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## **SCHOOLS INFORMATION PACK:**

### **ROB PARKINSON, STORYTELLER, MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST & WRITER**

Rob Parkinson has been performing in schools regularly as a professional storyteller/musician since 1984 and has given many thousands of performance and workshops for pupils of all ages in education, from nursery to sixth form and beyond. Rob draws on a repertoire of over 500 stories and plays an astonishing array of unusual ancient and ethnic instruments. He is also the inventor of many story games and other fun techniques for stimulating and developing oral storytelling abilities and linking these with writing.

- lively performance sessions of storytelling minstrelsy for both small and large audiences combining tales from around the world with modern yarns, jokes, tricks, fantasy songs and verse and the music
- workshops on a range of themes around stories and imagination, backed up by imaginative materials clearly explained.
- INSET for teachers, assistants, librarians etc. covering speaking and listening, control of imagination and development of narrative skills in a framework of intelligent organizing ideas.
- highly engaging performances for parents and for family audiences
- occasional free talks on storytelling and imagination
- imaginative back-up resources and ideas

## **SOME COMMON QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY ROB PARKINSON**

### **How much do you charge?**

The scale of standard current fees is printed separately since they are periodically revised (from the website, click on fees in the school visits section). Fees are broadly similar to those charged by other literature professionals with extensive experience. Discounts are available at some times of the year and in some circumstances. Where possible, I will help small schools etc with limited funds by offering discounts.

### **What is your experience and what are your qualifications for the work?**

I've given well over two thousand performances and about as many workshops in schools over a twenty-three year period. Schools/educational institutions worked in range from multi-ethnic inner city schools to small village primaries and from infant and nursery schools to sixth form colleges and further/higher education colleges. I originally trained and worked for a time as a teacher, subsequently contributing regularly to courses for teachers whilst developing freelance work as a writer and musician. In addition to frequent school visits, I've performed in theatres, at festivals, in clubs and bars, in public gardens and at historic sites and in all kinds of places including shacks in the Australian outback, as well as making several appearances on national radio and TV. I've been Chair of the Society for Storytelling, editor of Storylines, Organizer/Chair of the Storytellers' Forum South East. I've also published various writings on storytelling, music for guitar, songs and some poetry and produced various CDs of stories, songs and music (see Publications section of website for titles available from Imaginary Journeys).

### **How many pupils can you take at a time for performances?**

At public venues, I've performed for mixed audiences of over a thousand. In schools, my feeling is that the emphasis should be on quality and connection. My maximum number for school assembly performances is therefore normally 200,

though lower numbers are better - there is a more chance of creating what I would (without wishing to be too precious and pretentious) call the 'spell' with an audience of say 50 to 100. I also work with class-size groups when this is possible and preferred by the school, whilst in some special schools especially I've worked with much smaller groups.

**How many pupils can you take at a time for workshops?**

Whilst I've very effectively taken workshop groups of 100 plus on occasions, the usual size for a workshop group during a single day visit is an average class group of around 30. In some circumstances, I will take a larger group to fit in required numbers. It's very good to have small groups where finance and situation allows, as obviously pupils will get more personal attention. Group size during extended projects is open to discussion.

**What age ranges do you work with?**

All ages, including nursery. However, I recommend that audiences should not vary too widely in age. In some small primary schools, where children are used to working together, I can take Key Stages 1 & 2 together. This is not usually advisable in larger primary schools, whilst in secondary schools, I've found it generally helpful not to mix students who are more than a year apart other than in shorter assembly sessions.

**Do you perform for parents and family audiences in the evenings?**

Yes, quite often and with a lot of success. It's a great chance for parents to experience the real effect of words and images and music directly, perhaps to recall their own childhood responses to story. In some instances, schools have managed to finance all or part of the cost of my daytime sessions by charging for an evening performance - and of course, publicizing it very well. Occasionally I also do free short talks for parents.

### **What do you do in performances?**

What I do varies immensely between different audiences and age groups and from occasion to occasion. I also stress different aspects of my repertoire for, say a book week than I would for a music week or a multi-cultural event or when working on a specific education brief with selected pupils. A list of set themes I can do is included below, but I don't usually work to absolutely set programmes in schools, since it is usually necessary to adapt on the day, to be sensitive to time, place and people. I'm always happy to consider different themes anyway. The 'mix' can include stories from around the world, original tales, jokes, riddles, tricks, perhaps even a little juggling plus my own original narrative and fantasy songs, poetry/verse, traditional songs and the music of a big range of unusual instruments. (For more information about musical and story repertoire as well as instruments see below.)

