

STORY TELLING IN THE PLANETARIUM: TWO APPROACHES

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Storytelling in the planetarium is a wonderful use for a star theater. There are many different types of stories that can be told well in the planetarium, the obvious first choice being sky stories. However, the question about storytelling is not whether they should be presented in the planetarium or even which ones should be selected, but how they are to be presented.

I believe that there are two forms of presentation. First is what I call the “storybook style,” and second is the style of “joining the tradition.”

The storybook style is what you get with taped shows about star lore. The stories are reproduced nearly verbatim to the way they were collected. A strength of this approach is that the tales remain true to the story teller from whom they were collected. Historically the story may be more valuable when told in this fashion as it is presented more clearly for analysis. To produce such a program basically requires researching the stories, finding the ones you like best and organizing them into a coherent whole. The show ends up as a series of well narrated legends with some type of verbal or analytical bridge between them. The bridge may be an analysis of the story's meaning and origin, or the bridge may simply consist of moving through the night sky from one set of appropriate constellations (or sky objects) to another. The bridgework takes the set of stories and unites them into a complete show. It provides consistency and unity. The stories themselves may be adapted slightly to fit the time constraints and flow of the program as a whole, but generally they are simply told (or read) as originally found. Oftentimes a different narrator reads the stories than the reader of the bridges. The story reader might have a tonal quality that the audience would visualize as a native of that culture, adding a sense of realism that, for example, you're really hearing an Indian tell an Indian sky legend. Using a second narrator also helps separate the stories from the bridges. Narrators who imitate natives should be recognized for who they really are in the credits as we do not want to be accused of misleading our audiences.

Perhaps the most interesting approach is to have recordings of the actual storyteller telling the tale. Many oral history archives now exist that may have such, recordings available. Unfortunately, the quality of the recordings varies greatly; the audience must be able to easily understand the narrator. Also there

are often restrictions on how these important and valuable recordings may be used and edited. Furthermore, many of the stories that you want may simply not be available as an original recording. They may have been collected directly to paper rather than to the tape recorder, and in that case you are back to finding a reader.

This storybook style of presenting traditional tales provides great consistency from program to program. Every show will be the same. It's the case that we are all familiar with in the "canned" vs. "live" argument. This argument is worth considering in the case of storytelling, especially if you have several different lectures. This is a great way to present stories in the planetarium, but I don't feel that this "story book" technique is really "story telling."

If you want to do real story telling in your planetarium, then you must take a big personal leap and actually join the tradition and become the story teller yourself. When this happens the program changes vastly. You are no longer just presenting an objective selection of stories from some part of the world. Instead you will be bringing those old stories back to life and you yourself will become an integral part of the program. When I refer to the stories coming back to life, I'm not referring to how well you tell them, but the stories will become alive because they will grow and very slowly change as you tell them over and over. They will get better. It's like watching your children grow -- you never notice it until you look back at the old pictures. After you have learned the stories you want to present and after you have been telling them for six months to a year, go back and read your original sources. It'll be the same story, but you'll find that it'll be different in many ways and you'll probably (but not always) like your own version better. Some details in the original will be gone -- while other details will have become more important -- and a few new ones will have appeared that were not present in the original. This is the natural evolution of oral stories. If you study myths and legends, you will discover that stories change from teller to teller and from year to year. The story motif will remain, but details and characters will vary.

This does compromise the original stories because the Indian legend you may have started with will change. It will become partly your story. It's like the old parlor game where a sentence is whispered from ear to ear. What comes out in the end is not exactly what you started with. Some people will argue that this should not be done; the planetarium should remain objective and let the Indian story stay totally Indian and that the story should not be allowed to change. If you don't want the story to change and grow, then my answer is to go back to the "storybook" approach. It is a valid approach, but it's not true storytelling. What legitimizes the second approach is the realization that the stories only comprise half the show. The other half is the story teller himself. Of course this technique does have one drawback -- no one can be your substitute. When you become a storyteller, you are as much a part of the program as the stories, so you are not easily replaced. I suppose that could be looked at as job security! Also, while the

storybook style lends itself to analysis of the legends and myths, the story telling style does not because of the dynamic nature of the story and the way it is adapted by the teller. It is no longer a simple recitation of an old tale. Analysis of the historical or cultural significance of a given tale can become clouded by the performance style and the subtle changes that the teller has added. Also, I have found that students are as fascinated with the telling of the stories as they are with the stories themselves. Who knows -- you may just spawn some young people to join the tradition themselves.

So which approach is best? They both fit different needs and abilities. However, I have given shows using both styles and while my "storybook" style presentations were always received very well, my live story telling programs are the best received that I have ever done. People like stories, but they love to be told stories. Story telling in the planetarium changes the program from a show about stories to a performance by a storyteller. People always prefer a good performance over a good recording. Recordings are great, but it's just not the same as the real thing. The "joining the tradition" style is more demanding, but I think it is more rewarding too, because as the stories grow and change so will you and your story telling ability.

