

This Beauty & The Beast story is more than just a fairy tale

By JOE WILENSKY
Journal Staff

EVEN after 20 years, we don't know which one is Beauty and which is The Beast. Mitch Weiss and Martha Hamilton, known locally as the Beauty & The Beast Storytellers, are marking 20 years of performing together with the release of a new album, based on their "How and Why Stories" book, this weekend. They will be giving a presentation at Logo's bookstore on The Commons at 1 p.m. Saturday to celebrate the release of the CD, and to perform along with some of the kids who recorded stories on the album.

Weiss and Hamilton, who began performing as a storytelling team part-time, have been full-time storytellers since 1984 and have been leading a storytelling project in Ithaca elementary schools for 14 years. They have worked with 17 third-grade classes in six Ithaca schools this year.

Hamilton, 47, first became interested in the art of storytelling a quarter century ago, when she was a reference librarian at Cornell's Olin Library. She met Mitch Weiss through an informal network of storytelling colleagues — the friend who introduced them told Hamilton, "I bet that Mitch would be very good at this," she said.

Weiss, 49, a former part owner of Moosewood Restaurant, went with Hamilton to a storytelling party hosted by a local group, the Odyssey Storytellers. "I had never seen storytelling like that, where people told folk tales," Weiss said.

Hamilton recalls going to Odyssey parties for a long time before she got up the courage to tell her own story, and it wasn't long before Weiss and Hamilton discovered that together, they made an entrancing storytelling team — as well as an entrancing team in life, too. They've been married for almost 17 years.

As storytellers, their timing was perfect, too; they came together just as a storytelling revival swept through libraries, schools and informal groups in this country in the late 1970s.

The National Storytelling Festival, which was launched by the mayor of Jonesborough, Tenn., "brought together a lot of people who were in the wood-work, who were doing it out in the hills, for families," Weiss said. "He gave people a venue to perform. Attending those festivals, of course, were a lot of librarians, people with the power to hire people, and so suddenly, they were being brought into schools and libraries.

"When we started, it was just total luck. It was just taking off. It was amazing timing."

The renewed interest in storytelling also dispelled its own myths.

"A lot of people, when you said 'storytelling,' thought of reading books to little kids, and that was the image they had," Hamilton said. "And yet, it is as old as the world, the oldest art. When we first started, we'd go to a school, and the principal would say, 'Do you need to bring your van around to unload your props?,' and we'd say, 'We don't have any props.' And he'd say, 'Do you need a place to change your costumes?,' and

we'd say, 'We don't have any costumes.'

And you could see the guy was panicking, thinking, 'These two are just going to stand up in front of these 200 children and think they're going to listen?'"

"Of course, we had that same fear when we first started," Weiss added.

"But that hush, that stillness, always comes over them," Hamilton said, visualizing years of elementary school classrooms, children's faces turned upward in rapt attention.

An intimate art

The heart of the art of storytelling is "the intimacy," Hamilton said. "You don't have the barrier of the book. It's just communication, looking into the audiences' eyes."

"I think that when we perform for 200 kids, each kid feels like we're telling the story to them, personal, one on one," Weiss said.

And despite years of sitting in front of TV sets, computers and video games, Weiss and Hamilton say kids retain the brain "wiring" to appreciate storytelling.

"A lot of it has to do with the fact that our society is so media-oriented, and images are everywhere, it's easy for a kid not to use their imagination," Hamilton said. "Their toys do everything for them, they go and see movies and all the pictures are there for them ... if they just watch television, they don't get a sense that their own imagination is valid, or even how to use it. But it's funny how it's always there, though."

Few kids are unimpressed by the storytellers' low-tech intimacy. "There may be some who leave feeling, 'They didn't have any costumes or anything,' but that's not the feeling that we ever get. We get a feeling of great excitement," she said.

What has changed over the years is with children's sophistication. "It's what kind of stories we have to tell at what ages," Hamilton explained. "A story we might have told to sixth graders 20 years ago, we might now tell to third graders," Weiss said. "It would be too babyish for a sixth grader now. But sometimes, I think we need to take more chances and tell those 'younger' stories to those kids, because they're [still] just kids."

"We also do [that] at the end of a program, sometimes," Hamilton said, "when we've won them over, we say, 'This will be a great story you could tell if you babysit.' Because it frees them to be kids, and they like that."