### **How long is a performance?**

The usual time in a school day time setting is one hour with largish groups, sometimes shortened to around 40 minutes for younger Key Stage 1 children. When working with smaller audiences, sessions can be as short as 30 minutes and as long as 90 minutes. Short sessions of 15 to 20 minutes are sometimes given for nursery groups

### **What do you do in workshops?**

Workshops are about getting pupils to try some of the things that I do in their own way through story games and various other enjoyable, largely oral techniques. They are adaptable across a very broad age and ability range. Seven different workshop 'styles' are listed elsewhere in this information pack. The first 4 of these are the workshops from which the 4 booklets in the Natural Storytellers series grew and each of these explores oral story making and telling from the different starting points extensively illustrated in each booklet. Two further workshops are about using music to make and to tell stories, whilst the 7<sup>th</sup> is a combination workshop that directly addresses the link between oral telling and making and the writing of stories. Teacher's notes accompany each

workshop whilst the Natural Storytellers booklets may be purchased at discount prices to accompany sessions. An eighth workshop on writing songs and/or narrative verse is now available only when enough time can be given to it with one group. For secondary pupils and sixth form/college students, there are also specialist workshops around some of Chaucer's stories. Workshop ideas connect well with Speaking and Listening development and also with s Literacy strategies.

### **How long is a workshop?**

The minimum effective time for a workshop with an average school group is 45 minutes, though an hour is better if the timetable allows. Workshops can, however, fill a whole morning or afternoon, even a full day and, in extended projects, several days.

### **How many sessions do you do in a day?**

This depends on the numbers involved and the balance between workshops and performances. If I'm asked to do a series of hour-long assembly performances with more than 60 pupils, I usually restrict the number of these in a day to 3. For mixed assembly performance and workshop sessions on a single day, I will do 4 approx. 1-hour sessions. (Alternatives for such days are 1 performance and 3 workshops or 2 performances and 2 workshops.) For shorter sessions (max. 30 minute) sessions with class-size groups (or less), I'll do up to 8 sessions, providing I don't have to constantly change sites and can have adequate breaks. Regardless of the type of daytime format followed, I will stay on to do an evening or late afternoon performance for the appropriate additional fee.

### **What is your story repertoire?**

Over 500 stories are listed in my own notes as part of my repertoire. I am a creator of stories, though original tales form a smaller part of the total repertoire (around 50 longer stories). The rest come from world folk and traditional literature/oral tradition and range from fables and fairy tales, myths and legends

to jokes and anecdotes and all sorts. I'm particularly interested in the universal tale, which occurs in many cultures. All stories are developed in original ways and the process of telling is always improvisational and interactive as well as contemporary and immediate. I hope this excludes entirely any hint of the 'thespian'. For secondary schools, I can work both as a performer and as a workshop leader around the stories from Chaucer's 'Tales of Canterbury' in addition to sessions with more general themes and content. (My Chaucer work has been the subject of articles in educational magazines.)

### **What is your instrumental musical repertoire?**

The musical repertoire is very varied, partly depending on which instruments I am using. As a trained professional guitarist, I have a big repertoire on that instrument, ranging from classical pieces through jazz and blues and various folk styles to original compositions and improvisations. Other instruments currently in use include 'ancient' minstrel instruments such as the *renaissance lute* and *cittern*, the *medieval harp*, the plucked and the bowed *psaltery* etc., ethnic stringed instruments such as the Turkish *saz*, the Moroccan *gumbri*, the Arabic *oud*, the Kenyan *gambusi* and the East European *gussle*. I also use various hand drums such as the Irish *bodhran*, the Arabic/Turkish *darbuka*, the West African *djembe* as well as a range of other small percussion.

### **How do you use music?**

Music may be a more central feature in performances at, say, music weeks or in work with some pupils in special education. Where telling stories is more prominent, the music is used to create atmosphere at the initial stage, to make frames for stories, to pace tales and provide variety of impact, for interludes, for occasional effects or sometimes as a more continuous accompaniment. Participation stories and other items allow audiences (especially younger audiences) to play some of my instruments. Workshops explore ways in which music is used with stories and/or to make stories.

