

March 22, 2010

Hi Everybody,

By the end of February we had completed the sign-up list of Cinderella plays that one girl had created. Among the girls, princess themes are a popular subject for plays. Frequently they amount to retellings of moments from videos or books the kids have enjoyed and often the focus is on beauty according to the limited perspective of these sources.

Almost all of the plays included references to her beautiful dress, her beautiful headband, her beautiful necklace and to be honest teachers continually rack their brains to provide thought provoking challenges to these stereotypes. But that's another letter. Boys are usually apportioned the role of prince, or the animals who are transformed in the pumpkin scene, but occasionally in this round an enthusiastic actor would sign-on for one of the stepsister or fairy godmother roles. This is the kind of adventurous casting we welcome.

It had been asserted at some early point that the Cinderella list would only be for girls, an assumption shared by most. The teachers encouraged objections and discussion about this assumption. Fortunately one day a boy approached the list maker and asked if he might sign up. Permission granted. One teacher wondered how or even if the boy would stick to the subject. "Will your play be about Cinderella?" "Yes", came the reply. And then he whispered, "but there's gonna be a monster." And as it turned out a beast as well. The play was refreshingly devoid of glamorous clothes.

When we had completed the list we decided to try acting out a story from a favorite book in hopes of adding some additional elements. You may be familiar with the folk tale about The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Three brother goats, little, middle, and big yearn to cross the bridge to a grassy meadow, but under the bridge lives a mean and hungry troll. The three billy goats figure out a way to trick the troll. They cross one at a time, little one first, then middle each one putting the troll off with promise of a meatier goat until the biggest one arrives to challenge and push the troll off the bridge.

To this new piece we introduced a few set details. Throughout the year a group of girls had been consistently interested in drawing flowers. We approached them about making some to create the meadow. They agreed and quite a few other kids joined as well. Then to the sign-up list we added spaces for one person to lay out the flowers and two bridge builders who would use blocks to make a bridge. We also added a teacher musician to provide walking music for the goats.

We try to go over the dialogue in this play before each performance. Some kids are more relaxed and ready to speak their lines than others and when there is any hesitation from the actors the audience is unable to contain it's desire to direct. The action is frequently interrupted with voluble prompts from the crowd watching.

What's next? Well, a few weeks ago at table time one teacher introduced slim papers divided into three spaces comic strip style for story writing. Kids can draw pictures hopefully comprising a sequence and then dictate the accompanying words to a teacher. It occurred to us these might in some way be a useful and illuminating addition to plays as well, so when we figure out more about that we'll let you know.

Melinda, Joseph and David