When the hare beat the tortoise:
Today's storytellers are not just rewriting old stories.
They are using new means -- 3D, video conferencing
and tour expeditions -- to tell them.

By V Shoba

WHEN THE HARE BEAT THE TORTOISE

Today's storytellers are not just rewriting old stories. They are using new means — 3D, video-conferencing and tour expeditions — to tell them >>>

by **V SHOBA**

IT WAS a story that brought Eric Miller to Chennai two decades ago. On the trail of Kannagi, the wronged protagonist of *Silappathikaram* (*Epic of the Anklet*, an ancient Tamil literary work) who set a city on fire with her righteous wrath, Miller walked 300 km from Poompuhar to Madurai in Tamil Nadu to understand Tamil culture through the story of her apotheosis. Early last year, this trail of places came alive once again when Miller, who moved to India a decade ago to establish the World Storytelling Institute in Nungambakkam, Chennai, led a group on a cultural expedition in the heroine's footsteps.

In a 14-day pilgrimage-cum-storytelling workshop, Miller interspersed his own storytelling with performances by and interactions with local communities, all the while challenging participants to "uncover their own inner stories".

Storytelling (the oral tradition of telling stories), an art that once flourished in the fables of wise gurus and viziers, and the folklore of grandmothers, has, for the past two decades or more, taken a backseat to TV, movies and other visually-rich mediums. Now, storytellers across the country are adding a professional dimension to the art of spinning yarn with a renewed interest in preservation, promotion and performance.

At the spring festival of a school in Ban-galore, Geeta Ramanujam, a world-renowned storyteller and founder of Bangalore-based Kathalaya, which trains adults and teachers in storytelling for children, is telling a short story to a rapt audience. It's a modern adaptation of the hare-and-tortoise fable, where both characters go to school together and the hare wins the race. "Slow and steady wins the race was the moral of the original story, but that was so long ago," Ramanujam says. Her impersonations of the sprightly hare who waits for his friend to catch up with him after school, and the book-loving tortoise who researches his own life story in the library are loaded with drama. She steers clear of traditional archetypes and signs off with a new moral: "Sometimes the rabbit wins, sometimes the tortoise."

Ramanujam explains the importance of storytelling in learning. "When I tell a story, I share with you my imagination of the characters, and each listener is free to

JYOTHY KARAT

imagine them in his or her own way; when you see a movie, however, it boxes your imagination," she says. Miller agrees. "Storytelling is like one-man theatre, where you play all the parts and also involve the audience, which in theatre is called breaking the fourth wall," he says.

Miller is interested in breaking virtual walls and sharing stories through videoconferencing. Storytellers the world over agree that a story must be told live and involve interaction with the audience. "That's possible through videoconferencing now," he says, powering on his Mac to play a video of one of his collaborative sessions with a storyteller in the US. While a movie or a book or an audio book is merely a presentation of a pre-made story, gameplay fits the definition of storytelling better, says Miller. "Even mass media today is becoming more like storytelling, inviting SMS responses and polls from the audience and taking up their suggestions," he says. Miller is a professor at the Image College of Arts, Animation and Technology, Chennai, where he is trying to drive game design towards storyline-centric gaming.

Inspired by Miller's work, a cluster of storytellers from Mumbai has just formed the Mumbai Storytelling Association and has already planned a year of activities in the city. Coomi S. Vevaina, head of the department of English at the University of Mumbai, and a stage actress who has

In a pilgrimage-cum-storytelling workshop, the storyteller interspersed his own storytelling with interactions with local communities and "uncovering of inner stories" by participants

been telling stories for 15 years, says she has seen interest in storytelling mushroom all over India. "Several professors I know want to start telling stories. What we want to do is pass on our talents to the younger generation by conducting workshops for university students and anyone interested in stories," she says. Vevaina is interested in storytelling as a form of activism against racism, casteism, gender bias and other prejudices — her stories often feature a "chocolate-brown prince" marrying the princess, or the princess living happily on her own.