**What is the verse/poetry content?**

My own songs for younger children are a form of narrative and fantasy verse. I use some of my own poetry and light verse for children on some occasions, particularly when there's a request for original material or for poetry. These include a few narrative pieces written to be accompanied on guitar or other instruments. Then there are traditional and other ballads and narrative verse, monologues etc., used occasionally as and when appropriate. In adult performances for audiences of parents etc, I sometimes use my own poetry on more serious themes alongside lighter material

**What are extended projects?**

Sometimes I go to a school for three or more days in a week (or over several weeks) or am officially 'in residence' for a term or more at the school, which means that I make regular (usually weekly) visits during the period. Extended projects are often 'topped and tailed' by performances but centre around workshop sessions developing particular skills in pupils. They may be combined with training workshops for staff and/or evening performances for parents and family groups.

**Do you work with pupils in special education?**

Yes, quite often and usually very successfully, though I do not present myself as an expert in this field. I have worked with most categories of pupils in special education, though with some more frequently than others. Different aspects of my work can be stressed with different kinds of learning difficulty. For example, I'm able to use story frameworks more extensively with MLD pupils than I would with SLD and PLD students, where the main effect of what I do comes through music and song, with some use of story frameworks for participative work.

**Do you entertain?**

I hope so. I'm often booked as an entertainer in schools and elsewhere for the Christmas season and for special occasions throughout the year. Children and teenagers generally seem to find what I do very entertaining anyway. Of

course, real entertainment could also be educational but that's a subject for a major essay.

**Can you provide references?**

Yes. But when asking for a suitable reference, please give details of your school and the kind of pupils you work with and then allow me time to look up a similar and/or a local school I have been to relatively recently. It can be difficult to do this instantly, especially when I'm busy.

**Are you already CRB checked?**

Yes, many times over. I am able to bring one of several more or less identical certificates for inspection during visits and to fax or e-mail one in advance. For longer projects, I don't even object to filling out the forms yet again.

**Do you carry creative arts public liability insurance?**

Yes, up to the limit of 5 million pounds required by many local authorities. Again a certificate can be inspected or faxed or e-mailed.

## **THEMES FOR SCHOOL PERFORMANCES ETC.**

*Many schools leave choice of performance material and themes to me on the day and **it is not necessary to choose one particular theme for, say, a school book week.** The examples of themes given below is by no means exhaustive*

### **Some examples of themes used with children under 12**

*Each title represents a mini-repertoire from which material is chosen on the day to suit the audience.*

- Tales from around the world (general programme)
  - Tales of long ago and far away (general programme)
  - Parkinson's Lore (general programme)
  - Minstrels and Castles
  - Monsters & Magic
  - Tall Stories
  - Animal Tales
  - Dragonology
  - Sea Tales
  - Myths & Legends
  - Strange Contraptions & Inventions
  - Ghosts & Ghouls
  - Heroes Tricksters & Fools
  - My Fantastic Family
  - Magic Gardens
  - The Saucy Sal Spaceship
  - The Wonderful Store
  - Christmas Crackers
  - Fairy Tales
  - Fabulous Fables
  - Original Tales
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- Special themes to order. Past examples include Green/countryside/number/ water/ age & youth/ multi-culture/ travel/science/travel/voyages of exploration/history etc.

**Adaptable for students 12 upwards, adults, family audiences etc.**

(Again, these are example themes/programmes.)

- Sky Hooks & Tartan Paint (a programme of tall tales and fantasy)
- The Duration of Life (wry humour and traditional wisdom combined)

- Tales of Chaucer (a.k.a The Miller Rides Again & Tales on Tales on Canterbury Tales)
- Tales of Turning (Stories of transformation of many kinds)
- Tales of Bafflement & Bewilderment (Mysteries and puzzles and enigmatic stories)
- The Mare's Egg & other Sussex yarns
- The Tenterden Ghost & other Kentish yarns
- A Hall of Mirrors- a Modern Mythology. (Modern yarns and traditional patterns combined)

### **Speeches/talks etc.**

Themes around story, metaphor and performance by arrangement. (See Imaginary Journeys website under Workshops & Training for specific examples)

### **Extended Projects for Schools:**

Usually created in consultation with staff. An example is include The Voyage of Maeldun three day project (based around a 10th Century Irish Bardic tale) with performance of same name at start and end and featuring adapted workshops using Tall Stories techniques.

