

Storytelling and other educational programmes during the exhibition *The Magical Crowd – Beliefs in Supernatural Beings in Podravina*

- The text reviews the educational programmes held during the exhibition *The Magical Crowd – Beliefs in Supernatural Beings in Podravina*, staged between December 2015 and late May 2016. The storytelling method is highlighted as a method of direct work with museum visitors focused on enhancing the experience of the museum.

Key words: Ethnographic Museum (Zagreb)
educational programmes, storytelling

INTRODUCTION

The exhibition *The Magical Crowd – Beliefs in Supernatural Beings in Podravina* was staged at the Ethnographic Museum in Zagreb between 12 December 2015 and 31 May 2016. The author of the expert concept of the exhibition was curator Danijela Križanec-Beganović, the author of the photographs was Iva Lulić, and the author of the exhibition display Nikolina Jelavić Mitrović. Artists Zdravko Tišljar, Zdenko Bašić, Marija Plečko, Petra Orbanić, Maja Jurjević and Ivo Vičić were also represented at the exhibition. Their visual and audio contributions interpreted the magical world of the supernatural beings in Podravina beliefs.

The expert part of the exhibition was based on the field research of Danijela Križanec-Beganović in Podravina in 2014 and 2015, acquired older ethnographic material and data obtained from the *Questionnaire of the Ethnological Atlas of*

Yugoslavia from the nineteen-sixties. Texts by the author, narratives of the narrators, art photographs and sculptural works presented various supernatural beings. *Coprnice* (witches), *vile* (fairies), *šumske dekle* (forest girls), *vukodlaci* (werewolves), vampires, *pesoglavci* (dog-headed men) and dragons constitute only a part of the rich world of beliefs and stories of the older generations in Podravina, recognized and remembered by the present-day population.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES RELATED TO THE EXHIBITION

The task of the educational team of the Ethnographic Museum included devising and implementing programmes for different user groups with which the display of the exhibition was enriched and supplemented. Since most of the overall users were accounted for by school groups, special efforts were invested into designing programmes for that particular group. We wanted to present beliefs as part of traditional culture to the youngest visitors in an educational, creative and amusing way. The implemented programmes can be divided into two groups – programmes for organized kindergarten groups and programmes intended for family visits. While programmes and schools and kindergartens were implemented during the week, family programmes were run on Sundays. During the six-month exhibition altogether 2725 users took part in workshops, guided tours, storytelling sessions and special events.

Mythical beings dwell in stories, which is why storytelling was the most frequently used method in direct work with the users. Its primary task was to enrich the visitors' experience of the museum. The storytelling method as a tool used in interpreting a museum object can be appreciated in a narrower and a broader sense. In the broader sense storytelling actually means the identification of the cultural context in which the museum object is used. In their consideration of the cultural context structure Margaret and Raymond Di Blasio also defined the principles of museum storytelling. An exhibition narrates stories in the museum context. That is why it must have a balanced relationship between the factual and the amusing, it must be compact, concrete and use a developed visual language. Describing an object is not enough – you must also explain its origin. Moreover, the museum story must also be personally attractive and – an additionally important point – it must break existing biases and promote intercultural comparisons (1983: 7). Thus, the *Magical Crowd* exhibition narrated stories about the supernatural beings of Podravina from the ethnological and scientific perspective, and from the art perspective through the artists' photographs and pictures.

Before listing the staged programmes, let us briefly present museum storytelling in the narrower sense as a form of direct work with the visitors/users. Storytelling skill is extraordinarily important in order to enrich the experience of the exhibition. According to Trinkoff (2015: 6), the story leads the visitor on a museum trip in which he/she will gain knowledge about the institution and its objects. Any guided tour through the exhibition is also concurrently storytelling and interaction. When storytelling on a guided tour, in addition to voice and diction due account must also be taken of nonverbal body language and accommodation to the guided group in terms of age and educational level. Therefore, the experience of the exhibition may vary from one storytelling guide to another. In his analysis of the storytelling method, Herminio Otero stressed the importance of the “transmission of esthetic excitement” (2005: 236). This is precisely what happened during the *Magical Crowd* exhibition. Storytelling enhanced esthetic excitement and the experience of the displayed works of art.

