

When asked for an article about “bombs” I submitted the following to the national Storytelling Magazine:

**In Praise of the Outside Eye** by Jackson Gillman, January 2010

Lord knows there’s lots of public bombs that I could write about, and have. But this time I’d like to address two private ones that *prevented* public ones.

Flash back nearly thirty years when I was learning sign language and I loved it. I was looking for the perfect piece to put into repertoire that combined this new “second language” with my telling. I found it in an out-of-print picture book, The Mermaid of Storms by Mary Calhoun. I dutifully translated the book into sign language, so I could perform it with this beautiful visual accompaniment.

Having the sense to enlist a professional sign language interpreter to make sure that I *got it right*, I hired Barbara Levitov. I couldn’t wait to show her how masterfully I had interpreted the story. It was about a fifteen minute piece. I started off – “Once upon a time, a mermaid lived deep in the sea. She and her sister mermaids. In the vines of the sea, the mermaids would swing and sing, bubbling up the water with laughter, and riffling it smooth again with their tails...”

“Whoah.” I hadn’t gone 15 seconds into the story and Barbara stopped me. I felt like I was on the Gong Show and hadn’t even been given a chance to get to the good parts. “You’ve got it all wrong.” Wait. I checked these signs out, I thought they were accurate.

Barbara explained. “You don’t want to translate the story, you interpret it. What’s the first picture in the book? Okay, draw it. No, with your hands. Forget the signs. Show me the picture with your hands...”

Bong. A light goes on. So, that’s what this is about. Visual by visual, she helped me paint the story. The sign language shouldn’t just accompany the text, it wants to all be a seamless whole. Which incidentally, necessitated restructuring some of the spoken words to flow better with the signs, but that’s a different part of the story.

I basically had to start all over and it was a challenging process, but it was an exciting one for me. Had I continued the way I started, everyone would have perceived my telling as clunky, not just Barbara. How thankful I was to be set on the right path before I had bumbled along any further in totally the wrong direction.

What I also discovered in the process of physically illustrating each scene in the story, is that less and less words needed to be spoken or signed, yet much more was said!

Along the same lines about ten years later, I had been working on a longer epic that lent itself ideally to sign interpretation. It was nearly 25 minutes long, and I had gone a long ways down that story road using all the tools that I had learned in the trade. Again, I couldn’t wait to show it off to my director at the time, Benny Reehl. I wasn’t gonged this

time. Benny watched intently through the whole story. When it was over, he sat silent for a while. Wow, I really blew him away this time, I thought. He was speechless.

Finally, the master spoke. “It’s long, Jackson. It’s reeeeally long.” Aaargh -- crushed again!

He allowed that the story had parts that were very engaging but that in the end, the story’s energy just wasn’t sustained. Earlier, I called Benny my director, but perhaps coach would be a better term. We went through it piecemeal, but I was really left to rework it on my own which is the way I wanted it.

Again, each scene needed to be streamlined, but keeping the whole in mind. Additional work-in-progess sessions with Benny helped keep the story flowing and on track. Eventually I got it to a place to again show him the story in its entirety. He then deemed it masterful. I asked him to time it. How long is it now? It was longer than 25 minutes. “Wait, you told me it was too long, I’ve worked with you all this time and now it’s even longer!” His reply? “Jackson, length has nothing to do with time.” It was like a Buddhist koan, but I clearly understood it. It all had to do with rhythm, dynamic changes, through-line, sustaining power … sustenance.

In both examples I’ve given, my work would’ve floundered without an outside eye. And as a result, just think how many other people have benefited from not having to sit through stories that were clunky and looong.!

So it is has been with much of my work. Yes, we can get better at being “outside eyes” for our own work, but only up to a point. Then the proof is in other people’s pudding, and how much more satisfying it is to allow others to taste test our work, and help us fine-tune all the ingredients to make the final dish truly worth savoring.