

One plus One can equal five when you are talking about good tandem storytelling.

Given that such an important part of storytelling is interacting/vibrating with and responding to listeners, I always wondered how people could tell as a team, something that has to be choreographed (verbally and physically) to be effective, and still be telling rather than simply performing. This is no simple feat, but when a team does it, they multiple their effectiveness many fold.

The first effective tandem tellers I ever saw were Laura Pershin (still telling grand tales in Ann Arbor MI) and Ellen Block who told in the late 70's and early 80's in the Boston area. They called themselves West of the Moon and were an injection of pure energy and joy into the storytelling community. Watching their work was like seeing each teller with their alter ego who could make comments and reflect on their partner in a way that a single teller could not. Thus the tale was told, but we also received more humor, intimacy of perception, and depth than either one could have conjured without the other.

Jerry and Barry, the Story Crafters from New York State, upped the anti for tandem telling by integrating the idiosyncrasies that can only emerge out of a long marriage, their music, and their message. Though their work is obviously sculpted and rehearsed, blending movement, dance, voice and music, the flexibility that results from a long and intimate relationship, harvests wonderful authentic moments within each tale as they respond to the material, each other, and the audience. What we get are much more than two well-trained tellers. We get a world of folkloric excitement that vibrates in the here and now.

Hands down, the tandem team that has both pushed the envelope and widened it's flap with incredible skill and commitment is Eth-Noh-Tec's, Nancy Wang and Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo. One of the great things about our art form is that there are no specific requirements for excellence. You bring who you are to storytelling and that defines your style. Robert and Nancy, another husband and wife team who work out of the San Francisco area, bring a bag of skills too diverse to fit into any one bag. What makes their work unparalleled is how they have seamlessly blended their individual strengths to create a new storytelling form.

Nancy has studied various modern dance techniques including that of Martha Graham, Jose Limon and Hanya Holm, and has worked as a choreographer and performer in both contemporary and ethnic forms. She is also a playwright and her works of Asian American themes have been widely produced. Finally she is a practicing psychotherapist and brings to her performances a profound understanding of human psychology and behavior. Robert's music background as a songwriter and composer, his interest and talents in Asian ethnic music, dance, martial arts, theater, Kulintang gong music, and his innate comedic ability (he is the facial mugging champion of the western world) are the plethora of skills he brings to his storytelling.

Robert and Nancy's work is synergy. They bring forth the meaning, characters, and arc of a tale using an interactive physicality, accenting music, the all the possible wit of the spoken word. They

combine all the separate talents described above into a storytelling duo whose sum is greater than it's already brilliant parts. When in their audience you cannot believe that there are only two people before you. You feel as if you are watching an entire theater company. What is most fascinating is that the work, because of their unique relationship and highly defined skills, is not 'performance art.' It goes that step further that step that storytelling requires, and draws both passion and energy from listeners to fuel and inform every telling. What looks to us like stylized choreography, because of their long-term relationship, actually and often flows with the tale and the audience. They have gone that step beyond technical skill and traditional communication to create a tandem team that does interact in the moment with it's audience, and still leaves us awed by their skills and heart of their tales.

Tandem telling clearly isn't for sissies. It requires an attuned listening and response mechanism that solo work does not, but done well, it can increase the effect of stories many folds.