Most storytellers in India still cater to children though. At Sishugraha School in Bangalore, Usha Kolluru, a storyteller trained at Kathalaya, is getting ready for a day of back-to-back classes. Her style is playful, even comical in places, as she enacts to Class 2A a scene from the *Panchatantra*: the birds of the jungle, dissatis-

fied with their king, Garuda, are gathered for a re-election. It's not a narration, nor a page from a book. It cannot be. For when Kolluru describes the assembly of birds, little Meghna, a back-bencher, butts in with a pertinent question. "What's the name of the peacock? He must have a name," she says. Ashwin from the third row, inspired by his classmate's curiosity, asks whether the gathering includes kiwis, kingfishers, penguins and ostriches. "They should elect the emu, it's the fastest bird," he says, and the class is caught up in a chirping of its own. The story, by now a full-fledged discussion moderated by the teller, stretches on for over half-an-hour and ends with the birds re-electing Garuda. Even before Kolluru can ask what they thought of the story, the children come up with their own understanding. "The moral is, think before you act," says one. "The crow was smart, he didn't let the owl become king," says another. A disappointed Anaya says, "The peacock is so pretty, he should be king."

Kolluru listens patiently and adjourns the class with an activity — making a bird mask with a paper plate, crayons and pre-made cut-outs of beaks and wings. "These sessions improve children's intelligence and help them become sensitive and knowledgeable," says Ramanujam, who, for many years, has been working on integrating stories into junior school curriculum.

Kathalaya hasn't had a single story-

JYOTHY KARAT

telling session for adults other than on-request workshops for corporates. Ramanujam, who has given several story-telling performances for adults abroad, says, "In the US, professional storytelling is chiefly for adults. But here too things are looking up. I'm looking forward to telling stories to adults." In December last year, for the first time in India, Miller organised a session for adults in a Chennai café where participants shared personal stories on giving and receiving gifts. The next session, scheduled for February 8, has the subject: 'The odds were a million-to-one against me, but I did it!'

If contemporary storytelling is emerging as a career option in Indian cities, traditional forms of story theatre and performance such as Dastangoi and Harikatha are also getting a fillip in the arts circuit. But they are not really interactive any-more, says Miller, adding that traditional stories have to be secularised to appeal to modern audiences. "Most parents have a motive in mind when they approach me for classes. They want their children to learn to speak English. I try to teach people and children how to be articulate through stories," he says.

Sowmya Srinivasan, who recently became a full-time storyteller, says the way stories are told in India needs to be changed. "Most children like traditional, moral-based stories, but that's just how they have been conditioned. I am inter-

"Most parents have a motive in mind when they approach me for classes. They want their children to learn to speak English," says storyteller Eric Miller

ested in how a child can create another reality for himself within the story," she says. Srinivasan works with the Spastic Society of Karnataka on stories for children with disabilities.

A few storytellers might frown on technology as a rival force but some are trying to reconcile the two worlds. Ramachandra Budihal is a man equally in love with gad-gets and stories. A Wipro techie and founder of the Mahabharata Research Foundation — which is engaged in compiling and digitising an encyclopaedia of literature about the epic — Budihal gave a rousing presentation of his "Digital Hampi" project at the 2009 TED India conference. Wearing 3D eye gear with an in-built camera and stepping into the shoes of a tourist wandering the ruins of the Hampi temples, he demonstrated a concept navigation system capable of taking him back in time, where he could walk through Hampi in all its original splendour— projected as it was on the present site. A map of the place, with interactive features — listening to the sound of chants in the sanctum sanctorum, "touching" musical pillars to produce notes and Ramayana carvings to unveil the stories engraved in them, even virtually carving names on the monuments — and finally, a projection of king Krishnade-varaya onstage, completed what Budihal called a "fully immersing experience".

Digital Hampi is the first project to be taken up by the newly-formed India Innovation Labs — a collaboration between government, academia and industry, with MIT Touch Labs and Wipro leading the technical front. "Imagine touching the king who doesn't exist anymore. Imagine smelling the smells of the past. This 'imagineering' will soon be reality. Who knows, we might use robots to tell the stories behind India's heritage sites," Budihal says. Let's hope we can watch this story unfold. □

PRASHANT NADKAR

All Ears: (Top) A student enjoys a storytelling session; (above) members of the Mumbai Storytelling Association