

Work with a Storybook Performer: Inge Van Mensel

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/storybook-performer-inge-van-mensel/>

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It's natural for writers to hope that some day their stories might inspire someone to create a theatre production or write a song or draw a picture. Fan fiction! It's all good.

Any creative extension of a story is just the type of inspiration writers dream of and hope for their work.

If no one knows about your story yet, here's a thought: work with a storybook performer - one like Inge Van Mensel. Her husband writes suitable songs and she creates fun activity bags for the kids to enjoy after her story performance.

This kind of story expression and - as Inge describes it - a storybook *extension*, is a wonderful way to immerse kids more fully into the world of your story. It makes their introduction to your book an event, one they will likely remember well into adulthood.

Inge's husband! Singing a storybook inspired song that he wrote.

A storybook performer for your next [book launch party](#) would be amazing! To get an idea of how working with someone like Inge might work, I sent her several questions. Here's how she replied.

A Bit About Inge:

This is a gal who gets around. A Belgian native, Inge has a history teaching English as a second language. She's lived in Spain, England and now Australia, where she is raising her family. But that doesn't prevent her from travelling. They now go on trips as a trio. When they do, they plan several storybook performance stops along the way.

Inge loves a Dutch sauce called Joppiesaus. ([I had to look that up!](#)) She drinks mostly water and fruit juices, but balances that out with a love of Belgian pastries and biscuits and chips (fries) with mayo. She wears sporty shoes and tends to the color pink even though she doesn't really like it that much. "I never liked pink but seem to wear it quite a bit."

About Being a Storybook Performer:

1. Inge, I know that you are a teacher (of English as a second language). What inspired you to branch out into performing storybooks?

During my teaching career I loved creating projects based on a book, a song or a specific topic. I missed that freedom a lot when I was working in Spain and afterwards in the childcare centres in Australia.

My husband and I talked about finding something that I would enjoy and that we could take on the road with us and he reminded me of what I used to talk about: performing storybooks.

2. How long have you been doing this? When did you start and where?

I started to develop and shape the idea at the end of last year (2014) and decided to sign up with NEIS (New Enterprise Incentive Scheme), an Australian Government initiative. After I finished the course to help me write my business plan I got accepted at the end of March 2015.

It took another few weeks to find an author and of course a story. Steve Coleman and Sabine Carter gave me their full permission to develop their story for a show and I am still very grateful for that. After receiving the book, I spent several weeks working on my props and songs.

I finally had my first performance at the end of May at my child's childcare and a couple of days later at the Aquarium during the book launch and signing here in Townsville.

3. How many performances do you do in a year/month?

At the moment I have at least one booking a month 'till December. I also perform every other week at the Children's Ward in the Townsville as a volunteer. On our six-week tour I managed to book four performances and I am hoping that people will start to get to know me, and my work and that word of mouth will help my business to grow.

[Inge also explained to me that establishing contacts for performance venues is the most difficult aspect of what she does, in particular because many potential venues afar do not yet have a website or Internet

listing. In many cases, she discovers a venue while on her way elsewhere.]

My aim is to have a minimum of 2 performances a week in the future.

My husband and I are also starting to contact communities to go and develop a combined project where he will do musical workshops and concerts and I will do my shows as well as workshops with parents to help them enjoy story time more - by making up songs, story bags, etc. to extend the books they love reading with their children.

4. How do you line-up your performance schedule? How do you get dates and how are you compensated?

My husband and I look at least 6 weeks ahead and look at where we will travel. I then spend a lot of time researching the internet to find possible clients like libraries, bookshops, childcare and kindergarten, schools and holiday care. In the future I want to extend it to an activity for parties as well as festivals. I will then call and email, to introduce my business and to see if they would like to book a show for the time that we will be in the area.

I charge for my performances. I started with a general fee for a group up to 60 children but I am now trialing a cost price that varies depending on how many children will be attending. It will hopefully help smaller centres and groups to access this kind of performance.

[Inge typically uses a Letter of Agreement to detail the expectations of all parties involved.]

We also are looking at getting grants from the Australian government to be able to travel to smaller communities that will cover our traveling, setup, planning, performing and accommodation costs.

5. What was your first storybook performance like for you? Was it a surprise?

I was nervous and excited at the same time. I performed 2 trial sessions at my little girl's childcare centre. The first session with a group of 2 year olds was nice but shorter than I thought it would be. The second group was older and it was a lot more interactive and engaging as they were able to communicate more and relate to their own experiences.

6. What is your favorite memory of a performance moment?

I love the times where children come up with their funny comments and the smiles on their faces. One little boy was cheering excitedly every time the turtle appeared; it was hard not to laugh with him and stay in the story.

The family tour bus.

7. Your husband is a musician and he has written music for your performances. Have you ever performed a story that came with songs included? If not, would you be interested in that as well?

I feel it is important that songs are added to shows. It helps with keeping the children engaged and it gives

opportunities for repetition and movement.

For one show, my husband and I worked together to create songs and he helps me with cords that will fit so I can use a bit of ukulele during the show.

8. You're looking for material to use theatrically. Do you have any wishes in terms of target age group or anything else? Is there anything you just don't want to do? Any types of characters that you feel work best with your style?

The most important thing is that when I read the book I feel a connection with it. That when reading it the first time I can start to see possibilities in how to adapt it into a show.

My first performance is based on the book, [Jodi and the Turtle](#) by Steve Coleman and is written for primary children but I have performed it to children ages 1-12. I just adapt how I talk, what information to include as extra, how to ask questions and how to get them engaged. Not one of my shows has been the same. The main storyline and songs are there of course but what happens before, during and at the end - I never know till I get a feel for the group that has joined me.

I believe every author writes differently - and every book is different and therefore any new show I develop will be completely different and original with a touch of me of course.

9. If a writer were to contact you with a book they had written, how much involvement from the writer would you want in your own production? Do you want the writer's input at all or do you want to just do your thing?

I think the main thing I like to experience with the author is that they believe in me and my goal to promote their book and therefore I will make sure that the performance will reflect that. I do believe that before we talk ideas, I like to read the book and brainstorm about it. After that, I am very interested to hear the author's ideas.

The final creation though will be decided by myself. During my 15 years of teaching and daily life I realized that to be able to teach, present or perform something I need to believe in what I do. I don't work well under the pressure of having to follow instructions of others.

10. In what sorts of venues do you perform and where do you hope to perform?

At the moment I perform mainly at childcare centres and libraries. I also perform at the Townsville Hospital Children's Ward on a fortnightly basis as a volunteer when in Townsville.

In the new year (2016) I want to extend it to schools, afterschool clubs, bookshops, parties, festivals, homeschool groups, and *anywhere else a group of children will come together*.

To contact Inge Van Mensel, visit her [WEBSITE](#) and her [FACEBOOK](#) page. You can also [TWEET](#) with her.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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