

Sean: This is Sean Buvala with the Storyteller.net Amphitheater at the Mesa Storytelling Festival 2008 and I am talking with Charlotte Blake Alston...

Sean: Hello!

Charlotte: Hello!

Sean: One of the featured storytellers. How've you been doing?

Charlotte: I've been doing wonderful since I've been here.

Sean: Good! Good! Every festival has its own flavor. We go and (we find that when) we tell (in different) places and what's the flavor for you here?

Charlotte: Well, first of all you have this beautiful art center with wonderful choices of theaters of sizes and spaces that work really well with children, families and adults. So, that's been wonderful, And to be able to perform yesterday in a space, we had over 2,000 children in the main hall. It was just magical. It was absolutely wonderful. So, the weather we do appreciate, as well. I think everyone should come for clear skies and the warm temperatures. But, I understand you have done the festival outdoors before.

Sean: Yeah, in previous years, it was the typical tent model and the last two years it's moved here.

Charlotte: I love being outdoors, but I love the option of having multiple spaces to perform in, as well.

Sean: I think yesterday's event with the school children was world class, and that's not a word I throw around a lot in the storytelling world. I think we were world class yesterday. I think the facility, the kids, the performers, everybody pulled everybody else up. I am dying that it wasn't videotaped. That was a DVD product yesterday, an archive; that's a PBS special. That's how good that was. You guys were brilliant.

You have this crystal-clear voice when you start singing, and it just resonated in that building. I was backstage and it was coming backstage, this voice. So, I want to ask you about using music and storytelling. I was so connected to what you did yesterday. How does this blend for you, what's the feeling when you put together story and music. How do you come to that place?

Charlotte: Well, it really does come out of the tradition that existed, the old tradition that existed for thousands of years in West Africa. But also it really is an essential element in African/African American cultural traditions. My mother was a church organist; we had a piano in our home. My mother brought the piano teacher to the house. Half of Mr. Robert's income came from the Blake family. We did family programs. We sang in the choir. I was able to hear harmonies when I was very, very young. My sister was on the opera track. In fact, as I have been sorting through some old pictures and photos I found one of us as children around the piano singing with my brother John playing the piano. So, music was a fundamental part of our lives. And, in traditional storytelling, in the African and African/American community there is always music incorporated. So, there is this combination of spoken word and singing or chants, audience participatory elements, as well as instrumentation. So, I think I'm really just following, what I've done all along. My mother was the music person; my dad was the spoken-word person. So, it seemed natural that I would incorporate both those elements.

Sean: A lot of the audience that come to Storyteller.net are people that say, "Hey, I want to do that for a living." So, we do a lot of marketing work and things like that, and some people are very successful at it. If somebody is looking at a person like you, who is established and says, "I want to do what she does," is there a kernel of advice you can give them about incorporating music into their story? Where do they start?

Charlotte: That's a good question. Certainly, if music is a part of the way you move in the world, then you should incorporate it in a natural way. The music, though, you have really to think about what you are doing. The music has to serve the story. It has to help move the story along. I've seen some people who work very hard to incorporate music into their storytelling, and the music ends up taking away from the story; it doesn't really fit. I just heard Olga Lawyer who some of the listeners

may hear in the background, talk about the story that she was telling, and it took her two years to tell it because she couldn't find the right song to do in the story. So, that story sat and waited for two years until she was able to find that song that made the story work and then she began to tell it.

So, whether it's singing, and there's some simple ways that you can incorporate music, particularly with children audiences, but with adults, as well. I think there is power in unison singing, so sometimes you can incorporate a chant or a line that the audience gets an opportunity to repeat, either some element of the story, or something that the character does in that story, and very simple, so it shouldn't take five minutes to explain to the audience how they are going to participate. It should come very easily so you don't interrupt the rhythm and the flow of the performance and the story.

It took me about two months to be able to play the thumb piano and talk at the same time. So, I started to play, I found this lovely melody and I said, "Oh, this is really nice, here's a story I can do," and I went to talk and my brain said, "Excuse me, are we talking or are we playing?" So, it took some time because what happened was my brain wanted me to speak in the rhythmic pattern of the melody that I was playing. So, it took a while; it took some practice. And the same thing happened when I began to learn the kora, the 21-string kora, because I knew I was going to have to play, talk and sing and perhaps sing and talk in another language other than English. So, I would actually practice with the TV up loud so I had distractions, so my brain had to really still pay attention to what I was doing with my fingers. I would recite the Gettysburg Address; I would recite the Highway Man, Sam McGee; anything that I could do so that I could begin to get my brain to become accustomed to doing both of those things. So, it wasn't until I was able to do those without tripping over myself that I started doing it in front of an audience. So, be patient, it does take time, and it does take some practice.

Sean: And, wait for the moment to arrive.

Charlotte: Wait for the moment to arrive.

- Sean: That is great advice, because so many folks try to become what they're seeing instead of being what they are.
- Charlotte: Exactly. You can see four or five storytellers, as your listeners might know, tell the same story and you're going to hear it told in four or five completely different styles.
- Sean: Now, you and I, I remembered yesterday, have a commonality in being connected to what's happening in Downtown Philadelphia, or the historic district of Philadelphia at least, with the "Once Upon a Nation" work, so one of these days we're going to talk about that. Can you give a real quick synopsis about; they have a lot of theater people who try to do storytelling to talk about historical stuff during the summer. Can you give me a real short comment about how you got involved in that program and what happened with that?
- Charlotte: Well, I was actually contacted by one of the facilitators of that program, Geoff Berwind, when the historic commission came up with this bizarre idea to use stories to tell history.
- Sean: And, teach with stories.
- Charlotte: What a concept! And so, there were people who were contracted to actually write some stories. When he looked at them, he thought, "These are not going to work." And what people needed to learn is how to tell stories. So, I think probably the major thing for a lot of the young people who participate in that program is to drop that fourth wall of theater.
- Sean: Because, that's where they all come from. It's all theater people.
- Charlotte: There's no one out there, and you're just interacting with the people who are on the stage with you. But, there is no such thing as a fourth wall. It's a one-on-one, human-to-human connection that you're making with people when you're telling. So, that was really the main thing that we focused on.
- Sean: Excellent. One of these days we're going to do an Amphitheater with, I'm going to ask you to be a part of, if you would like to be, Geoffrey and you, and maybe a couple of their performers and do like a group

call and talk about that program, because I'm fascinated by that. And Geoffrey brings this huge theater background. When he was first telling me about using stories, "Oh" I thought, "Oh, I have seen this happen before," and I said, "Did you talk to any storytellers?" He said, "Yeah, do you know Charlotte Blake Alston?" I said, "Well, I don't know her personally, but I know of her." And I thought, "Oh, good! Relief! They had a storyteller come in and teach them something."

Charlotte: It's gotten better and better each year. They have a significant number of returning people.

Sean: Yeah, that's so good, so good. Well, listen, I know you and I are both on stage in a just a moment. So, thank you so much for your time and we'll talk to you some more. Thanks.