

Graham Ross

With the 2001 National Storytelling Confest in Adelaide just around the corner 'Swag' wanted to start the countdown by profiling Confest Director, Graham Ross. Although, he is being very cagey about the confest; its bubbling along nicely he tells me, he still 'doesn't want to release all I have yet...' "It will distort it if I say too much."

Graham reflects on the theme of Sharing the Gift. The South Australian Guild Committee brainstormed and came up with about thirty possibilities, maxims that reflected their Guild and a philosophy for the Confest. Graham says the theme they chose 'reflects a certain spirit of generosity, which our group feel about storytellers, and a perception of the 'special-ness' of the gifts some have.' He worried that maybe the theme sounded a bit 60's or 70's, 'head in the clouds,' type of thing. But it does reflect the spirit the group brings to running and planning the Confest, 'That is much conviviality, participation, and a nurturing atmosphere.'

When you talk to Graham as he speaks of his involvement with storytelling and the Confest you hear snippets from wide ranging sources. Eel traps of the local indigenous people, Terry Jones and wandering minstrels to visions of 'flourid and fantastically unbelievable bible stories.' He has been published widely with topics ranging from One Classroom Many Cultures ... to The Value of Stories and Storytelling ' and his strong believe in the power of storytelling is evident.

It is no surprise when he reveals deeper themes, "I think the real themes of the Confest are more the threads which began to arise at the last festival in Canberra...the nature of Australian Storytelling, where we are at, what are our storytelling roots, new trends emerging around Australia and ethical and moral decisions in storytelling issues.'

Graham brings considerable experience as an educator and entertainer to his storytelling, with over thirty years' experience teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. His emphasis through these years was 'to use storytelling as a vehicle for language learning and cultural teaching' and prepare teachers 'to appreciate cultural diversity' and to 'teach English to speakers of other languages.'

His entertainment background comes from over ten years work with Playback Theatre Adelaide where he performed as director, actor and conductor. 'This form of non-scripted theatre involves a troupe enacting community and personal stories on the spot with minimal props....at conferences and for community celebrations and events.' Graham has also conducted many highly successful training workshops 'connected with storytelling, cultural understanding, self-presentation, collaborative learning and aspects of literacy.

He unashamedly says he 'steals and borrows' insights, techniques, and story ideas from many people and this has influenced the direction of his work. From friend James, of Malaysian Tamill background the appreciation of storytelling as a social ritual. Kel Watkins stimulated his use of playful yarns to explore big truths and Ann Pellowski's writings prompted him to work with props such as string, paper and objects when telling. His work with playback theatre has 'enlarged (his) belief ' in improvised stories and developed his ability 'to be present in the moment' of the story. (I) 'have a strong sense of value for my voice when it is fully embodied and from the heart'; this he learnt from natural voice teacher, Frankie Armstrong.

With this wonderfully informed background to his storytelling it is little wonder that Graham has high aspirations for the Confest

We aim to create an event:

* where people will participate actively * Share with enjoyment their stories and skills. * Acknowledge and celebrate the quality and diversity of Storytelling in Australia * Discuss current issues * Reflect Australian life, environment and events * Gain insights from other performing arts and disciplines * Experience and explore storytelling for different purposes and audiences

With all this in mind the committee started having delusions of grandeur, the "Murray Princess" paddle steamer was the first choice for venue. Storytellers would wile away their days in languid repose, listening and telling tales as they steamed up and down the mighty Murray River.

However a reality check stepped in and it was decided that \$350 just for accommodation, was a little rich for economically strapped storytellers and they were a little fearful of too languid a repose. Graham still 'finds it hard to forget the image of the Murray Princess lit up at night on the Murray.'

They continued searching for a place that had 'an evocative atmosphere' at a cheaper price and they found it '20 minutes drive from the middle of Adelaide, a Crooked Mick stone's throw from Mount Lofty' at the Woodhouse Memorial Scout Centre.

Next decision was to come up with a logo for the Confest that would act as its symbol and could be used for badges and T-shirts. This task was assigned to multi-media artist Ria Willering. Primarily a painter, Ria was born in Holland where she spent her early years on her father's barge travelling the waterways of Post-War Europe. At an early age she was exposed to the cultures of Germany, Switzerland, Belgium before arriving in Australia in 1960. She has had several exhibitions including 'Sex In the Kitchen', 'Red Centre' and 'Bridges on the River Rhine'. Set design is included in her portfolio; Fiddler on the Roof, as just one example and last year she designed the cover for Diane Wokstein's CD and audiotape. In the book, 'Adelaide's Best Kept Secret's she is reported to do amazing things at adult parties. Before you baulk, they were referring to her extraordinary talent as a face and body painter.

Her brief from the committee was to... 'capture something about the environment of the Confest, i.e. South Australia, Mount Lofty, the Adelaide Hills and local Flora and Fauna.' You can see for yourself what she finally came up with.

As related before Graham is only letting out snippets at a time and when pushed on performers and performances he revealed,

'What I'm most excited about are: the attendance of Australian born storyteller/ singer Eric Maddern now living in Wales and a workshop being organised by Victorian teller and author Gael Cresp.....'

Eric Maddern is a singer, storyteller, teacher and writer born in Whyalla, South Australia. When he was 11 his family moved to England and he was educated at Windsor Grammar School. Late teens saw him travel with various organisations to Arctic Norway, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. On his return he gained a degree in Psychology and Sociology. Then it was off to America, Mexico and Guatemala before arriving back in Australia in 1976.

In 1981 he became part of Araluen Bush Arts Team based in Alice Springs touring shows to aboriginal communities and where he chanced upon a book of essays called "White Man Got No Dreaming" that made him wonder about his own place in the scheme of things.

It was then back to the UK where he put together 'a one man show about the culture, history and contemporary life of the First Australians.' This proved very popular and he toured with it extensively. In 1991 English Heritage approached him to tell stories at Historic Sites and a book and CD of stories followed the next year.

"Since then Eric has continued to work at the cutting edge of the Storytelling revival in Britain." The above facts gleaned from 'a brief biography', has left me extremely curious about Eric's work, the fields of storytelling he feels passionate about correlate to my interests and that of Australia's developing Guilds. It has also left me with dozens of questions, that I hope I get a chance to ask at the Confest.

Gael Cresp, friend and colleague outlined her workshop for me. It is based on an idea she heard in New Zealand from American teller Elisabeth Ellis who reputedly has a 'voice that sounds like chocolate tastes'. Ellis invited four tellers to tell their version of Cinderella and compare them. Gael and a team of tellers, Graham Ross (SA), David Shapiro (NSW), Gill Di Stefano (VIC) and Gay Sutton (NZ) will work with the story of Sleeping Beauty. They will extend the idea even further by asking Louisa John Krol (VIC) to intersperse the telling with music and Janet Tucker (VIC) to illustrate the written copy. This manuscript will include their discussion on the why's and how they came to the story and the metaphors and meanings the story illicit's for each teller. This promises to be a powerful session.

Well, that's all we can reveal at the moment, Graham and his team seem to be working away busily on our behalf. I look forward once again to the rejuvenation of body and soul that comes from a weekend with kindred spirits and being guests of the South Australian Guild.