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WITH THE KIDS

Timeless folk tales free from wimps

A veteran storyteller plies his trade in Pasadena with a blues accompaniment

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

DON'T tell the Brothers Grimm, but storyteller Leslie Perry has a bone to pick with the classic tale of poor little Cinderella.

"She's a wimp!" he exclaims, pointing out the passivity of the main character. "Look, she doesn't make anything happen. She relies on magic, and she doesn't stand up for herself — especially with her stepmother and sisters. A lot of fairy tales have this problem. That's why I prefer folk tales."

Indeed, folk tales have been part of Perry's bread and butter for the past 30 years as he continues to weave stories for audiences of all ages in Southern California. Drawing from just about every world culture, Perry recounts tall tales, traditional legends and cultural myths that inspire and amuse.

And while there may be magic in his stories, there's certainly no room for namby-pambies like Cinderella.

Perry will be plying his trade Saturday at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium as part of Pasadena Symphony's monthly Musical Circus series. "Tall Tales With a Tune" brings Perry together with musicians Brother Yusef and Robert S. Hilton, who will not only perform solo but also provide the background soundtrack to two of Perry's favorite characters: John Henry and Brer Rabbit. Calling themselves Homespun, this trio of friends has been working and playing together on and off for the last 10 years, sharing stories and songs at festivals, libraries, schools and other cultural venues.

"It's such a joy to work with them," Perry says of his fellow performers. "They really make the stories much more alive. They accentuate certain parts and just punch up the story."

While most of the show features stories with music, Yusef and Hilton will highlight their own musical stylings. With his slide guitar, Yusef will present a soulful and bluesy set; Hilton, on the other hand, will showcase a few of his original handmade instruments, which create otherworldly, silly and infectious rhythms.

For the show Saturday, Hilton is planning to bring his two-stringed cigar-box guitar as well as a three-string bow harp made of coffee cans and split bamboo — two instruments that are just a drop in the bucket of hundreds stored at his Altadena home. "You really can't move in my house — I've got too much stuff," Hilton says with a laugh.

With a backyard full of found objects (like teapots, bedsprings and gas tanks) and collected natural materials, Hilton says he brings his creations to life in much the same way some traditional folk instruments were designed — with imagination.

Hilton's cigar-box guitar, for example, takes its cue from early American traditions — especially in the South — that arose because people didn't have lots of money to spend on instruments. "It's also an African tradition to make instruments out of things that are lying around," he says. "I'm really into recycled projects these days. Right now I'm working on making something out of a hot-water heater I found."

Overall, Perry says, the performance is more than just an occasion to relish the "good ol' days" of music and story. "These traditions are alive and kicking, and they continue to be passed on to new generations," he says. "Even though the stories are from a different time, they still speak to us today. Same with the music. I know that 500 years from now, people will still be telling the story of John Henry and listening to the blues."