So many kids who have taken the storytelling workshops with Weiss and Hamilton have become animated, expressive storytellers. Is this ability innate, or does it take a good deal of talent, too?

"It is something, that to a certain extent, comes naturally," Hamilton said. "There are second graders who know how to tell a story, and you don't have to teach them anything. They've got the timing, it's just in there, and they know. For some, it's just there."

Talent helps too, as does experience — although Hamilton added that for some kids with stage experience, some



MAMTA POPAT/Journal Staff

Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss, known for 20 years as Beauty & The Beast Storytellers, are releasing a CD of stories from their latest book and celebrating it at 1 p.m. Saturday at Logo's bookstore on The Commons. The celebration will include a presentation, including local kids who told most of the tales on the album.

things have to be unlearned, "because it's a very different art"

Weiss explained: "When we tell stories, we tell them right to you. An actor has that wall."

"For some who have had acting experience, it's more of a performance, as opposed to looking into people's eyes," Hamilton added. "And that eye contact is really important."

And although kids are usually nervous, and a bit intimidated, about getting up in front of their peers and launching into a story, "but with a little prompting and some technique, and doing it together," Weiss said ... "It's really neat what happens in a class," Hamilton offered.

"It's sort of the great equalizer. You cannot ever predict. We don't know the kids, but we will find teachers saying, 'That kid barely says a word in class,' and if the kid has gotten up and has been so dramatic, everyone is just amazed," she said.

"A lot of kids are more oral learners, rather than book learners," Weiss said. "It gives them a chance to really shine," said Hamilton. They have seen severely learning disabled children take to this naturally "and really do well."

When Weiss and Hamilton work with a class, they don't have the kids read from a book or papers or memorize a story. "We demonstrate how to tell stories in [the kids'] own words," Hamilton said. "It's more of a creative learning experience in that way," Weiss said.

They often have the children draw a story map — a highly visual storyboard-type diagram "so they can get away

from the words," Weiss said. They have them diagram "the sequence of the events in a story, and then have them tell the story, with a partner, see how much they can remember."

"That really frees them," he said. "[We tell them], use your own words, you don't have to have it memorized, put the paper away. Just try to tell it, it doesn't matter if you make mistakes. See it as a series of images, rather than words."

"Even if every one of you had the exact same story, it would come out differently," Hamilton tells them. "Your own personality comes through in telling the story."

"There are three places to put expression: In your voice, on your face and in your body," Weiss said.

"There are stories we've told hundreds and hundreds of times, but if you're really up there emoting, it stays fresh each time, and because it's a different audience, they're reacting a little differently, so it really keeps you on top of it."

Weiss and Hamilton have authored three books: "Children Tell Stories" (1990), essentially a teacher's guide to teaching storytelling; "Stories in My Pocket: Tales Kids Can Tell" (1996); and "How and Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Tell" (1999). An album was made from the "Stories in My Pocket" book, complete with guest kid storytellers, and the new album builds on that tradition, with a dozen and a half stories, told mostly by local kids.

A new book, "Noodlehead Stories: World Tales Kids Can Tell," is due this fall.

high points of a kid's third grade.

"As teachers, we're able to draw on that forever more, to draw on those skills we've worked on with Martha and Mitch. [The kids] are then comfortable with getting up, sharing their ideas. ... Third grade does seem to be a wonderful year for this kind of program. It gives them such a confidence in getting up in front of people."

"They are uniquely wonderful in their role," Fenzel said of Weiss and Hamilton. "They have two very different styles, and because of that, between the two of them, there's something almost every kid can relate to and connect with."

Neverending story

Where did the name Beauty & The Beast Storytellers come from?

"When we first started, we were trying to think of a name," Hamilton began, with Weiss once more taking the next line in the couple's storytelling style: "Everyone had a different idea. Someone suggested Beauty and The Beast, and Martha said, 'Well ...' ... 'forget it, I'm not going to live up to that,'" Hamilton continued without missing a beat. "And then, Mitch said, 'We could never say who's who. So that actually has always been part of our introduction, and that was great, because everyone would laugh.'"

Hamilton turned somber for a moment — at least, as somber as one can get when invoking the image of the Magical Kingdom.