## **WORKSHOPS**

*For one-off visits and short extended projects, a series of standard workshops as listed below. Special workshop themes can also be discussed and workshop schemes on extended projects are very flexible. Workshops are most commonly given following performance sessions, though performance/workshop sessions can also be arranged. Workshop notes explaining basic principles and themes are provided with all sessions. Workshops 1 to 4 also relate directly to the Natural Storytellers booklet series and copies of these are available at discounted prices to schools booking workshops*

## **1. Tall Tale Telling**

A story making workshop that starts from telling 'wicked whoppers' and uses a series of games to make instant ideas grow into tales with their own 'logic'. Many games developed in this workshop are included in Book 1 in the *Natural Storytellers* series, *Tall Tale Telling*. This is a fun session that soon has the room humming with creative and constructive talk, Tall Stories can lead to written work as well as strengthening speaking and listening and is a sure way of tricking the 'natural storyteller' in pupils into life. Ideas can be adapted to suit all ages, from Year R to secondary schools to adults.

## **2. Imagine On**

This story-making workshop works directly with abilities to control and use imagination. It takes the skill of multi-sensory picturing (illustrated in *Natural Storytellers* Book 2, *Imagine On*) as a starting point and invites participants on an imaginary journey/quest, including various combinations of motifs from traditional 'fairy tales' and myths- magic shoes, cloaks of darkness, caps on invisibility etc. Large and/or small group questioning games then develop the narrative. Stories can be written at a later stage or developed as oral tales. Adaptable for older pupils in Key Stage 1 and for all levels in Key Stages 2 & 3 and beyond. (There is even an adult equivalent workshop.)

## **3. Yarn Spinning**

About telling and stretching stories, embroidering basic plots through a series of enjoyable questioning games. Based around games and ideas described in *Yarn Spinning*, Book 3 of the *Natural Storytellers* series. Various fascinating devices used by storytellers to embellish narratives are described in the note including Endings and Beginnings, the Run, the List, the Rule of Three, Pedal Point and many more. Games are used to introduce some of these at a level

appropriate to the age. Adaptable for pupils from Year 2 through to secondary pupils and adults.

#### **4. New Lamps for Old**

The companion workshop to Workshop 3 is a lively and enjoyable look at changing stories, making new tales from old ones, taking traditional plots and re-working them in different ways to suit different themes. It explores themes set out at length in Book 4 of the *Natural Storytellers* series, *New Lamps for Old*. Pupils take away their own 'new lamps' that can be written down or recorded on audio media later. Notes provide some stories in summary form for further development. Adaptable for pupils from Year 2 through to secondary pupils and adults.

#### **5. The Noise Contraption:**

The first of two workshops about music and stories explores various ways of using music and sounds effects to create new stories. An enjoyable session with hands-on experience with a variety of unusual instruments and plenty of suggestions for possible further work in the notes. Suitable for all primary school ages, including nursery. Suitable in adapted form for secondary pupils.

#### **6. Sound Spells & Stories:**

A workshop about music with stories - the way in which music can help to tell stories and the ways in which stories suggest music. Simple ideas such as the ostinato, the motif and the riff are developed to make short 'sound spells'. Adaptable for all ages.

**7. Patterns and plots: telling tales to writing stories:** This workshop explores the use of traditional plots and motifs through oral games as in workshops 3 & 4, but with the direct aim of creating new and original written tales, These are drafted and worked on in the session. Ideally this is a longer workshop of at least 2 hours, though a shortened one-hour workshop around plots for brief stories works very well.

## **ADDITIONAL WORKSHOPS:**

### **Telling Chaucer:**

A workshop to accompany the Tales on Tales on Canterbury Tales performances. Telling, experimenting and playing various story games with Chaucer's stories gives some unique insights both into Chaucer's creative processes and into story making in general. Originally designed for 'A' level students, since it was first introduced 12 years ago, this workshop has frequently been used with much younger pupils and is available for all secondary age students as well as for Year 6 primary/middle school pupils.

### **A Tale with a Beat/ A Tale with a Tune:**

These similar workshops are about narrative verse and song writing. They are now only available where at least a full morning or full afternoon can be given to them. Further details on request.



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