

DIANE FERLATTE

Aesop: Alive and Well

Art Form: Storytelling

Style: Traditional

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

A native of New Orleans, storyteller **Diane Ferlatte** recalls with fondness her childhood years of sitting on the porch of her grandparents' home, captivated by the oral stories of family generations past. She now carries on that tradition with tales filled with spirit, journeys and fantasy. Diane offers three different performances: *Have I Got a Story to Tell*, a solo show of stories from Africa and the American South; *We Were There*, that brings to life the stories of African Americans in history; and *Aesop, Alive and Well*, a new show featuring the fables of Aesop and the music of Erik Pearson. Diane views the art of storytelling as an effective way of stirring the imagination to promote reading readiness and literacy. Diane has toured in Austria and New Zealand, and has been a featured teller at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and Open House at the Hollywood Bowl. She was honored by the mayor of Oakland for her role as co-director of the city's Sixth Annual National Storytelling Festival.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Aesop, Alive and Well presents not only five fables, but also the story of the fabulist himself. Accompanied by the music of Erik Pearson, Diane Ferlatte tells her own version of the fables credited to the famous Aesop, including "Poor Crow," the story of a thirsty but determined crow, "The Ant and the Dove," a tale about helping others, "The Shepherd Boy" (or The Boy Who Cried Wolf), "The Monkey and The Donkey," in which a donkey learns to be himself, and "Bone Day," a story about a dog who learns to appreciate what he has. As we listen to the stories, we also come to appreciate the wit and wisdom of Aesop. A brief question and answer period may follow the presentation. Teachers may prepare their students for the performance by introducing them to the information provided in these pages.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

There are many ancient regions, islands and countries of the Mediterranean that claim to be the birthplace of Aesop: Thrace, Phrygia, Aethiopia, Samos, Athens and Sardis all historically claimed the prize. The respect for this time-honored storyteller, who was born in 620 B.C., is all the more impressive when you consider his difficult beginning: Aesop was born a slave. With no rights or privileges of a freeman of Greece, Aesop strove, thought and learned. Through his wits, intelligence and ability to learn and share his knowledge, Aesop earned his freedom. He became an active participant in the public affairs of Greece, impressing all with his stories. He traveled through many countries, driven by his desire to instruct and be instructed. Aesop's fables were known and quoted far and wide by adults, who also shared them with their children. Aesop eventually became a well-respected ambassador for the court of Croesus, king of Lydia, and was sent by him on many diplomatic missions. Using his fables as his tool, Aesop's ability to settle arguments between nations and states was legendary. His death, sometime around 560 B.C., only added to his fame. He died at the hands of the people of Delphi, who were then visited by illness and other disasters, until they believed that they were cursed. Aesop was honored after his death with the creation of a statue of him by Lysippos, one of the most famous sculptors of Greece. The statue was placed in Athens.

Fables are stories with a very high purpose: to teach a lesson about honorable behavior, often without letting the listener know they have been educated. Through the use of fictitious characters, often animals, the listener is gently led to decipher the meaning of the message on their own. No one is teaching them; they are being encouraged to examine the behavior presented in the tale and decide what is right or wrong.

Fables always end with a moral, an important rule for living. Through examples, they guide listeners toward valuing honesty, honor and good behavior instead of dishonesty and bad a. Aesop knew that presenting simple stories with humor would succeed, especially when it was his purpose to educate or influence a resistant or difficult audience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Think about the stories you heard in the performance. Which was your favorite? Why?
- A “moral” is a saying that states an accepted societal “rule.” Each of Aesop’s stories have morals. The Shepherd Boy teaches us that “Honesty is the best policy.” What are some of the other morals that you remember from the performance?
- What tools did Diane Ferlatte use during her performance to tell the stories? (voice, face, movement, body)
- Aesop was born in 620 B.C. How many years ago was he born? (Add the current year to 620 to get the answer.) Have the morals and lessons that he wrote about become obsolete ?
- If Aesop died a long time ago, why do you think this performance is called *Aesop: Alive and Well*?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Long before television, movies, radio, video games and even books, people told stories to entertain and teach. The stories were about real or imagined events, but the main point was to share information and enjoyment. Traditionally, stories change with each new telling and each new audience, because each storyteller will add his or her own special talents and experiences to the mix, as will each listener.

Discuss what makes a good story. Point out to students that good storytellers create pictures in the minds of their listeners by the way they describe the place where the story happens (setting); how the people, animals or objects in the story look (characters); the things the characters say (dialogue); and the things the characters do (action).



Ask students to sit together in a circle and create a story. Start the story with an opening line such as “*Once upon a time there was a student who kept talking in class.*” Go around the circle and ask each student to add a sentence to the story. Students should focus on listening and speaking. Afterwards, discuss the story to see what worked and what students would change.

- Legend:
- ⦿ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⦿ Discuss how the performance painted pictures in your mind with words, music and actions. Select one of those mental pictures and draw it, using colors to help express the feelings the story created. Use the drawing of your image to retell what happened in that part of the story, what you remember about it and why.
 - ❖ There are many well-known sayings, or morals, that come from Aesop’s fables. Some examples include “Honesty is the best policy,” “United we stand, divided we fall,” “Misery loves company,” and “You can’t please everybody.” With a partner, select one saying and create a story that illustrates that moral.
 - Aesop was born a slave, as were many people from many different countries throughout history. Sometimes people who were enslaved were able to earn or buy their freedom. Other times they were slaves for life with no hope of ever being liberated. Aesop earned his freedom with his stories. Find out more about slavery by research a specific country’s history, the ways people became enslaved, and if slaves from that country were ever able to earn their freedom.
 - ⇒ Discuss why telling stories is a good way to educate and teach an audience. If an audience enjoys hearing a story, are they more likely to remember details?
 - * Diane Ferlatte uses tools to tell her stories:
 - Voice** -- She changes her voice to fit the story’s actions or the character’s emotions (inflection and pitch.) She may also speak loud or soft (dynamic), and fast or slow (tempo).
 - Face** -- Diane changes her facial expressions to match the different feelings in each story.
 - Movement** -- She moves her body and hands to help listeners picture the characters and the actions of the story.
 - Music** -- Diane Ferlatte sings some parts of the stories, and Eric Pearson plays the music to help audiences imagine what is happening.
- Looking at the tools of the storyteller listed above, try to think of what other professions might use some of these tools, and why? (Teachers, politicians, ministers, policemen?)

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Gibbs, Laura. *Aesop’s Fables*. Oxford University Press, April 2003.
- Macdonald, Margaret Read. *Shake-It-Up Tales! Stories to Sing, Dance, Drum and Act Out*. August House Publishers, May 2000.
- On the World Wide Web: www.dianeferlatte.com