

Revival of a global

CALL it the gift of the gab or handing down stories from generation to generation — whichever way you view it, storytelling is a revitalised art form.

No longer resigned to that image of the old seanchaí sitting around a turf fire, telling stories has adapted into a more modern, interactive form of entertainment, and the crowds flocking to The Cape Clear International Storytelling Festival each year are evidence of that.

The west Cork island has been running the festival since 1994 and with each year, its popularity has grown. Starting today, it promises three days of performances and workshops with professional storytellers and enthusiasts from around the globe.

Chuck Kruger, the original founder of the festival and Cape Clear resident, is delighted with the progress the festival has made over the past 13 years. His first realisation of the power of storytelling came when, as a deputy headmaster in an International school in Switzerland, he invited a storyteller to come and speak to the students. Chuck remembers the students "sitting on the edges of their chair" as the story was told and it struck him the effect storytelling could have.

When he moved to Cape Clear years later, the dying art of storytelling reared its head when a local informed him "when the fella

Cape Clear's International Storytelling Festival celebrates the evolution of an ancient art, says **Kate Hayes**

with one eye sat down in the corner, we stopped talking"; the appearance of a television set in the corner of the local pub had eradicated chatter and story-swapping.

Lucky for the island then that Chuck decided to fuse his love of storytelling with that of his love for the island, and so The Cape Clear International Storytelling Festival was born.

This year's line-up is an eclectic one with storytellers of all different ages, sex and ethnicity. Jan Blake, one of Europe's leading



female storytellers, specialises in tales from Africa and the Caribbean, highlighting how cross-cultural the tradition is.

The island's location is also a major draw for those interested in the festival with the beautiful setting serving as "a catalyst for the stories". A "fireplace rather than a pub" is also the preferred criteria when it comes to telling tales, according to the festival founder so that "when people are telling stories the room becomes so silent that even the drawing of a pint

can interrupt a story".

By nature, oral storytelling is largely improvisational with the teller usually memorising a loose series of incidents or images. It's not, as Chuck Kruger, says a "syllable by syllable perfection, but rather a gifted storyteller is able to vary his stories according to their audience".

This ability to take cues from the reactions of the audience means the wording and delivery of a story changes also. As a result then, no two tellings are the same

tradition

Chuck Kruger fused his love of storytelling with that of his love for Cape Clear, and began the festival in 1994.



and this lends the entire storytelling process a personal feel visual mediums like television and film lack.

That's not to say storytellers are a dying breed, it's just they have taken on a different form — actors, musicians and comedians, may not spend time regaling us with tales around the fireplace, but do weave stories in their own way.

Four-time Grammy award winner Dave Holt, who is appearing at the Cape Clear festival this year, is a perfect example of this.

His love of the banjo led him to remote communities in North America in which he discovered folk stories and music that have inspired his work since.

But what makes a good storyteller, especially in a nation of talkers? Aside from the professionals at work at the festival, there is also a storytelling workshop for the more dedicated enthusiast.

"It doesn't matter if you're a publican or a priest, as long as you care about stories and want to improve your telling of them," says Chuck.

Unfortunately, so big is the demand all the places this year are taken.

In theory, storytelling may seem a simple activity — just a gathering of people sitting around relating stories to one another — in reality, though, it can have a powerful effect.

With the listeners' entire focus on the one point, the onus is on the speaker to put this focus to good use, whether that is to hold a mirror up to human nature, to promote understanding, or to fuel the spirit.

Chuck says that's really what the festival is about: dispelling stereotypes, absorbing different points of views, and, above all, listening in rapture. Of course, the rugged island scenery doesn't hurt either.

■ The Cape Clear International Storytelling Festival starts today until Sunday.

■ Visit: <http://indigo.ie/~stories>

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