

# *Floating on a Sea of Stories*

## Teacher's Notes

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for having the performance of **Floating on a Sea of Stories** at your school. These teacher's notes accompany the show and aim to provide you and your students with some background information about the show and some ideas for follow up classroom activities.

All the best

Bronwyn Vaughan

### **Background**

The inspiration for the show came after I toured around Japan for several weeks in 2008. I loved the culture, the history and the people. In Tokyo I visited the International Children's Library, a 4 story complex housing hundreds of thousands of children's books from around the world. Here I was able to source many traditional and contemporary Japanese Children's stories.

Back in Australia I further researched Japanese stories, language, music and culture and then devised the performance with Brian Joyce, who is also the show's director. Janet Clouston and I designed and constructed the props, costumes, backdrop and puppets used in the performance.

### **The Stories**

I based the performance on stories about the sea, as Japan, comprised as it is of 4 main islands (Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu) and around 7000 small islands, is very much aware of its sea bound location.

I chose 3 traditional children's stories, **A Piece of Straw**, **The Crane Child** and **Peach Boy**. These are well known and well loved children's stories that all Japanese children would be familiar with, in the same way as we are familiar with stories like Cinderella, Jack and the Bean Stalk or The Three Little Pigs.

The stories centre on **themes** which are common to many Japanese stories and portray an ethos dear to the hearts of Japanese people. These are the notions of good deeds being rewarded, a theme running through all three stories, and the idea of "small" finding the inner strength, bravery and ingenuity to overcome the "large", as in Peach Boy.

All three stories can be sourced in Australia either through libraries or bookshops and are as follows.

**A Piece Of Straw** (based on a trad story) by **Junko Morimoto**

**The Fairy Crane** (trad) from **Japanese Children's Favorite Stories**, Book 2, compiled by **Florence Sakade**

**Peach Boy** (trad) from **Japanese Children's Favorite Stories**, compiled by **Florence Sakade**

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 to fit all the stories into a sea theme, so, in the first story, **A Piece of Straw**, a cyclical story, where one thing leads to another, I changed its rural setting to a seaside one using, seaside themes like fishermen, cormorants and boats. In **Peach Boy**, I changed the traditional companions of **Momotaro** to turtle, fish and jellyfish.

Secondly, I did not want to portray violence or fighting as a way to solve conflict, so, in **Peach Boy**, the main character, **Momotaro**, does not fight the **Oni Monster**, as in the traditional story, but instead plays and wins a game of Ichi, Ni, San or Noughts and Crosses .

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.



## **Synopsis of Stories.**

The framing story of the show tells of the main character, Oshin, and how she got her boat, her bird, her cormorant, Tori, and her sail. The three traditional stories told in the show fit into this framework.

### **Story 1: The Story of Oshin's Boat (based on **A Piece of Straw**)**

Oshin was once poor, without money or a job. Every day she would go to the temple and pray for good luck. One day a voice from the sky urged her to pick up the first thing to come to hand as it would bring luck. She runs from the temple so excitedly that she trips over and lands on a fish kite. She meets a crying baby and his mother and, after soothing the baby with the fish kite, gives it to him and, in return, is offered 2 oranges by his mother. She meets a fisherman who has been casting his net all day without catching any fish and is hungry and thirsty. Oshin gives him the oranges and, in return, is gifted with the fishing net. She meets a man with his cormorant, which he uses, in the traditional Asian way, to catch fish, but the man has a rope tied so tight around the cormorant's neck that the bird is unable to hold the caught fish in its beak. Oshin gives him the net for catching fish and, in return, is given the cormorant. She loosens the rope.

Then she meets an old man with a boat who is bemoaning the fact that he is too old to go to sea and catch fish. She gives him the cormorant and he gifts her the boat. Later the old man goes to live with his son in the mountains and gives the cormorant back to Oshin.

Hence, Oshin, is now the proud owner of a boat and a cormorant. Next she needs a sail.

### **Story 2 : The Story of Ohin's Sail (based on **The Fairy Crane**).**

Mr and Mrs Kumo live by the sea. Mr Kumo, Kumosan, makes wooden sailing boats and Mrs Kumo, Yoko, makes the sails, weaving them on her loom. They are sad as they have no children to love, look after and pass on the skills of boat and sail making to. One day Yoko finds an injured Crane on the beach, which she and Kumosan care for until it is able to fly away. They miss the crane but remind themselves that "she is a bird and must fly".

One day an orphan girl, Kijuki, comes to their house and asks to stay. She becomes like a daughter to them and offers to help Yoko weave her sails, but, only under the promise that Yoko and Kumosan are never allowed to come to her room while she weaves the sails. They agree. Every day Kijuki goes to her room and weaves sails which are strong, light and exquisite. Soon everyone wants sails made by Kijuki and the family are very busy with their work and very happy.

But Kumosan and Yoko are curious and one day they go to her room and peak inside, revealing not their daughter at the loom but the crane they saved at the beach, plucking out her own feathers to weave the sails. The crane turns back into Kijuki and explains that she took human form to repay their kindness, and, now, because they have broken their promise, she must change into a bird and fly away.

The couple are sorry and sad but understand that "she is a bird and must and fly."

Now that Oshin has a sail she wants to sail to Oni Island, but Torisan is afraid as Oni Island is where Oni monsters live. She reassures him with a story.

### **Story 3 : Overcoming Tori's Fear of Sailing to Oni Island (based on **Peach Boy**)**

This is a story about traditional Japanese monsters, called Onis. They are big, loud and mean and spend their time terrorising and stealing. The Oni in this story lives on an island off the coast of Japan.

