

## Young European Storytelling

About a year ago, a column in a Dutch storytelling magazine stated the following:

*“The art of storytelling is not suited to young people. Telling and understanding stories requires maturity and life experience. This is confirmed by the facts: youngsters do not visit storytelling events very often, and the stories they tell are mostly confined to urban legends told in the schoolyard.*

*The above view is taken by quite a few storytellers. It excludes youngsters – age 16 and older – from the art of storytelling, turning it into an elitist activity with a very small group of participants. Consequently, storytelling is pushed to the margins of society and robbed of the social engagement that is so important for any art form. Young theatre-makers, comedians, visual artists, musicians and dancers all observe society and use their art to mirror their experience of the world. Yet when a storyteller looks into the mirror he sees only his own face – with a new grey hair added every day. Storytelling is the only form of art where the average age of the artist is well above fifty.”*

After publication, these words were often cited in discussions amongst Dutch storytellers. Both younger and older storytellers recognized this situation from their own experience.

It is my belief that the established storytelling culture leaves too little room for young artists. I am very glad, therefore, that this subject is on the agenda of this year’s FEST conference.

Most well-known storytellers are autodidacts, while others have learned from more experienced artists. There are also those who have a background in theatre and developed their skills on their own. The current generation mostly pursues storytelling as a second career.

When I first started with storytelling myself, I searched the entire country for a course – and found only two weekend courses! This was simply all there was on offer. Then I started visiting several storytelling cafes. However, it soon became apparent that these were not ideal places to develop my abilities. Fortunately, I then met an older storyteller who offered to teach me. At the same time, I silently decided to contribute in the future to opportunities for young people like me, who wish to develop as storytellers.

Now, many years later, I run the largest storytelling school in the Netherlands. My own students receive much better training than I and my teacher-colleagues did when we first started.

There is a small but growing number of young storytellers who decide to earn their living by telling stories professionally. When I talk with this younger generation, the conversation often turns to their choice of profession and career opportunities. The decisions they make now will influence the courses of their young lives. Because they are younger, they also have different needs than older storytellers. One of these is the need for quality education, another for opportunities to get more work experience. Also, they wish to meet age-peers who engage in storytelling.

This new generation of storytellers communicates with one another and their audiences via new media such as Twitter and Facebook. Often, they tell different kinds of stories than the older generation, and they are always searching for new and creative ways to tell them.

The future of our art lies in the hands of this new generation that is now starting to make itself heard. They can use their stories not only to contribute to society but also to bring the art of storytelling itself to a new level. Storytelling needs younger artists who can overtake the old order and in doing so renew and contribute to the professionalization of our art.

It is my strong belief that we need a European project to support the development of storytellers between the age of 16 and 35. FEST provides us with many opportunities to organize both virtual and real-life meetings between these storytellers.

Over the last years, several significant initiatives were launched to provide young storytellers with opportunities to develop their art. I would like to discuss two in particular.

- In the UK, a yearly Young Storyteller of the Year competition is held. For some of the winners, receiving this award was an important step towards becoming a professional storyteller. It would be terrific if such a competition could be held in several different countries. We might then invite all the ‘storytellers of the year’ to attend FEST conferences together as VIPs.
- The previous year the FEST Interest Group Young Storytellers came up with the idea to invite young talents to international storytelling events. In Holland we have just put this into practice. Last week, four young European storytellers between 18 and 32 years old produced an English storytelling show in two days. Jan Blake took up the role of director and the production was put on four times during the Waterfall International Storytelling Festival in Zwolle. One of the performers was this year’s Young Storyteller of the Year in the UK. Via Twitter, the daily experiences of these four young storytellers could be followed.

Initiatives such as these could be further developed by cooperating with more European events, storytelling schools and other providers of storytelling training.

Apart from making new productions with Young Storytellers, festivals could also exchange these productions. In this way, young storytellers are not only given the chance to make a show, but also to go on a European tour. A project such as this is relatively inexpensive. Young Storytellers who are offered such an opportunity will be content with a plane ticket, accommodation, and meals.

Among storytellers, there is often talk about a ‘renaissance’ of storytelling. I believe this revival can only succeed if we attract young storytellers to the scene and make the most of the opportunities. Otherwise our cherished ‘renaissance’ may turn out to be only a very short-lived affair.

Now is the time to choose whether we want to open new doors and engage storytelling with our changing times. If we wish to bring more people into contact with our valued art, we need to create more opportunities for young storytellers.

In the Netherlands, pupils between 14 and 16 are trained in the art of storytelling. The previous month they made an unannounced visit to primary schools all around the country – and even appeared on national television. To me, this initiative symbolizes the future possibilities of storytelling. These were not older, well-known storytellers bringing to stories to classrooms and television screens. They were young teenagers bringing primary school children into direct contact with the ageless art of storytelling!

Raymond den Boestert, FEST conference in Toledo, Spain, June 2011.

**Vertelacademie (Academy for Storytelling)**

Internet: [www.vertelacademie.nl](http://www.vertelacademie.nl)

Twitter: @Vertelacademie

Address: J.P. Coenstraat 65-bis, 3531 EN, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Phone: 0031 (0)30 2935842