

My Fine Feathered Friends

Teacher's Notes

Thank you for having the performance of ***My Fine Feathered Friends*** at your school. These teacher's notes aim to provide you and your students with some background information about the show and some ideas for follow up work in the classroom.

All the best to you and your students,

Bronwyn Vaughan



Background to the Show

In a tree outside my window lives a Butcher Bird who wakes me every morning with his song. It's a delightful tune, very complex, yet so clear you can sing along to it. When this charming bird moved into my neighbourhood it got me thinking about birds and how clever and amazing they really are. I live in an inner city suburb and yet it is full of all sorts of bird, so we can say they have adapted to their human neighbours remarkably well. It's extraordinary that they can fly, and over very large distances, very quickly, without getting lost. They build the most astonishing nests; some are like works of art. They look beautiful, dressed as they are in their fine plumage. And they can sing!

I read lots of books about birds and watched lots of documentaries, most notably **David Attenborough's Life of Birds** which I am sure your students would love. I went to museums, art galleries and zoos to find out more. What struck me was that liking birds is quite a common human trait and I discovered a whole world of people who write, paint, research, study, sculpt, compose and play music, dance, sing and dream about birds

As I was now one of them I decided to write a show which was a tribute to the glories of birds and so I created **My Fine Feathered Friends**.

The Stories

People have always written fictional stories about birds, from the earliest myths and legends, through the fables and fairy tales right up to the contemporary stories we know and love today. I had so many stories to choose from, but had to narrow it down to 3, plus the framing story of the show.

I went with stories I have loved for a long time and ones that followed the particular themes I wanted to explore, namely **bird song, birds' cleverness, and flight**.

I have, in places, changed some of the details, characters and storylines from the traditional tellings and I have done so for the following reasons. Firstly, I wanted the stories to revolve around birds, so, in the second story, **The Elephant's Child**, I gave the Kolokolo bird a much more central role.

Secondly, I did not want to portray violence or fighting as a way to solve conflict, so, in **The Elephant's Child**, I cut out all the punishment, hitting and trickery that goes on between the elephant and his family.

Finally, the last story, **The Eagle and The Wren**, changes from one about trickery, cheating and competition, to one of friendship and co-operation. I have given this story an Australian setting using Australia birds as my main characters.

These changes, I believe, enhance the experience for young audiences without forsaking the integrity of the traditional stories.

This is the nature of story and storytelling. It is not a static art, set in concrete, but one that changes with time, place and person, a quality which enhances the enduring satisfaction we derive from a good story, well told.



The stories I used are:

The Framing Story for the show is about my character, **Ms Peacock**.

On a warm and sunny day Ms Peacock falls asleep in the park. A passing bird lands on her head, lays an egg and flies away. When she awakes and finds an egg on her head she must decide what to do. She keeps it warm and dry and when it finally hatches she has to raise the bird, teaching it all it needs to know about being a bird, by telling it stories. I was inspired to write this framing story after reading ***The Singing Hat by Toby Riddle***, a gorgeous story I am sure your students would love.

The Emperor and the Nightingale by Hans Christian Anderson. In this well-loved story, set in China, we meet an Emperor who falls in love with the beautiful song of a Nightingale, in spite of the bird being very plain and dull in looks. The Emperor wants to possess the bird so puts it in a cage and expects it to sing on demand. One day the Emperor is given a "mechanical bird" that sings

when you wind it up. The Emperor favours *this* bird because it looks good and never tires. He forgets all about the Nightingale, sad and alone in its cage, and so it escapes. When the mechanical bird breaks down and cannot be fixed, the Emperor, realising he has forsaken the Nightingale, is filled with sadness and regret and slips into illness. When the Nightingale hears of the Emperor's plight it returns to the palace to give him solace through song. The Emperor, having learnt a lesson, does not put the bird back in the cage but encourages it to be free and to come and go and sing when it pleases. I chose this story because it is about **bird song**.

The Elephant's Child by Rudyard Kipling (from the ***Just So Stories***). Set in Botswana, Africa, on the banks of the Limpopo River this is a story about the **cleverness of birds**, as epitomised by the Kolokolo bird. It is also about how elephants got their trunks. The story is set in the days when elephants had short stubby noses. We meet the elephant's child who is forever asking questions which the clever Kolokolo bird can always answer, except when he is asked what crocodiles eat for dinner. They set off to find out. When they do find a crocodile he declares that he eats elephants for dinner and grabs hold of the elephant's nose. A tug of war ensues in which the elephant's nose is pulled and pulled until it becomes very long indeed. The crocodile loses interest and slinks away leaving the elephant in tears about having such a long, ugly nose. However, the clever Kolokolo bird points out the usefulness of a long nose (swatting flies, picking bananas, giving oneself a cool shower, and making loud trumpeting sounds.) From that day on elephants have always had long noses, trunks!

The Eagle and the Wren. This is a traditional story which has appeared across many ages and in many cultures. It can be found in Aesop's Fables and in the stories of many Indigenous cultures, including Australian Aboriginal culture. The version of the story I like is written by **Jane Goodall**. She retells the tale changing it from one about cheating and trickery to one about co-operation and friendship. I have chosen to tell it because it is about **flight**. I have set it in Australia and used Australian birds as my main characters. The story goes that all the birds were having an argument about who could fly the highest. They decide to have a race. However, the superb fairy wren, the smallest bird in the bush, cannot fly high at all and is sad that he cannot join the race as he wants to see what the world looks like from up high. As the birds get ready to race he has an idea. When no-one is watching he hides in the soft feathers behind the eagle's neck. The race ensues and one by one the birds all drop out except for the eagle. Just when the eagle thinks she has won, the wren comes out of hiding and flies even higher. The wren explains that the eagle has won the race and that he only wants to see what the world looks like from on high. The eagle befriends the little wren, admiring his bravery. She takes the wren under her wing and flies back home. The other birds are amazed to find that while the eagle won the race it is the smallest bird in the bush who has flown the highest of them all.