During the exhibition storytelling was used as a dramatic technique in storytelling theatre, fable reading sessions and fable telling sessions. As an art form storytelling implies interaction between the storyteller and the listener. The storyteller’s skill is also reflected in his/her capacity to respond to stimuli from the public so that listeners co-create the story. Unlike theatre performances, storytelling does not include set design; sometimes only a costume is used, but very often it is not. Most frequently the storyteller does not move physically but evokes the characters in the story with his voice and gestures.

PROGRAMMES FOR ORGANIZED KINDERGARTEN AND SCHOOL GROUPS

Just as in many other exhibitions of the Ethnographic Museum, organized kindergarten and school groups were the majority in the overall number of visitors of the *Magical Crowd* exhibition. During six months it was visited by 32 kindergarten and school groups with altogether 1356 children. Although most of the organized groups saw the exhibition on their own or with expert guidance, most of most of them also participated in some of the offered workshops.

Since kindergartens and schools often find it financially more cost-effective to send a greater number of educational groups to the museum at the same time, when the workshops were formed due account had to be taken to make them educational, creative and amusing, and at the same time feasible for a greater number of children at the same time.

The concept of fable and folk story reading sessions turned out to be the best solution because it offered the possibility of accommodating a greater number of children in the workshop at the same time (even up to 50) and did not require additional equipment (tables and accessories). In order to present reading as a pleasant and interesting activity, much attention was devoted to preparing the facilities, but also the participants. Children were not expected to sit on chairs; instead, they were given cushions and small tables so that they could relax and get into the spirit of the story. A small hand-made cardboard fireplace served to illustrate the introduction to the story about the time when people, before the appearance of the radio, TV and computers, used to spend their off hours sitting in front of the fireplace and telling stories; there followed discussion about whether people now like at all to listen to stories and read books and the like. Before starting to read, we would all take a couple of deep breaths in order to relax, lock our mouths with little keys and prick up our ears.

The reading room concept was designed first of all to present reading as an amusing activity in which they could participate on their own but also include others (e.g., by reading books to others or listening while someone was reading to them). By introducing workshops of this type the Ethnographic Museum supported the national strategy for the promotion of reading and joined the first national campaign for the promotion of reading aloud to children since birth – *Read to Me!*¹ Similarly, reading sessions were also focused on bringing the often incomprehensible concept of belief in supernatural beings closer to the children, especially younger children. Hence the selected stories were not limited to the Podravina region, but characters presented at the exhibition also appeared in them.

The stories were selected bearing in mind the following criteria:

1. Origin of the story

The essential point in selecting the reading matter was whether it was a folktale and not a specific author's story or fable. This is why we selected two collections from the Croatian oral tradition.

1 The *Read to Me!* was initiated under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth on 2 April 2013 on the occasion of the *European Reading Aloud Year*. The partners in the campaign were the Croatian Reading Society, the Croatian Library Association - Commission for Library Services for Children and Youth, UNICEF, the Croatian Paediatric Society, the Croatian Association of Researchers in Children's Literature, the Croatian Logopedic Association with the support of the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, the Ministry of Culture, the National and University Library Foundation and others. The drive wanted to stimulate parents and other adults to read aloud to their childrens in cebirth, and stimulate joint visits of children and parents to libraries. The drive is still on, and others can join it, such as all institutions, associations but also individuals through the organization of story telling and book reading sessions, reading marathons, organized reading sessions in foreign languages, interactive reading sessions, promotion of picture books, exchange of books, etc. (taken over from www.citajmi.info; last 22 October 2016). More about the drive on www.citajmi.info.

both elaborated by Jozo Vrkić, *Cvjetnjak velebitских vila, hrvatske narodne bajke i priče o vilama (Flower Garden of the Velebit Fairies, Croatian Folktales and Fairy Stories)*² [from which two stories – *Mala vila (The Little Fairy)* and *Vilinska koprena (The Fairy Veil)* were selected], and *Bajke iz Čitanke Hrvatske narodne bajke*³ (*Fables from the Croatian Folktale Reading Book*; the fable *Zlatna jabuka [The Golden Apple]* was selected for reading.

