

The chicken, the hedgehog — and the storyteller

BY TOBY CYGMAN
For The Bulletin

The enthusiastic and expressive Patrick Ryan, U of M's fall 2011 storyteller-in-residence, captivated the crowd at his welcome event with a folktale that influenced Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a funny story about the friendship between a chicken and a hedgehog.

Since its opening in the fall of 2008, University of Manitoba's Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture has hosted a residency that brings a writer and/or storyteller to the U of M to give such unique public performances. The resident storyteller also speaks in classes and offers one-on-one mentorship and advice on the craft of writing and storytelling. This semester the centre hosts Ryan, a London-based teacher and professional storyteller.

Ryan grew up listening to his great aunts tell stories, but it wasn't until after university when a tutor who was also a folklorist saw his storytelling potential and taught him to do field work in the area. He went on to complete a master's degree in education at the University of Chicago, a program that encouraged him to develop storytelling as a specialty alongside his teaching.

While teaching in America, Ryan continued to spend summers in Britain and Ireland collecting stories. In Belfast in the early 1980s, when it was often too dangerous for children to go to

the library, Ryan was involved in a program in which library staff went into the community to tell stories. Ryan trained staff in the program and later conducted professional development seminars on storytelling in London. He developed a reputation for storytelling expertise and performance until the storytelling started to supersede his teaching.

Ryan also studies the cognitive and neurological aspects of storytelling. He is particularly interested in how narrative is crucial to the development of the brain: "[Storytelling is] one of the first ways we think," he says. "Listening to oral stories, whether they're told from memory or read aloud, is important for the young child's mind to develop as the mind of a reader and writer."

Ryan is interested in how memories are translated into narratives and then used as guidance in new or unusual circumstances. "We think about stories we know from movies and books and friends," Ryan says, "to negotiate what to do next. We keep those stories in our heads."

The first institute of its kind in North America, the centre promotes scholarly research into oral and literate cultures. It provides support for students, faculty and community members working to create their own stories or studying others' stories.

The CCWOC is an interdisciplinary, research-based facility that permits artists, scholars and students from diverse backgrounds to explore



Photo by Susan Rich

Patrick Ryan, current U of M storyteller-in-residence.

the transformative possibilities of the spoken and written word.

Patrick Ryan is in residence at the CCWOC until December 2.

>> For more information about the centre and Patrick Ryan, go to:

umanitoba.ca/centres/ccwoc

Want to learn more about storytelling and try it yourself? Patrick Ryan's last storytelling circle is on Wednesday, November 16th from 2:30-3:30 at the CCWOC's Creative Communities Studio at 390A University College. To join, email ccwoc@cc.umanitoba.ca, or call 480-1065.

ARTS SPOTLIGHT

Farcical comedy opens BHT 2011-2012 season



Photo by Karen Schellenberg

The Gypsy Woman by Don Nigro & Other Lazzi is a physical farcical comedy performed with a flavour of *commedia dell'arte*.

It's curtains up for the University of Manitoba's Black Hole Theatre Company on November 15, and a contemporary reworking of a classic *commedia dell'arte* scenario.

In Don Nigro's version, Isabella and her servant Pedrolino return to Naples after ten years and decide to impersonate gypsies in order to find out what has happened while they were gone. An outrageous farce ensues, complete with "slapsticks" and all of the usual *commedia dell'arte* characters. This is a journey through love, identity crisis, insanity, the secret of life, and a very unfortunate recipe for magical cookies.

Playwright Don Nigro is known for a highly diverse body of dramatic literature, work that is often mysterious and unclassifiable, work like *The Gypsy Woman*. The play is a contemporary take on a story of "love," yet influenced by *commedia dell'arte*, a physical improvisational style first performed by the Gelosi troupe 400 years ago in Italy and France.

Jaelyn Kozak will take the director's chair for this racy production. "Forms of comedy owe much to *commedia dell'arte* and some of the conventions were utilized by playwrights such as Shakespeare and Moliere," notes Kozak.

She adds that the play is highly-imaginative, original, smart, and more importantly, funny, promising to be a crowd pleaser.

The BHTC produces a season of five noon-hour and three main stage productions every year between September and April. Noon-hour productions are free and run in the Theatre Program's Black Hole Theatre, an intimate 120 seat thrust theatre located in the basement of University College.

The three main stage productions run over a two week period in the months of November, January and March with 10 performances each. The November and March performances take place in the Black Hole Theatre while the January performances take place in the 230-seat Gas Station Theatre in the Osborne Village as part of the Manitoba Theatre Centre's Master Playwrights Festival.

The origins of the Black Hole Theatre Company begin with the formation of the U of M Dramatic Society in 1915 and a first production at the Walker Theatre. By the late 1960s, the Dramatic Society had evolved into the U of M Theatre Group with financial support from the University of Manitoba Student Union.

The company performed in many venues around the campus and city, with its home base being the Studio Theatre, a former floor hockey room in the basement of University College. By the early 1980s, this location had evolved into the current Black Hole Theatre.

With the exception of the Theatre Program teaching and support staff, the BHTC is made up of and staffed

What is *commedia dell'arte*?

According to director Jackie Kozak, it is physical and farcical comedy that originated in Italy and flourished during the early 1500s to about the 1750s and involves masks, improvisation, stock characters and tricks, routines, stage business, gags, stunts, action bits called *lazzi*. It is impossible to summarize *commedia dell'arte* in a sentence, she says; to understand it, it must be seen.

Commedia dell'arte is important to stage history for it marks the beginning of theatre as professionalism. The actors who played the stock characters such as the *zanni* (servants), *innamorati* (the lovers), *vecchi* (old creepy men) and *the Captain* were masters of their trade.

"I did not aim for an authentic historically accurate reproduction," she says, "because who's to know what *commedia dell'arte* in the time of Renaissance Italy? I chose an already-scripted play by a modern playwright Don Nigro, though the scenario hundreds of years ago. Jacques Lecoq's *The Moving Body* was an invaluable resource. As he says, 'No reading or reference books can substitute for creative work And this creative work must always be of our time.'

Kozak notes that to develop the play, "We did much investigating."

by roughly 140 students who are currently taking part in Theatre Program courses. The company's executive board is made up of current theatre students and faculty.

This year, *Gypsy Woman and Other Lazzi* takes to the stage to kick off the 2011-12 season until November 26. In the new year, *Arms and The Man* by George Bernard Shaw runs January 20 to 28, followed by *The House of Blue Leaves*, by John Guare and directed by George Toles, which runs from March 13 to 24.

Gypsy Woman Showtimes:

Tuesday, November 15, 7:00 p.m.
Wednesday, November 16, 8:00 p.m.
Thursday, November 17, 8:00 p.m.
Friday, November 18, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, November 19, 8:00 p.m.
NO PERFORMANCES SUNDAY OR MONDAY
Tuesday, November 22, 7:00 p.m.
Wednesday, November 23, 8:00 p.m.
Thursday, November 24, 8:00 p.m.
Friday, November 25, 8:00 p.m.
Saturday, November 26, 8:00 p.m.

>> For more information on the Black Hole Theatre Company's upcoming season: bhtc.ca.