

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 1984

Telling It Like It Should Be

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In the beginning, words were created so that we could name things like the sky, the water, the ground and so forth.

Much later, ink and paper were available to capture words so they wouldn't disappear into thin air.

But somewhere in between, it was discovered you could use words to bend the universe into whatever shape you wanted, to entertain as well as teach using the power and inventive capacities of your voice.

This elusive, yet enduring art of spontaneous narrative began getting a full-fledged workout yesterday at the Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum as more than 20 men and women from Washington, D.C., and Tobago, N.C., and Nigeria joined hands in a "love circle" marking the ceremonial start of the second annual National Festival of Black Storytelling.

Throughout the weekend, folklorists, teachers, librarians, musicians and storytellers will celebrate the multi-faceted tradition of black oral narrative in seminars, performances, parties, workshops and, of course, a thick, zesty gumbo pot of story swapping and "testifyin'."

The diversity of those assembled could be gauged from watching yesterday's drum-syncoated "love circle," which Larry Coleman, a comedian as well as a Howard University communications professor, likened to a "sanctified church."

Each person in the circle was urged to "spread the word" to his or her neighbor. Among those saying hello were Mary Wilkins, the great great-grandniece of Harriet Tubman; Mary Carter Smith, the official "griot" (loosely defined as a tribal chronicler) of Baltimore; and Philadelphia's own Horace "Spoons" Williams, whose nickname is also his musical specialty.

And there was a loose-limbed apparition in baby blue, wearing bells, butterflies and balloons who called himself "Brother Blue." He announced, "I'm a storyteller. That's my name. That's my game ... We have a story for you. And the story is you!" There was a lot more in between, but language turns to quicksilver in a crowd like this. Blue's real name, incidentally, is Hugh Morgan Hill. He holds degrees from both Harvard and Yale.

The circle broke and Linda Goss, the festival's co-director and a well-known local spellbinder, urged some of the participants to jump onto the auditorium stage and demonstrate their craft.

Smith recounted the story of an African chief whose bones were found by five of his six sons when he failed to return from a hunting trip. The brothers used their individual powers to bring the chief back to life. Each claimed the tribe's valued cow-tail switch as his own for giving the chief his blood, skin, flesh, breath and skeleton. The chief, however, gave the switch to the youngest son "a baby" who was the first to ask

the question, "Where is my father?" The rest of the sons, the chief said, "had forgotten about me."

The story was used to demonstrate the necessity to "remember those who sacrificed their lives for us so they will not have died in vain."

Even if this narrative were reproduced here word for word, its impact would be muffled by the lack of Smith's laser-like voice, telling her story the way Dinah Washington sang the blues.

Qualities such as these, Goss said, give black storytelling its distinctive "dynamic," the story itself being only the framework for the complete performance.

"Whenever the [storytellers] feel the spirit, they get up. They dance. They sing. They chant. They start talking," Goss said. "It has movement. Most people see storytelling as somebody just reading a book or standing still and talking. But the African tradition demands much more. The spirit of the drum, the animation, the hand movements, the eyes. And also the call-and-response. It's meant to draw people in, gather them together."

If You Go

Second Annual National Festival of Black Storytelling, Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, 7th and Arch sts. 574-0380.

Friday: "It's Time to Tell the Children" Storytelling sessions for school groups. 10-11 a.m.; 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; 1-2 p.m. "Talk Dat Talk," oral history presentation 3-5 p.m. Also, "Well Shut My Mouth Wide Open," a program featuring 8 nationally recognized storytellers and a performance by the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble. \$3. 7:30-11 p.m.

Saturday: "Hand It Down, Pass It on Around," storytelling workshops; 10-11 a.m. Storytelling and the Black Family; 11 a.m.-noon The Black Comedian and Black Preacher; noon-1 p.m. Techniques of Storytelling; 2-3 p.m. Anansi the Spider: An historical analysis; 3-4 p.m. The Signifying Monkey: An historical analysis; 2-6 p.m. "Jump Right In." Block Party, Swapping Grounds, Family Sampler.

Sun: "Releasing the Spirit." Worship through storytelling at the Janes Methodist Church, 47 E. Haines St. 11 a.m. "Wonder Tales" at the Please Touch Museum, 210 N. 21st St. 2 p.m. \$3.50. Info. 963-0666.

Admission to all events, except noted, is free.