2. Contents

Since the fable reading sessions were related to the *Magical Crowd* exhibition, we thought that they should include at least some of the supernatural beings presented at the exhibition. During selection we most frequently came across stories in which the fairies played a specific role, and it was therefore not surprising that in two out of the three finally selected stories the fairy played the central role. *The Fairy Veil* is a story about love between a fairy and a young man with a clear message about the value of love and devotion toward people we love, while the *Little Fairy* is a story about a fairy who grows in keeping with the love she gets from her beloved; however, the end is somewhat sadder. We thought it would also be essential to choose a story without a happy ending because such an approach enhances the children's sensibility for a whole range of emotions and, in discussion with them, improves awareness of the true values in life. The third story, *The Golden Apple*, is a variant of a story already familiar to some children: it is a story about a girl whose golden apple/toy falls into a well. A frog promises her that it would help her if she let it eat with her at the table. In the story an evil witch casts a spell on a prince and turns him into a frog. The story also has a strong moral lesson about the importance of meeting one's promises.

In addition to discussing with the children about what they saw as a message and about their own experience related to the theme of the story, we always linked that with what they saw at the exhibition. Since the plot of the stories often differed from the description of the same characters in the story, that would open up discussion about the observed similarities and differences.

2 The collection was published in 2011 by *Glagol*. It contains nine stories and fables from various parts of Croatia and one from Roumania, all elaborated by Jozo Vekić, free lance writer from Omiš. Every story includes a glossary of unknown words, and the illustrations are by Ana Jakić-Divković. In line with the title, the themes of all the stories are fairies, the fairy world and the relationship between fairies and 'ordinary' people.

3 The collection was published in 2006 by *Glagol*, and it contains folktales elaborated by Jozo Vrkić and included in the anthology of Croatian oral literature and in the selection of required reading and reading books for primary schools. Twelve fables deal with supernatural beings and inexplicable events, often with a dose of humour and always with a happy ending and a strong moral message. Each fable is accompanied by a glossary of unknown words and illustrations by Ana Jakić-Vidović.

3. Length

Unfortunately, in the implementation of educational programmes we were often faced with the lack of time required for obtaining good quality in the performance of certain workshops. Kindergartens and schools found it simpler and cheaper to send several educational groups to visit the museum at the same time. Not infrequently, a group of more than 50 children came to visit the museum and attend a workshop at once. They usually had between 60 and 90 minutes at this disposal. Considering the available resources – not only the human but also spatial ones – we divided large groups into several sub-groups so that all the pupils could participate both in the workshops and in the visit to the display and the exhibition. Because of the short time available, it was essential to choose relatively short stories (up to a seven-minute reading) in order to allow time for discussion after the reading. If we had a smaller group and more time, they were offered a longer workshop. After reading the children would produce their own picture book based on what they had heard in the story and seen at the exhibition. In another version, the read story would be dramatized together with the children. Analogously, as a supplement to reading, a few drama games would be played with the children. The names of the games recalled the supernatural beings from the exhibition, e.g., *Dragon's Tail*, *Fairy Hair* or *Magic Frog*.

Although the demand for the fable reading session related to the *Magical Beings* exhibition was higher than that for other workshops, a workshop for making fairy wings was also included in the offer. It was intended for smaller groups of up to 20 children. Its implementation required more material and working space for each child. Fairy wings and, at the special request of boys, dragon wings, were made from already prepared metal wire frames bent in a form matching wings. Children drew nylon stockings of the desired colour on them and decorated them with multicoloured paper, strips and beads.

The Ethnographic Museum promoted inter-institutional cooperation, as evinced by the fact that organized school groups had the opportunity to visit a play in the Museum. It was called *Over the Bush, Over the Thorn... Stories from Folk Traditions* presented by the *Teatar Tirena*, produced with the support of the Department for Education, Culture and Sports of the City of Zagreb and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia. The performance thematized various supernatural beings from the Croatian tradition such as witches, fairies, night hags, dog-headed men and werewolves, and familiarized children with the Croatian cultural tradition in an amusing way.

The actress Jadranka Bargh told the Russian folktale *Baba Yaga* [a supernatural being (or one of a trio of sisters of the same name) who appears as a deformed and/or ferocious-looking woman]. There are different variants of the story about the evil woman and the beautiful Vasilisa, the girl who remained without her mother and was evicted by her evil stepmother. In some versions of the story Baba Yaga is a witch flying around in a magical cauldron. She lives in a hut on chicken wings. In other versions of the story she is not the enemy of the beautiful girl Vasilisa but helps her. The *Baba Yaga* storytelling theatre performance was intended for children of younger primary school age. It was staged three times in December 2015 for first and fourth grade primary school pupils.

