

DIANE FERLATTE

We Were There

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*, featuring the fables of Aesop. The latter two shows feature 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. She 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. Diane 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:

In *We Were There*, Diane Ferlatte presents the historical stories of ordinary African Americans who did extraordinary things. Using music, songs, factual and mythical tales, Diane shows how everyday people participated in the founding and building of America. During periods of slavery, Revolution, Civil War, Westward expansion and the building of the railroads, African Americans actively contributed to the events that shaped our country. Unknown and unsung in most history books, these abolitionists, slaves, rebels, soldiers, pioneers and cowboys were there -- fighting the battles, taming the prairie, freeing the slaves and building the railroads. Through Diane's telling of these tales, students will increase their understanding of the vital part played by African Americans in the creation and building of our nation.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The accuracy of historical records is dependent on the people who write them, the cultures and societies they represent, and the era during which the histories are written. Unfortunately, this means that some stories go untold, particularly if the stories are about a segment of the population whose history is ignored, devalued or even misrepresented.

The role of African Americans in the shaping of the United States was absent in school texts for many years. Fortunately, in recent years there has been increasing recognition and awareness of the importance of the contributions made by African Americans in the founding and history of our country. The stories that are being uncovered and shared should be a source of enlightenment and pride for all Americans.

As fascinating as they are numerous, these stories tell of individuals whose courage, honor and vision helped them rise above enormous obstacles. Chained in slavery, owning nothing but their beliefs and ideals, they each traveled a hero's journey. *Robert Smalls* escaped slavery by commandeering a Confederate ship and sailing it straight into the Union navy blockade, where he, the ship and its cannons were welcomed. He went on to fight for the Union as a captain of the ship he commandeered. *Mary Fields*, freed at the end of the Civil War, traveled west, worked for employers as diverse as a group of nuns and the Pony Express, and was instrumental in the development of much of central Montana. *John Henry*, often thought to be a legend, could have been any of the railroad workers whose hammers, steel spikes and dynamite blasted holes through the mountains of West Virginia and Alabama, moving mountains so that railroads could travel across America. Matching his strength against the power of a machine, he gave everything to succeed. In the story of a young Black girl whose actions saved George Washington, we see not only courage, but tolerance and charity. What is amazing is that these stories do not stand alone -- there are many other histories to be explored. The internet is a useful source of information today, and is bursting with websites documenting the stories of other African Americans -- most of them everyday people who helped their country grow to become what it is today. They were there!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Think about the stories you heard in the performance. Which was your favorite? Why?
- All of the stories told about ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Have you ever done or do you know someone who has done something "extraordinary?"
- What tools did Diane Ferlatte use during her performance to tell the stories? (voice, face, movement, body)
- All of the individuals whose stories were shared were slaves. Do you think their being slaves affected their actions? In what way?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS -LANGUAGE ARTS:

People have always shared stories to entertain, enlighten and inspire. The histories of real people and actual events are the most exciting, since we know that the events really happened. Everyone has a story where they or someone they know moved past the mundane and stepped into events where life and death matters had to be faced and dealt with. These events might include the death of a loved one, an accident, a family crisis, a vacation adventure, an exciting job or life change. Sometimes telling stories from one's own experience is difficult. If privacy is an issue, stories dealing with real people may be altered to provide anonymity and privacy. The events may even change slightly, as long as the meaning and message behind the story remains the same.

Discuss what events in an everyday life might make 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 people (characters) in the story look and what they believe in; the things the characters say (dialogue); and the things the characters do (action).

Put students in pairs and encourage them to share a story with their partner. Afterwards, share the stories with the class or ask students to write and "publish" their stories.

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.
- ❖ History books tell about events and the "famous" people involved in them. In *We Were There*, audiences see how ordinary people can be involved in and affect major historical events. Select an event from the performance or from your history or social studies book. Read the information, and then imagine what the world would be like today if the hero or heroine in the story had not taken action. (For example, if the young slave girl had not saved George Washington, what would America be like today?) Write a paragraph about how our lives would be affected. Read your paragraph to the class and discuss.
- ▶ All of the people in these stories were slaves. Slavery existed, and still exists, in many parts of the world. Find out more about slavery by researching a specific country's history, the ways people became enslaved, and if or how slaves from that country were able to gain 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 a storytellers "tools" to tell tales: She changes her voice to fit the story's actions or the character's emotions; she changes her face to match the feelings in each story; she uses movement of her body and hands to help listeners picture the characters and the actions of the story; finally, Diane Ferlatte sings parts of the stories. Eric Pearson plays music to help audiences visualize 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?)

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Macdonald, Margaret Read. *Shake-It-Up Tales! Stories to Sing, Dance, Drum and Act Out*. August House Publishers, May 2000.

Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Belknap Press, 1998.

On the World Wide Web:

www.dianeferlatte.com

www.brightmoments.com/blackhistory/

www.enchantedlearning.com/history/aframer

