

Times Review – Beyond the Border 2005

Beyond the Border

Erica Wagner at St Donats Castle, Glamorgan

★★★★☆

WHY TELL a story? Why listen? At this year's Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival in Wales, Jasna Held had the most compelling answer. Held is from Croatia, and in the wondrous grounds of St Donats Castle (home to Atlantic College, who provide help and support for the festival) she revealed that her beginnings as a storyteller began during the war that tore apart her ancient home city of Dubrovnik. She had always, she told an enraptured audience, loved fairy stories; it was only when her eldest daughter asked her to tell one as their house was being bombed that she realised their true power — and her own. Held described how, amid the thunder of guns, her listeners' faces were transformed by her words, how fear was banished.

It would be hard to call such moving recollections a commonplace of Beyond the Border, but this is a festival that never lacks for the extraordinary. This year things were damper than they've been previously — but that was only the weather, not anyone's spirits. This is a truly international gathering — Chirine El Ansary brought her spellbinding *Arabian Nights* from Egypt; the Jaipur Kawa Brass Band came all the way from Rajasthan, bringing with them a fakir who dazzled his audiences with his juggling prowess; Ryspai Isakov travelled from the Kyrgyz Republic, bringing its distinctive style of epic singing to this magical setting by the sea.

Ben Haggarty, Sally Pomme Clayton and Hugh Lupton revived their seminal piece, *The Three Snake Leaves*, drawn from the tales of the Brothers Grimm and a touchstone of British storytelling.

Beyond the Border is all about the oral tradition — and yet it's good to see that, more and more, the boundaries between the written and the oral are being broken down.

Last year Jeanette Winterson came to the festival to speak; this year's guest was the mythographer and novelist Marina Warner, who traced the path of the story from Scheherazade to the internet. All the world is in a story — and it feels like all the world arrives Beyond the Border. In tents, in yurts, in the ancient beamed hall of St Donats Castle, this year it was possible to hear the voices of our ancestors and our own voices, too.