PROGRAMMES FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The programmes intended for the general public citizens and related to the *Magical Crowd* exhibition can be divided into two categories – programmes intended for children (accompanied by or without parents) and programmes intended for the adult public.

CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY WORKSHOPS

The *Winter Holiday Workshop* was a three-day programme was intended for children of lower school age. The programme was led by painter Manuela Vladić Maštruko, and it was conceived in terms of different activities every day. The first day started with a tour of the exhibition in order to familiarize the children with the theme and inspire them; using the collage technique we produced supernatural beings by cutting silhouettes of known persons from magazines and turning them into magical beings. The second workshop day was also concerned with collage; however, this time we also had at our disposal pressed flowers and small leaves with which we enriched our work. On the last, the third day we made magical beings based on our own imagination and using driftwood and acrylic dyes. Such workshops lasting several days are especially interesting because it enables children to devote more time to their work and delve more deeply into the specific theme, and are at the same time given the opportunity to form new acquaintances.

In our programme intended for the general public we also wanted to promote reading as an amusing and desirable activity, and we therefore organized three family fable reading sessions on three occasions – one on Museum Night and two Saturday sessions in January and March. We read the same stories used for organized school groups, and attracted great interest. In order to introduce the

children to the world of magical beings, every reading session was preceded by a short guiding tour of the exhibition and was followed by an art workshop. We also wanted to establish connections with libraries because they promote reading culture and in order to offer our little listeners an experience of the best quality. Iva Bunčić of the Zagreb City Libraries, who has worked with children for quite a few years, was in charge for the implementation of all such workshops for the general public.

Fable storytelling sessions were also organized along with fable reading sessions; at first these two workshop types may seem to be alike. But actually two different concepts are involved. During reading sessions, the essential point is to help children to understand that this is a desirable and amusing activity, and that it need not always be something you are doing on your own but can also be done in company. During storytelling sessions greater emphasis is placed on the dramatic interpretation of what is being told, and the interaction between the storyteller and the listener is more present than during reading sessions. By organizing fable storytelling sessions we also wanted to expand the theme of supernatural beings to the international level, and the workshops were accordingly included into the permanent display of non-European cultures. The themes were stories from China and Scandinavian countries. Both storytelling sessions were run by Nikolina Stanišić of the *Centre for Creative Development In the Clouds*. The target group were children of pre-school and younger school age, with or without adult accompaniment, and an art workshop was held after every reading session. During the Scandinavian storytelling session we made bookmarks in the form of foxes and forest crowns of cardboard and leaves; during the Chinese session we made paper lanterns.

The exhibition coincided partly with carnival and that provided a new opportunity for connecting the two topics. We organized a Saturday family workshop which attracted quite a few visitors; we made masks, but masks inspired by the exhibition display rather than standard masks. The children who attended the workshop (mainly accompanied by parents) could choose whether to make fairy wings and a fairy crown, or a terrifying mask of the devil or of the gnawer displayed at the exhibition. Wings were made by stretching nylon stockings over wire frames followed by decoration; crowns were made of connected crepe paper flowers, and masks by applying collage on small paper bags. One week after the workshop we organized an event called *Fairy Ball*, with many children present in the above described workshop. The *Fairy Ball* was organized in order to attract additional visitors to the *Magical Crowd* exhibition, and the target group were family visitors. We devised activities which both adult and young people could enjoy – free guided tours through the Museum, face painting for those who came unmasked (or wanted to complete their mask)

by Pattama Štimac, *face-painting* artist from Thailand, the magician Arijan Ivanković who strolled through the Museum and performed tricks, and a fairy dance workshop led by Vlasta Rittig of the *Divertimento* Historical Dance Studio. The programme lasted 2 hours with the participation of almost 200 children with parents.

Live bearers of local traditions cooperate continuously with the Ethnographic Museum, so that the attendant programme of the *Magical Crowd* exhibition hosted the members of the *Konak* association from Novo Virje who presented on a Saturday workshop traditional games, rhymes and songs from their region, and stories about supernatural beings still 'alive' among their older members.

