share my stories with as many people as possible and for them to experience the magic of storytelling. I approached groups of staff who were out in the sun having lunch to tell them about it. While they all loved the idea, and were aware of the sessions, what became very apparent was that staff were very busy and didn't have time to spare, even at lunchtime.

The ***Tell the Tale*** workshops could also take place live and indoors following Covid guidelines on distancing, mask wearing and sanitising. We had many lovely evenings outdoors in the Healing Garden for these workshops but there were occasions I opted to stay indoors to work on particular topics.

The workshops went really well, and the participants were so committed to the process. They were generous in their sharing and support of each other. I was aware that it was a long commitment during the summer months. In my planning I felt it would give us the time to really delve into storytelling, and also allow some flexibility if people couldn't make some sessions. Unfortunately, circumstances changed for some people which meant they had to reluctantly drop out.

The goal of this series of workshops was for the participants to develop their own storytelling skills and tell a story by themselves at the end. As a group we decided that the audience would be the participants. It is a big step to tell a story and in this way the participants felt supported.

On the evening of the telling, I had set up the room with nice lighting and a performance space. I always emphasise that each person will find their own unique way to tell stories that reflects who they are. And what a delightful evening of stories we had. Each storyteller did just that, told their chosen story in their own unique voice. It was a joy for me to see all their hard work and commitment pay off. I could only marvel as each shared their stories with such confidence, finding new insights to stories I have been so familiar with and each adding their unique take. It was a truly magical evening, and I was honoured to witness it.

It is such a privilege to watch people grow and blossom over the weeks. And that is only what I see on the outside. What happens on a deeper level can be profound, which occasionally people share with me. And the feedback during and at the end was very positive.

Of course there were challenges along the way. As part of the process, we started exploring telling personal stories which are very challenging. I have to admit I misread the interest in this and maybe spent too much time on it. I had given the participants the impression that they had to tell a personal story at the end which wasn't my intention. In fairness to them, they all rose to this difficult challenge to forge a personal story. Some opted not to tell these at the end but to share one of the traditional stories we had worked on. However, I feel the participants got a greater understanding of the structure, and the important elements of stories. It enhanced their telling greatly as they demonstrated so well during the performance.

I have very high expectations of myself and how much can be done. There were occasions during the workshops where these expectations overtook me. I felt I wasn't delivering and meeting participants' expectations, which were high too. I don't think this seeped into any of the sessions. The great support from the WHAT team helped me ground myself, trust my process and to actually hear the feedback that was coming from the participants.

A storytelling group has emerged from these workshops that hopes to meet monthly to share stories and develop further.

### **My Story in Response to the Residency**

I am working on my story which is called 'The Curing Walk'. It is inspired by my time working with WHAT, the people I met, observing life in the hospital and a bucket of abandoned keys. I will perform this story in the hospital as part of Well Festival 2022.

### **Storytelling on the Paediatric Ward**

It was a thrill for me that, as restrictions eased, there was an opportunity to visit the ward and tell stories. Some weeks, all of my telling was one on one, other times it was to a group. Sometimes it was to very young ones, other times teenagers. On occasions I told stories to children waiting in the corridor for assessment. And the parents also got to hear and enjoy the story. On one occasion, I was telling to some parents as their children slept soundly.

It was just wonderful to see the smiles, hear the giggles, watch a child relax and forget about where they were, to drift off to sleep, even.

It is a challenging environment to tell stories in. At times there is a lot going on and a storyteller can be in the way! But it was also lovely to observe a nurse getting on with work and the child oblivious as they were lost in the story.

The staff were so welcoming, supportive and happy to see what the children got from the experience. I was also lucky to have mentoring from musician Liam Merriman on working on the wards.

### **Take aways for me as an artist/storyteller**

To **manage my own expectations** in the way I do those of the group. I have so many ideas and can see so many opportunities for working with stories, but I need to realise the limitations in situations, especially around time. My time, the organisation's and the potential participants' time. Having lots of ideas, and the desire to see them materialise, is important for artists, but so too is a sense of realism as we look after ourselves. There will be other opportunities to work on the ideas that don't take off.

As a follow on from that I see again the need to **trust myself and my process**. I have seen it work and deliver great results over many years. Yet that little bit of doubt sneaks in. I think it is healthy to have that bit of doubt to keep me on my toes and to be engaged in what I am doing. Not just dialling it in. But it is important to challenge it and not allow it to interfere

with the process. Part of that is realising, and acknowledging, my own abilities, talents and my limitations. And the limitations of my art form.

**The problem with language and imagery in traditional stories.** This is something I have been aware of for many years and have worked at creating some sense of gender balance in my telling and not relying on the stereotypes.

During the residency it became ever more apparent to me that there are a number of problems with the language and imagery used in traditional stories. In a health setting, I was particularly aware of the way people's age and physical features can be used in very negative ways. I want to spend time exploring this to insure I have greater balance in my stories, that they reflect fully my own values and reflect the understandings of today.

It's also **not about numbers but the quality of the experience** for the participants. As artists we strive to share our work with as many people as possible. We believe in what we are doing and of the benefits/pleasure/importance of it. It is easy to get caught up in how many people participate and use this as a measure of success. Most important for me is the experience the participants have and what they gain from it.

## **In Conclusion**

I realise as I reflect on this residency that what I offer listeners to my stories, and participants in my workshops, is the opportunity to look at themselves and the world around them from a different perspective. A different perspective that offers discovery, insights, the possibility of change and to stretch themselves. A different perspective that makes that moment in time, and maybe beyond, somehow better and easier.

I think I can safely say that I achieved this during my residency.

Joe Brennan

Artist in Residence 2021