

The Jean Russell Storyteller Project

The Jean Russell Storyteller Project is in partnership with, and supported by, The Ragdoll Foundation. This project will be reaching thousands of children and young people, helping them to grow in confidence, to understand their cultural heritage and to enjoy the gift of storytelling. It is an ancient art and someone who is carrying on this tradition in her own unique way, is Anna Conomos, the Jean Russell storyteller.

I was delighted to accept an invitation to join the tour in Birmingham. I soon realised that Anna has the gift of making everyone part of the story. From her large collection of folk fairy tales, myths, legends and songs, Anna sweeps you up into an adventure. Be prepared to get involved – turn into crazy characters, learn interactive rhythms and journey through time and space.

The first session included all the children in the Nursery and, although nervous, they soon became intrigued and then totally involved with the performance storyteller. The tale from India started with Anna's own magical time travel machine, her thunder stick. She began by introducing the animals one by one, making the appropriate noises and faces and she invited some volunteers to act the parts of the animals, wearing masks themselves, to the great amusement of their classmates. The last animal to be introduced was the rhinoceros, who wanted to be a star. The only way she thought this would happen would be to leave the forest and all her friends. When the story ended Anna showed the children a picture of a rhinoceros by the name of Clara who *did* become famous all over the world.

Day two had three sessions covering Years 1 to 6 in the morning.



The myth of *Jason and the Argonauts capturing the Golden Fleece* was very dramatic and, armed with hats, feathers, Greek costume, bows, arrows and cannon balls and with all the children being involved, the story came to life. From Anna becoming Jason's very old mother by curling herself up to become small and bent and screwing up her face and changing her voice, to the many-headed monster being re-enacted by the children who roared and made their fiercest faces, to frighten Jason as he stole the fleece for Pelleas. But my favourite part



Central@RLK Nursery School, Swindon with Aldbourne CBG.

was seeing all the children rowing the boat with Hercules the Powerful and singing at the tops of their voices.

Another group acted out an Old Testament story of *Jacob and Esau and the Blessing*. Two children were very athletic when acting as twins in their mother's womb with arms going in all directions while standing on one leg depicting the struggle to be the first born. Of course there was more to the story than twins being born but the children listened intently as the story

was acted out. It may even be a story they had never heard before. As with the other presentations, the children were encouraged to work out the moral of the story.

After lunch it was the turn of the Reception Class to be excited to listen to, and take part in, another rendition of *The Rhinoceros Who Wanted to be a Star*.

The final session was for thirty parents. Sadly, only four attended due to horrendous weather. Anna talked about the benefits of reading and telling stories with their children. She explained her five-piece story pie by using fairy stories, learning how to break the stories into the different segments of the pie with their children and how to extend the pleasure with just a few props to also act the parts. Working in groups and with a little thought and planning, we realised how much fun can be achieved and all those who attended wanted to repeat the workshop.

It was a very hectic two days!

Each visit is carefully thought out with communication between Anna, the Jean Russell Project Coordinator on the Executive of the Federation of Children's Book Groups, the Book Group and the schools or other venues in order to work out a programme for each presentation. As part of the follow up, each venue will be given a copy of the stories to enable teachers or carers, if they wish, to use as a basis for further work. There is also a teaching DVD for any members of staff who wish to increase their own storytelling skills.

Before the project ends there will be two more visits, starting in November, at Ipswich then Oxford.

Carole Thomson, Trustee, The Ragdoll Foundation.

The Ragdoll Foundation: www.ragdollfoundation.org.uk

The Federation of Children's Book Groups: www.fcbg.org.uk

Anna Conomos: www.performancestoryteller.com

The Jean Russell Gift

The Ragdoll Foundation was established in 2000 by Anne and Barrie Wood. It is supported by Ragdoll Productions and is dedicated to supporting the creation, appreciation and awareness of imaginative and innovative content that reflects the world from a child's point of view. Through a combination of grant giving and special initiatives, the Foundation aims:

- To provide a space for imaginative thinking, voices and practices
- To seek new creative solutions
- To seek partners, collaborate and share knowledge

The Jean Russell Gift was initiated in 1984, to celebrate Jean's memory. It started as an annual gift of books to a nominated child and their family. Many children with special needs, who cannot for some reason play as actively as other children, often

find a special joy in reading. Jean herself, as a child, had many periods in hospital, but was able to go anywhere and do anything, through the books that she read. So it is no surprise that, throughout her adult career, she worked to introduce children to the magic of books.

Today, the JRG is one of the Foundation's legacy projects and is currently being delivered, in partnership with the Federation of Children's Book Groups, as a new initiative — The Jean Russell Storytelling project.

The project aims to bring storytelling to a wide range of audiences over a twelve-month period. These audiences are selected by the Groups to ensure inclusivity and outreach. Thereby, the power of the story is being brought to young people who might otherwise never have the opportunity of sharing stories.