Along with stressing the importance of the heirs of original culture, cooperation with primary and secondary schools is also an essential element of our activity. In 2016 cooperation along with the *Magical Crowd* exhibition was established with two primary schools in Zagreb. School-girls from the *Otok* primary school interpreted Ivana Brlić Mažuranić's *Croatian Tales of Long Ago* and, by choosing seven characters from her stories, tried to bring the spirit of Old Slav mythology closer to the visitors of the Ethnographic Museum. The performance *Ancient Times in Croatian Tales of Long Ago* was presented according to the text of teacher Zdenka Bilić, and the girls created and produced the costumes in the *All the Secrets of Clothing and Scene Costumes* workshop at the Open University Extension Centre in Zagreb. Under the leadership of professors Vladimira Bošnjak and Nikolina Stanišić, the pupils of the *Stenjevec* primary school worked –after visiting the exhibition – a whole term on the *The Magic Fairyflight* performance staged for the visitors of the Ethnographic Museum. The essential point, in our belief, was to encourage the Museum users, the younger ones in particular, to interact with the exhibition, i.e., to make them realize that they must not only be passive observers, that they can interpret in their own way what they had seen and create something out of it.

PROGRAMMES FOR ADULT USERS

Events for adult users included lectures related to the theme of the exhibition, the presentation of a book, presentation of theatre mask production, and the *Magical Crowd Carnival*.

Two lectures held during the exhibition attracted an exceptionally high number of visitors: Zoran Čiča's *Vilenica & Vilenjak: the Fate of a pre-Christian Cult During the Witch Persecution Period* and Anton Rudan's *What do Fairies Eat – A*

Guide to Wild Edible and Medicinal Plants. The programme which attracted the highest number of visitors was the presentation of Luka Šešo's book *Living with Supernatural Beings – Werewolves, Fairies and Witches in Croatian Traditional beliefs*.

Since the carnival coincided with the exhibition, a programme connecting the two events was also organized for adult users. Cooperation with the Croatian National Theatre enabled interested visitors to witness directly the work of the theatre makeup artists of the leading Croatian theatre. Altogether four presentations run by Darija Hrgović were organized in January. Obviously, the makeup artists were inspired by the exhibition and supernatural beings.

In order to attract new visitors, an event entitled *The Magic Crowd Carnival* was staged on Carnival Day, meant as an informal party of the museum staff, staff members from other Zagreb museums and the general Zagreb public. The guests were invited to come masked; if they did not have a mask, they could leave the job to the makeup artists of the Croatian National Theatre who drew on their faces magical water, forest and floral beings displayed at the exhibition. The good atmosphere was additionally provided by *Cinkuši*, a band whose repertoire is based on the rich Croatian folk heritage. A competition was also organized for the most fanciful mask, with valuable prizes.

CONCLUSION

By additional programmes at the *Magical Crowd – Beliefs in Supernatural Beings in Podravina* we endeavoured to enrich the experience of the exhibition and present the Museum as a place for learning in an amusing way and developing creativity. A special programme was designed for every visitor group in line with their needs and age.

The theme of the exhibition was certainly abstract and beyond the comprehension of children of pre-school and younger school age, and we had to adapt the programme for them so as to facilitate their understanding of at least a part of exhibits displayed at the exhibition. The storytelling method turned out to be the best choice for the age(s) under consideration – the most numerous group of users of the Ethnographic Museum. An activity of this type enabled users to learn something about the theme of the exhibition in an amusing and informal way and, at the same time, offered us, the people who implemented it, the opportunity to deal with other problems which came up during the organization of the workshops. They included, first and foremost, the lack of time for a high quality performance of more extensive and more demanding activities, the too high number of participants in specific workshops and, last but not least,

insufficient staff and space for educational programmes.⁴ We believe that the storytelling method is an excellent choice for all the people faced with similar problems in the implementation of educational activities. We will certainly continue to use in our work.

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⁴ After the closing of the *Magical Crowd* exhibition the Educational Workshop of the Ethnographic Museum moved to new premises, better in terms of size, but still often inadequate for the implementation of educational programmes. This could be the topic of a future paper.