Long ago, an old man and woman lived in a hut by the sea. Every day they would look out to Oni Island and pray that the Oni would not come and steal from them, as over the years, the Oni monster had stolen everything they ever had. One day the old man went fishing and instead of catching a fish caught a giant peach, inside of which was little boy. They took the boy to be their son and called him Momotaro or Peach Boy. When he grew up, as a way of repaying their kindness to him, he sailed out to Oni Island to fight the Oni, and take back everything he had stolen.

On the way he met a turtle, a fish and a jellyfish who offered to accompany him on his quest. Of course, the Oni was too big to beat in a fight so Jellyfish suggested that Momotaro play a game with the Oni, the winner taking everything the Oni had stolen. Fish suggests a game of Ichi, Ni, San or Noughts and Crosses and they play the game on Turtle's shell. Momotaro wins and sails back home with the spoils. The Oni is never seen again.

### **Language**

Throughout the performance I use common Japanese words or phrases which you may like to go over with your class. Pronunciation is straightforward without accents, each syllable given equal weight, pretty much.

Arigato..... thank you

Arigato gozaimas...thank you very much

Domo... thank you (informal)

Konnichiwa..... good day

Sayonara.....goodbye

Sumimasen...excuse me

So deska..... is that so

Hai.....yes

Iie..... no

Obasan..... old woman

Tori..... bird

Ichi, ni san.....123

'san' on the end of a word implies a mark of respect and warmth, eg., torisan and Kumosan

### **Culture**

I have called upon several traditional cultural motifs in the show. These are

**Origami**- in the second story I make an origami paper crane. Origami is the Japanese art of paper folding. There are many books on the subject and you may like to try some folding with your class.

**Cranes** are important symbols in Japanese culture, denoting longevity. The well known story of **Sadako and The Thousand Paper Cranes** builds on the Japanese ideal that if you fold a thousand origami cranes a life can be saved. You may like to read this book with your class and start folding!

**Music** – in the first story I use the recurring melody of Sakura (Cherry Blossom) the most famous and well loved of all traditional Japanese folk songs. You may like to learn this song with your class.

**Fish Kite-** kite flying is a traditional and well loved children's pastime . Fish (Carp) kites are associated with the annual celebration of Children's Day (May 5<sup>th</sup>) and are hung outside homes to symbolise success in life. You may like to make and fly kites with your class.

**Dolls and Puppets-** Kokeshi are traditional wooden dolls for children. I have based the puppets used in **The Fairy Crane** on these. Further to this **Bunraku**, traditional Japanese puppetry, is a much loved and well attended art form in Japan.

**Bowing-** instead of shaking hands, the Japanese bow. It is used to say hello and goodbye and express gratitude, apology and respect.

**Kimono-** my costume in the show is a kimono tied with an obi, traditional Japanese dress.

## **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. These are the use of backdrop, props (large and small), costume, 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, Oshin, 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, generosity, revenge, forgiveness, right and wrong.

Secondly, for young audiences it is 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.

You may like to look at and discuss with your class the theatrical techniques used in the show to bring the stories to life. You may also like to explore storytelling with your class using some of these techniques.

**Backdrop**- it takes little to create an atmosphere and change a classroom space into a stage. From the simplest use of draped fabric, painted panels or screens and even power point projections onto a whiteboard.

**Props**- the use of any physical prop, no matter how humble, draws the attention of the audience and re-engages their imaginations.

**Puppets**- I use a bird puppet throughout the show and in the second story I use 3 papier mache puppets to tell the story of the Fairy Crane. However in the third story I use an umbrella to represent a turtle, a fish and a jellyfish and simply by manipulating the umbrella in different ways I create an impression of these three creatures. You could work with your class to create simple puppets from found objects , e.g., gloves, socks, recycled containers, small brooms, feather dusters, babies rattles etc, which can be simply decorated to create different characters.

You may like to introduce Bunraku, traditional Japanese puppetry, and ask your students to research this on the internet.



**Music**- I use simple and easy to play percussion instruments to create atmosphere, to emphasise, to punctuate and to make sound effects for the stories. Ask your students to incorporate percussion into their storytelling. I use a recording of the Japanese Flute or **Shakuhachi** as a background for the second story. Use recorded music to create atmosphere or mood in your classroom storytelling.

**Costuming**- even the most simple adornment, a hat, a shawl, a piece of cloth, can help your students to create and build a character.

**Characterisation**- I try in my storytelling to **show** the action or the character rather than tell it. In your classroom storytelling encourage your students to create different characters using voice (accents, dynamics of loud and soft etc, tones, moods) and movement. Ask them to explore the building of characters who are old, young, kindly, angry, mean, animal, etc.

**Art** – use visual art sessions to create props, costumes, backdrops etc. You could also ask students to paint or draw a story from the show or a narrative of their own choice. This could take many forms from a simple cartoon or the painting of a scene to an expressionistic portrayal of a feeling or emotion. In the show we used papier mache to create the boat and the puppets. You could try papier mache with your class to create props, puppets or masks.

**Listening, reading, writing**- the seed of the show comes from stories found in books. Use this idea as a stimulus to explore other stories from Japan and/or stories from other cultures. Most libraries have good resources in this area and fairy tales, folk tales, myths and legends should be easy to access. Ask your class to retell a story from the show (or one of their own choice) and read or tell it to the class. Ask the class to write/tell stories they have learnt from home or from their own reading. Ask them to write their own fairy/folk story.

If your students would like to write a letter to me, expressing their responses to the show, I would be happy to receive these and write back. Please send them to P.O Box 122 Thirroul NSW, 2515

In general, the show can be used as a starting point for further studies about Japanese Society and Culture, as well as Drama, Art, Music and English.

Sayonara