Where to Begin

If the idea of becoming a storyteller intrigues you and you would like to try it in your planetarium, there are some basic steps to getting started. First you must locate the stories you want to tell. There are many books available today that offer vast collections of sky lore (see the bibliography at the end). This is the easiest source available.

Of course for the truly ambitious, field work is a fascinating way to get original stories from a primary source. Interviewing storytellers can provide you with knowledge of traditional styles and techniques of presentation that is difficult to obtain from a written transcription. The downside, of course, is that collecting stories in this manner is time consuming and takes a great deal of expertise. Furthermore, it can be very difficult to find an interviewee who is not only worthy of study, but who is also willing.

Most planetarians may find interviewing individuals too time consuming. So for the sake of simplicity, let's assume that you are using books and other previously collected works as your primary documents. Your first job is to read a lot of stories. You need to get a feel for the type of stories you wish to tell. It is probably best to pick a particular genre to start with, such as Native American Legends, or Greek Mythology. After reading through a couple of collections, think about which stories stick out in your memory either as stories you like or as stories you deem appropriate. Go back and read them again. At first you should try learning just one or two stories.

Don't begin by trying to produce a show entirely on storytelling. An hour's worth of stories is a lot of material to put into your head and then present in a credible "storytelling" fashion. This can certainly be a long term goal. I now present three different such planetarium programs; however, I began more modestly. I suggest that you learn only one or two stories about one of your favorite constellations and practice storytelling during star pointouts. Many of us fill our pointouts with tidbits of information that we have picked up about different stars, constellations, clusters, etc. Try presenting a story in a similar manner. It works well and it broadens the scope of a typical pointout. Don't be surprised, however, if you're disappointed with your first few attempts as it takes practice. If your stories are rough at first, it won't make or break an entire show when the story is only a short "add-on" to your pointout. Don't give up though, if you keep telling your story it will get better. Quickly you will become quite comfortable with it. Then you can start learning and practicing other stories. It won't be long before you'll have a fairly good repertoire. Then you can begin to think about a show devoted to your stories.

When you find a story you want to tell, the first thing you must do is learn it. The key here is to "Learn the Story," don't memorize it. If you want to present it exactly as written, I think you should record it in the storybook style as previously suggested. It is more subjective to "learn the story." Start by reading the tale several times. If you have several different versions of the story available to you, which is quite common, read them all several times. What you need to do is to develop your own version -- one that works for you. Start telling the story to yourself or perhaps to friends. Personally, I find it difficult to actually tell the stories until I have an audience. The tale never really comes to life until I have captive listeners. Audiences love it when you use different voices for different characters. It helps to differentiate the characters and it makes your story more entertaining. The downside is that it is very demanding on your vocal cords. You might wonder if the job security of being your facility's only storyteller is worth losing your voice over.

In the planetarium there are several things to consider on the visual end of production. Keep it simple. When we produce a storytelling show, we try to keep the emphasis on the stories and the telling. We keep the visuals simple, usually Kodalith line drawings. Don't get carried away trying to illustrate everything that happens in the story. Part of listening to a storyteller is using your imagination to visualize the tale. This is heightened in the darkened star theater, so let the environment work for you. Use your visuals to illustrate only key points.

Another visual effect that I think is more effective than any slide is to have the storyteller out in the theater. If you have the personnel, have one person operating the console while the storyteller is out where he or she can be seen. Try not to hide behind the console. To illuminate the storyteller use very faint indirect lighting or, my favorite, simply have the storyteller stand in the stars. I have been fortunate in this regard because I work in a Starlab where it's easy to

stand in the starlight from the star projector. This also works well in tilted domes. Whichever way the performer is illuminated, the audience will be fascinated by simply watching the teller perform. Changing the color or the amount of light on the storyteller during a performance can greatly enhance the story.

Storytelling can also be interactive. It is easy to interact with the audience at many different levels. You can begin by asking simple questions throughout the story, questions that usually have obvious answers. This makes the audience become a part of the performance and helps create a more intimate setting. It also allows you to gauge the attentiveness of your audience. Small children like to take on a more active role. Let them know that you need help telling the story, and give them cues that they must listen for and respond to with a certain repeating phrase, sound or clap. They love this and it keeps their attention. This definitely works better with younger children than older kids. Storytelling is very rewarding--and very taxing at times. After five hour-long shows of telling the same stories over and over, you may have doubts, but the audience's response will keep you going for more. People love stories and the planetarium is a great environment for it. Try it. The rewards make all the work worthwhile.

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Please note: These tapes are not show tapes and are not to be used in the star theater. Lynn Moroney is a professional storyteller and listening to her excellent performances will be a great asset to anyone interested in learning to tell stories well.

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