

Peckham Splash Storytelling Workshop

Peckham Park Primary School

Friary Road, London, SE15

2nd May 2006

Workshop Leader: Eugene Skeef

Visiting Artist: Nadine Brown

Scribe: Alan Gilmour

Today's session at Peckham Park was split in two, with half the Year 6 year group in the morning and the other half in the afternoon.

The Morning Sessions

Bake Drums Not Bread

The session started with Eugene showing the first group some footage of people making and playing the Udu in Nigeria, with the footage of the drums being baked in a bonfire being a particular favourite. Eugene went into the background of the instrument, telling the group that only women were allowed to make them and that the women of the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria had invented them. He extended this idea of the Udu as a special instrument made by special people by telling of the spiritual place where the women harvested the clay and that they did this lovingly and humbly, taking gifts or food to the place as a blessing and giving thanks to the God of clay.

The group were transfixed by these stories and most of the pupils were very interested in these instruments, even though most had never heard seen them. Interestingly, when asked where their families were originally from, only one or two said they had links to Nigeria; most of the rest said they were from Peckham. However, no matter where people were from, the group really lit up when Eugene showed them footage of some street dancers dancing to the sound of Udu and the children were really amazed at how vibrant and alive the sound was and especially amazed when the dancers started doing back flips.

What will we see when we're upside down?

This was our impetus to move into a circle as one of the pupils, Shola, volunteered to show us how he did back flips, doing one onto a crash mat in the middle of the circle. This then allowed Eugene (after an aside when he claimed he could do a back flip onto the mat but it was so fast no one could see it) to get some dancers in the middle of the circle doing a unique movement, to be copied by the rest of the group. It was immediately apparent that a lot of people in the group were incredibly confident dancers and this exercise could be scaled up quite quickly, having two people in the middle, then four, and even adding lyrics.

Lyrical Peckham

While Eugene took the rest of the group through an exercise on animal shapes, where someone takes on the shape of an animal and the others guess which animal they are, Nadine and me helped four of the group devise some lyrics that could be rapped over these movements. They started playing with ideas around the line that Eugene had given them as an inspiration "I feel the rhythm rising through my body" and were trying to get lyrics that were focused on what was happening in the group of dancers.

This is what they wrote:

I FEEL THE RHYTHM RISING THROUGH MY BODY
I HAVE INSPIRATION TO DANCE
I FEEL A FIRE RISING IN MY DANCING
SO GIVE ME A LITTLE CHANCE
STEP BACK I'M IN THE MOOD TO DANCE

One of the writers was wondering how this could be rapped, as it turned out, it wouldn't be rapped but sung in harmony with two other pieces created by the group.

The Snake-Bird Butterfly

The creativity of the pupils really took off when one of the dancers, Hannah, had taken the task of showing an animal and used her creative imagination to go past that. She did a beautiful dance and when asked what it was replied "it was a snake but it had wings".

This set creative sparks flying and the group were really spurred on to use their imagination with Eugene telling them that "now, the pupils of Peckham Park are going to a new part of the world that doesn't exist yet, where snakes can fly on butterfly wings. We're going into the cave of the imagination"

After the break, the dancers were experimenting with different shape combinations, there was one with a snake + an elephant + a human so it was a very creative process, with the shapes being offered up for the rest of the groups to guess what they were.

While this was going on, the lyric writers were struggling to think of a rap that could focus on these weird combinations of animals. Eventually the whole group were asked to help with this idea, this is what they created:

I WOOF LIKE A DOG
I JUMP LIKE A FROG
I ACT LIKE A COW
AND SOMETIMES I 'MIAOW'
I FLY LIKE A BIRD
MY WINGS ARE SUPERB
I HAVE TEETH LIKE A SHARK
WHEN I SMELL FEAR I BARK

Peckham Rhythm Orchestra

One of the problems the group struggled with was that the last two lines of this piece are in a slightly different rhythm than the rest, and this made the group stumble when they tried to sing it. Adding in four loud “woofs” and looping the end of the rap until it became a different song, in a different rhythm, overcame this problem.