"But the truth is, Disney sort of ruined our name. They really did, because before that, a lot of kids didn't necessarily know the story. It was a folk tale, and we wanted people to remember it," she said.

Now, "little kids often come wanting to hear [the Disney version], and if we're advertised, people think we're only doing 'Beauty and the Beast,' so they either come or not, depending on whether they want to hear it or not."

"And for older kids, it can be a turnoff," Weiss said. "More and more of my personality gets into it," Niven said of her storytelling. "As you learn more about whole world concepts, you can incorporate culture into the stories [you tell]."

Niven can be heard telling the stories "Two Brothers, Two Rewards" and "The Turtle Who Couldn't Stop Talking" on the new album.

Karen Fenzel, a third-grade teacher at Northeast Elementary School, has been working with Hamilton and Weiss in her classroom for more than a decade.

"Their addition to the curriculum has been, in all respects, incredibly wonderful," she said. "They just have this incredible ability to take even the most resistant child who may think, 'No, I'll never be able to do that,' and help him or her blossom into this wonderful storyteller."

"It's a confidence that just blossoms," she said. It has become "one of the true



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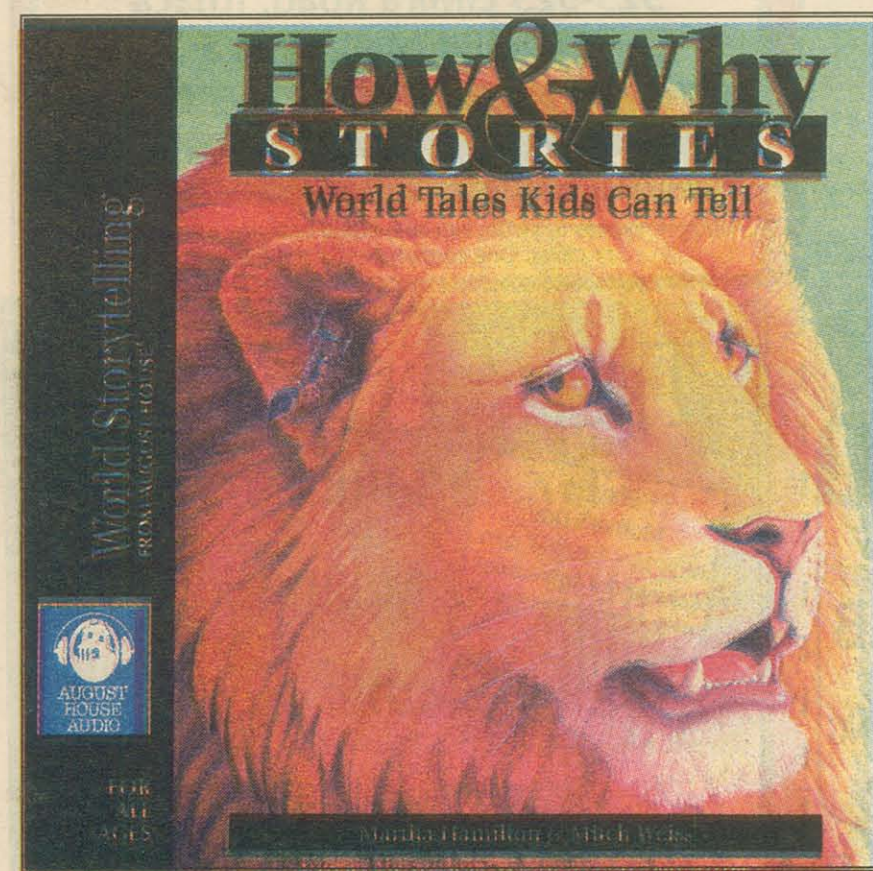


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Mitch Weiss and Martha Hamilton have been performing together as Beauty & The Beast Storytellers for 20 years. Top photo: Weiss and Hamilton in 1981. Middle: Weiss and Hamilton in 1988. Bottom: Weiss and Hamilton perform at Beverly J. Martin School, 1986.



AUGUST HOUSE AUDIO/Provided

The audio version of 'How & Why Stories: World Tales Kids Can Tell' includes guest kid storytellers from Ithaca: Madeline Brumberg, Hayden Frank, Sam Harris, Gabriel Lewenstein, Gwen Niven, Johnathan Reed, Rosie Simon and Christel Trutmann.