



# DIANE FERLATTE

## *Have I Got a Story to Tell!*

**Art Form: Storytelling**  
**Style: Traditional**  
**Culture: African American**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

A native of New Orleans, storyteller **Diane Ferlatte** recalls with fondness 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 views the art of storytelling as an expressive way to pass on history, culture and values and as an effective way of stirring the imagination to promote reading readiness and literacy. She was honored by the mayor of Oakland, California for her role as co-director of the Sixth National Festival of Black Storytelling and was a featured storyteller at the annual National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. This dynamic and inspiring artist has toured internationally to Austria, Australia and New Zealand, and has been featured in a storytelling series at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Diane Ferlatte weaves her tales from many cultures, but her favorite stories have African, Southern and African American roots. Enhancing her gift in the oral tradition is her skill in American Sign Language allowing the art form to be embraced by the hearing impaired community.

In her performances, the multi-talented Ferlatte sings, signs stories, plays the spoons and other instruments (drum, marimba, rattles), and tells folktales, fables, nursery rhymes, and personal stories to the delight and enjoyment of audiences of all ages, cultures and colors!



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The Black oral heritage is alive and growing among people of African blood, whose ancestors presumably originated storytelling with the creation of civilization in Africa, and among other ethnic groups as well. Brought into the Americas by African captives, the art form remained largely dormant among descendants of the original captives except in family and church meetings. Now, however, the art is being resurrected and calls for storytellers are crisscrossing the nation and much of the world. Audiences vary from intimate family gatherings to international storytelling festivals.

Since the beginning of time, folks have always wanted to spread the word. The ones who can spread the word the most effectively have the ability to "talk dat talk" and "walk dat walk." They can grab the imagination of the listener and hold on to it for as long as they like, conjuring up images of the good and the bad, the weak and the strong, and the trickster and the fool. They have the ability to make you laugh until you cry, cry until you laugh, stand up and shout, or stare in amazement at their gestures and characterizations.

In the African American culture, past and present, these folks have gone by many names. Today they are called preachers, healers, teachers, comedians, blues singers, poets, dancers, rappers, liars, and historians. Among

African people the historian is known as the *griot*. The *griot* is a revered individual in the society who is entrusted with the exact cultural history. This exalted position is inherited. There are families in West Africa who have claimed this honor for many generations. The art of the *griot* requires music and song skill and also an unerring memory.

In a performance, all storytellers will use whatever it takes to get the story across. To hear them is to hear the drum, the heartbeat of Africa. To see them tell the story is to experience highlights of African ritual at its best, a total theatrical performance.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite story from the performance?
- What characters did you like the best? Why?
- How did Diane use her body and voice to portray various characters in the stories?
- Did you hear or learn any new words in an African language or in American Sign Language (ASL)?
- What lessons did you learn through the experience of the stories?



## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Maps help us find places, but they can also help us find stories. Study maps of the United States and Africa, the two primary locales from which Diane Ferlatte draws her tales. The United States has many regions where people of particular ancestry and culture have settled. Identify a place you are interested in or have always wanted to visit and learn a story which originated there or is associated with that particular area. Examples might be: a Native American legend from the Navajo in the Southwest; a Scandinavian folktale from the Swedes, Norwegians or Finns in Minnesota; or a Latino legend from peoples of Mexican or Central American heritage in California. The continent of Africa is composed of many countries with different cultural groups, each of which has a unique tradition and oral history. Refer to books on African storytelling to find examples from a variety of tribes. Have students share their stories with the class, incorporating the map and/or the journey of a story in the telling.

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

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⇒ Read a selection of African folktales, such as those featuring the adventures of "Spider" and African American folktales, such as the "Brer Rabbit" stories. Describe what commonalities the folktales of different origins share. Analyze how the stories' lessons or morals are similar or unique.
- ❖ Begin a journal recording daily observations of your life and home environment. Select an entry to use as the basis for a personal history story.
- ❖ Give each student an index card which has a "story starter," a line with which to begin a tale. Have students write their stories and then transcribe them into small blank books. Finally, have them illustrate their work, creating original storybooks.



Suggestions for "story starters":

I woke up in the middle of the night and...

If I could have three wishes, I think I'd choose ...

The funniest thing that has ever happened to me was...

- ▶ Look at examples of African art: textiles, masks, sculpture, basketry, beadwork and jewelry. Pick out elements - line, shape, color - that typify the unique aspects of African art in the various media. Observe how the design and style of traditional African sources has influenced and enriched contemporary art and culture.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Gross, Linda and Marion E. Barnes. *Tales that Talk,- An Anthology of African-American Storytelling*. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY: 1989.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. Alfred E. Knopf, New York, NY: 1985.