NEW HAMPSHIRE WEEKLY

ARTS & PEOPLE

'Just tell stories, and the way you do that is just by describing the pictures that you see as the story moves and words fall out from what you are saying in your imagination.'

BILLY TEARE

GLOBE PHOTO / NANCY HORTON

Lee musician Randy Armstrong, Northern Ireland storyteller Billy Teare, and Portsmouth storyteller Genevieve Aichele are collaborating for a Sunday performance.

Where the teller and the told meet

With words, performers draw a picture

"Everybody has a theater in their head and they people the theater with the characters in the story. It's an individual theater that everyone's got, but it's a collective theater when everybody's together. If you say, 'Once there was a king and queen,' everyone knows exactly what that means. It's a universal metaphor."

– Billy Teare

By D. Quincy Whitney
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

LEE – Story is theater and memory and, most of all, trickster, because it is often much more than it seems.

Thanks to the "Americans for the Arts" community residence program grant awarded to the Music Hall, only one in four in the nation, Portsmouth storyteller Genevieve Aichele, Lee musician Randy Armstrong, and renowned Northern Ireland storyteller Billy Teare are sharing their storytelling experiences as well as collaborating for their Music Hall performance Sunday in Portsmouth.

Storytelling calls up different memories for everyone.

Aichele lived in five states growing up, but always took with her two books: "Stories from Around the World" by Danny Kaye, and a collection of Chinese fairy tales. A resident of New Hampshire for more than 20 years, Aichele came to storytelling nine years ago from her work in theater and mime.

A native of West Virginia, where he listened to the tall tales of his grandparents, Armstrong had the presence of mind to tape those stories before his grandparents died. A musician with a reading disability, Armstrong recalled how he started a tradition with his three sons.

"I was too tired to read, so instead we made stories up. We'd start with the third oak tree on the side of the house and we would just go from there," Armstrong recalled in a recent interview at his home, where the performers are rehearsing.

Billy Teare recalls the tall tales he told as a 5-year-old given full rein to use his imagination in front of the class in a primary school in Bally Karry, County Antrim.

"My news would be nothing like a new pair of shoes," he said. "It would be: On the way from school yesterday, a gorilla jumped out – and my news would ramble on for 15 minutes."

When his teacher died, her replacement changed Teare's young experience with stories. "I remember the first day she came in, I thought it was going to be news time as usual. She said, 'Sit down, it's just your imagination,' and suddenly the imagination became an enemy," said Teare.

It was not until 39 years later that Teare resurrected his love of stories, first as a stand-up comic for a decade during the height of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland.

"One day I just got up at The Brown Cow Public House in Carrickfergus and did this very loosely put together comedy spot, five minutes, and it worked on that occasion. But that's the mistake you make, thinking if you can do it here, you can do it anywhere," said Teare.

Teare spent many evenings performing comedy, first at a Loyalist club, then traveling to West Belfast to present his comedy act in a Republican club, which might then be fol-

STORYTELLERS, Page NH 13

With words, storytellers draw a picture

■ STORYTELLERS
Continued from Page NH 11

lowed by his stage hypnotist act at a British army camp.

"I always felt as I was growing up that I was socially inept, and that doing comedy would actually bring friends my way, which is totally wrong because comedy is the one thing where your audiences can totally destroy you ... I died many times," Teare said. "Audiences are vicious, and we're talking about Belfast audiences at the height of the Troubles."

In 1990, at a Merlin Conference in Bath, Teare heard Robin Williamson, a celebrated Celtic bard. "It was in the Prince of Wales Theater in Bath on a wet afternoon, and the first thing he did was he looked at his audience and said, 'You're all too far away; come closer,' and we sat there spellbound for two hours," Teare recalled. "I knew that's what I wanted to do."

Teare began working in schools, teaching children how to remember, just through telling stories. Teare recalled one bored 13-year-old boy who was never without a deck of cards. Teare taught him to memorize the cards, a skill he demonstrated to a surprised school principal.

"As soon as that kid knew he could do that, he knew his brain worked in spite of what he'd been told," Teare said. "The memorization of a pack of cards is actually just telling a story in your own head. Once you've learned a very simple code, then you are telling yourself a story using elements of the code. It sounds complicated, but it isn't."

In his school literacy projects, Teare encourages students to write their stories only after they have spoken them several times first.

"Words on a page are only a codified way of getting pictures out," Teare said. "I say forget about books, just tell stories, and the way you do that is just by describing the pictures that you see as the story moves and words fall out from what you are saying in your imagination."

Teare also feels that a story exists between the teller and the listener and unites them somewhere in the middle.

His most dramatic memory about meeting in the middle involved Catholic and Protestant school children who rode the same bus each day, sitting on opposite sides, into the town of Castlederg to attend neighboring but separate schools. Teare spent a week in the Protestant school first.

"One of the bus drivers told the principal that he'd been watching the kids and some began to lean across the aisle and tell the other kids that there was a storyteller coming to your school next week, and this is one of the stories he told," Teare said. "That's the power of storytelling. Those kids, brought up not to speak to each other, had suddenly broken that down and were talking to each other, telling stories."

One of Teare's favorite stories involves the island people who once got along, but separated to the north and south to find food. The tricker god walks down the middle of the island, donning only a two-colored hat that he turns at the end of each walk so that each side continues to see only orange or green. Eventually, they begin to worship the god of green or the god of orange until one person follows the god to the end of his walk and sees him switch his hat.

"You can tell stories that have deeper meanings, which kids may not pick up on first," Teare said. "They enjoy it as a story. Let the story work, because it will."

"Stories are metaphor so we can deal with huge, deep issues that are too painful for somebody to deal with on the surface, but through stories, you can deal with anything," said Aichele.

▶ *Teare, Aichele and Armstrong present "Folktales from around the World" at 3 p.m. next Sunday at The Music Hall, 28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth. For tickets ($9), call 436-2400.*