

# STORYSHAPING

WITH THE STORYSHAPES

***Are we sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin....***

***Every good story has a shape***

'Ooarr me hearties!' Pirate Jools captured the hearts and minds of the children of Barrowby and Grantham when she helped them to create their very own pirate story at the Christmas Party. But she also impressed the adults, with her energy, enthusiasm and, most of all, her incredible ability to create stories in spontaneous rhyme.

Of course, like so much in life, it is never quite as easy or as simple as it appears. In fact, Julia Damassa, creator of Storyshaping, (below), has developed a unique approach that is grounded in a



belief in the magic of storytelling and the vital need for children to develop confident and articulate communication skills, using concepts and ideas from the theatres of Brecht, Augusto Boal in Brazil and Tadeusz Kantor and Zofia Kalinska from Poland.

Oral storytelling has been humanity's way of making sense of experience, of ascribing meaning to events around us and of entertaining ourselves over the millennia, using rituals of performance. But who do the stories belong to – the storyteller or the listener? Julia, taking inspiration from modernist and avant-garde theatrical tradition, has created a structured process, where story-telling becomes a shared creative experience between the adult Storyshaper and the children who create and own the story.

Julia and her trained Storyshapers use specially designed highly tactile soft shapes or, for older children, sky-blue or pink cubes, which act as prompts and visual reminders for the key elements of every story: Place, Time, Character, Question and Idea. Julia based her structure on the Prologue in *Romeo and Juliet*, in which Shakespeare sets the place, the time and the characters before identifying what Julia calls 'the Big Question' – a question that the character is seeking the answer to, for which ideas need to be generated to drive the narrative of the story forward.

For each shape, the Storyshaper asks the group a question, encouraging the children to interact, think creatively and make collective decisions. Experienced shapers learn how to hook small details

onto each shape to help them remember the story as it progresses, although, as Julia says, the children will always remind you if you forget or make a mistake! The Storyshaper's role is vital. Taking inspiration from Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (learning or teaching plays) and his theories of acting, the Storyshaper plays a 'dialogical' role, acting as both insider and outsider, being part of the performance through mirroring and reflecting the words and gestures of the children, whilst simultaneously remaining aware of the story's dynamic, observing the children's involvement and driving the narrative forward.



The children become the Storysharers, owning the story, their individual ideas inspiring the storytelling of the others in the group. They become watchers, listeners and contributors. The skills the children gain from this experience are multi-layered; not only do they learn to share their ideas, cultivate their imagination and listen non-judgementally, but they also learn how to take joint responsibility for creating. The satisfaction of a collective creative experience remains with them, as they each take the finished story forward independently, as a writing project, within physical movement or as art. Julia explained that Agosta Boal was her muse for developing the interaction of the Storyshaper with the Storysharers. A cultural activist, Boal transformed theatre audiences into active participants, seeing theatre as a mirror into which we can step to change reality.

But, although the concept is grounded in dramatic theory, Storyshaping is all about doing. Julia has taken her shapes into children's respite wards, Surestart centres and schools, as well as working with travellers' families and other marginalised parts of society. Storytelling is becoming less common but no-one is too old. Many adults also need structure to help them develop their creativity and imaginations, those of us who 'can't find the words' to tell our stories. As Julia says, everyone has an imagination, everyone has ideas, it's expressing them that some find tricky. Those who experience Storyshaping when they are young will have a head start.