At this point Richard returned and was amazed to see that in a little over two hours the group had written a song with three distinct movements in three different rhythms. This is the full song:

I FEEL THE RHYTHM RISING THROUGH MY BODY
I HAVE INSPIRATION TO DANCE
I FEEL A FIRE RISING IN MY DANCING
SO GIVE ME A LITTLE CHANCE
STEP BACK I'M IN THE MOOD TO DANCE

I HAVE TEETH LIKE A SHARK
WHEN I SMELL FEAR I BARK
WOOF! WOOF! WOOF! WOOF! (Repeat 4 times)

I WOOF LIKE A DOG
I JUMP LIKE A FROG
I ACT LIKE A COW
AND SOMETIMES I 'MIAOW'
I FLY LIKE A BIRD
MY WINGS ARE SUPERB

I FEEL THE RHYTHM RISING THROUGH MY BODY
I HAVE INSPIRATION TO DANCE
I FEEL A FIRE RISING IN MY DANCING
SO GIVE ME A LITTLE CHANCE
STEP BACK I'M IN THE MOOD TO DANCE
I FEEL THE RHYTHM RISING THROUGH MY BODY (repeat & fade)

After working all these rhythms out, Eugene and Nadine quickly chose some singers, a rhythm-section and a group of dancers, who ran through a dance routine from the first part of the morning while the other played and sang.

Due to the time constraint, Eugene didn't have time to move people to see what section they were happiest in, they could only swap everyone around quickly to give everyone a chance to both drum and perform.

This was a great session with some incredibly creative children who were very strong and confident performers in terms of both dancing and singing. Perhaps, given more time we could have worked more on the percussion side to really

draw out the differences in the three rhythms they developed, I had a quick chat with Eugene afterwards when I said that the rhythm of the main song, “I feel the fire”, matched the whuma-whuma-whuma of the Udu and his eyes lit up. I think given time he would have liked to really strip the rhythm down and let the singing and dancing stand out.

After Lunch

Meet with a Beat

The second session started much differently than the morning. Eugene was planning to start with the stories of the Qoi-Qoi and how they turned their bows into instruments and, as the group came in, he was heading outside to select a pebble to play this instrument. However, as Nadine brought the pupils in, they were already clicking their fingers in a rhythm and starting to layer different rhythms over the top of this basic, steady beat. This was too much for Eugene to pass up and he came racing back in and managed to use his car-keys to play the bow, picking up on the different rhythms in the group.

Within less than five minutes, the different rhythms had started to develop into words:

Rhythm one: I FEEL THE RHYTHM
 I FEEL THE RHYTHM NOW

Rhythm two: HEY YA
 CAN YOU MOVE YOUR FEET
 COME LISTEN TO THE BEAT

This was very quickly looped and overlapped into a very strong harmony until Eugene stopped the singing to introduce himself and to throw in some new ideas that may inspire the pupils.

Ilange Libantu Bahle

Eugene told the pupils about his Zulu heritage, describing the land and telling them of Shaka: the great Zulu leader who had led his people through his ‘Vision Quest’, when one of the people in a tribe goes into the hills and has a vision of the future, either of great fortune or of great danger.

He also told of the hunting prowess of the Qoi-Qoi, explaining how they could travel incredible distances and explaining their relationship to the sun. He explained how the sun in Africa is huge, and people in South Africa today, the descendants of the Qoi-Qoi, have a saying “ilanga libantu bahle”, literally meaning “the sun is beautiful people”. In Africa, at ilanga, the end of the day when the sky glows red and the sun is on its way down, you say a little thank you to the sun that has been your guide and companion through that day by stopping

what you are doing and adopting an expression and body shape of much beauty and thanks.

This started a movement piece where someone would come into the centre of the circle, pretend to be working at a job until Eugene signalled that the sun was going down, when they would throw out a pose. The group had to guess what the job had been. Again. Like the morning group, it was obvious that the group contained some incredible dancers so Eugene and Nadine got them doing increasingly complicated moves and rhythms.

While the group were working on rhythms, I asked Eugene if I could work on the melodies the group had created at the start of the afternoon session; I was interested in how much of the day had been about beauty and positivity and thought a song about that may be a good way to end the performance at the Royal Festival Hall. This is the final lyrics:

Rhythm one: I FEEL THE RHYTHM
 I FEEL THE RHYTHM NOW
 ILANGA CALLING
 THE SUN IS ENDING NOW

Rhythm two: HEY YA
 CAN YOU MOVE YOUR FEET
 COME LISTEN TO THE BEAT
 SHAKA
 AND THE QOI-QOI
 BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE LIKE ME

These were overlaid as before, now with full rhythm-sections and dancing and the result was spectacular. I think we all wished we could have worked with both groups for a full day as the results in such a sort space of time were incredible.

Alan Gilmour
Scribe
2nd May 06