Theatre, Music and Storytelling

While the show is certainly based in storytelling I move it beyond this into the realm of **theatre** by using a wide array of theatrical devices to tell the stories; backdrop/sets, props (large and small), costumes, make up, wigs, puppets, music, song and dance.

Further to this I dramatise the stories using characterisations, voice and movement, not only playing the central character, Ms Peacock, but all the other characters in the stories who I portray through characterisation and puppetry.

My reasons are, firstly, that I come from a theatre-in-education and children's theatre background and have always loved theatre and its ability to take an audience on a journey to another time and place in an effort to bring the viewer closer to an understanding of themselves and their world. Theatre creates a safe and intimate space where, through imagination, audiences explore ideas and themes of human importance, e.g., fear, courage, love, loss, family, community, greed, friendship, right and wrong.

Secondly, for young audiences it is a big ask to sit quietly and listen to *words* for 45 minutes. No matter how riveting the story any child would get bored. Hence, I use props, music, puppets etc., to punctuate, enliven, engage, explain and illicit the use of other senses and areas of the brain, with the overall aim of the

full engagement of the mind, body and heart of the audience. My aim is to show as well as tell.

Recycling- Inspiration for Design

As I was writing the show, the suburb I live in had its annual council throw out/clean up. On my daily walk I started to consider people's "junk" and the idea came that the design of the show should be based on **recycling**, or as they say, "**upcycling**". I work with a friend, Janet Clouston, when creating my shows, so together we set about the task of making everything in the show from recycled materials. Hence, we have birds made from teapots, coat hangers, old silverware and jewellery, kitchen utensils, old 3 wheeler bikes, golf caddies, old sponges, brushes, drink bottle tops, umbrellas and upside-down watering cans. My costume is made from second hand tea towels and my wig is fashioned from reused fruit bags. One of my musical instruments is made from an old gas bottle and my two "trees" are made from plant stands that a neighbour was throwing away.

It was inspiring to be carbon neutral in making this show and the resulting design looks delightful.



Cultural Influences.

In all my work I am inspired by **multiculturalism**. I grew up in the fifties and things were pretty dull for me in the “White Australia Policy” era. When multiculturalism started to thrive so did I. My world opened to a rich array of new tastes, sounds, ideas, languages, imagery, art, literature and music. Hence, my work has always been driven by an appreciation of diversity and a celebration of difference. Therefore, in all my shows I like to tell stories and present sounds and images from a wide range of cultural influences. In this show these influences are **Chinese, African** and **Australian**.

The show is peppered with words, sounds, music and song from these 3 cultures. Your students would have heard the following:

Chinese:

Nihao- hello

Xiexie—thank you

Zaijian-goodbye

The song sung by the Nightingale was written in Mandarin for me, by a friend.

Setswana (language spoken in Botswana):

Ra- sir or Mr

Ma- madam or Ms.

Dumela Ma or Dumela Ra is a greeting with the addition of Ma for women and Ra for men.

I used the very popular **Mbude** by the **Mahotella Queens** from an album called **South African Legends** as the background music for the second story, **The Elephant’s Child**. The children will recognise it, as it was popularised in The Lion King.

Australian:

Cooo-eee.

Follow up

You can use the show as a basis for work with your students across a range of subjects: English, Art, Music, Drama and HSIE.

The children may like to talk about the show in these terms:

How did Bronwyn tell the stories? Was she sitting with a book on her lap?

What theatrical devices did she use to tell her stories? Music, puppets, props, costumes, make-up, sets.

How did she portray characters? Through characterisations where she acted, moved, talked like somebody else. Using puppets. She also asked one of the students to be the crocodile.

How did she use music? She used recorded background music and she used percussion instruments to both create atmosphere and as sound effects.

What was the backdrop like? What was painted on it? Why did she use it?

Bronwyn used recycled materials and junk to make her show. Why did she do that? Was it effective?

What about the stories. Do you remember them? Can you recount them? What were your favourite stories/ characters/ parts of the show? Were they true stories or were they fiction? Can you find these stories in the library? Can you find other stories about birds? Write about the show, rewrite the stories, write a letter to Bronwyn. Paint or draw a picture of Ms Peacock or one of the birds, or the elephant or the crocodile.

If your class would like to write letters or send drawings to me about the show I would love to see them. Please send to P.O. Box 122, Thirroul NSW 2515.

From this simple discussion you could go on to stage your own storytelling performances. Find or write stories. Retell them like Bronwyn did using simple props and costumes. Then add some simple, percussion sound effects or some background music. Then, your class might like to have a go at making puppets from recycled materials. Ask kids to bring something recycled from home to form the basis of a puppet, e.g., milk bottle, box, pots and pans, old pipes! They may even like to paint a backdrop.

Talk about birds and all the amazing skills they possess. Write about them. Make birds using recycled materials. Make nests. Look at birds at your school and in your neighbourhood. Name your favourite bird and research it using books and the internet.

