

FILM REVIEW

Jay O'Callahan: A Master Class in Storytelling. Producers: Robert and Marjory Potts. Distributed by Vineyard Video Productions, Elias Lane, West Tisbury, Massachusetts 02575. (616) 693-3584. 30 minutes, color, videocassette.

Reviewed by Garry W. Barrow

To some folklorists, "revivalist" is a four-letter word. To others concerned with folklore as a communicative process, "traditionality" is not in itself essential. This video production, even though it only tangentially concerns tradition as such, can be instructive for folklorists of either viewpoint as to the parameters of narrative performance, and the nature and value of the revivalist interpretation and popularization of folkloric materials.

Jay O'Callahan is an unabashed revivalist, a "master storyteller" whose performances draw upon the oral traditions of many cultures, as well as upon original and historical materials. As the title indicates, O'Callahan intends his video to serve as a workshop for teachers, librarians, camp counselors and others who have occasion to perform narratives. To this intended audience I recommend the video highly. Its format is that of a casual interview with O'Callahan conducted amid the bookshelves of the West Tisbury, MA Free Public Library by producer Robert Potts. This arrangement provides O'Callahan with a forum for demonstrating his art, expounding the values of it and analyzing his technique, while the interactions of the interview situation help to involve the viewer and to prevent what is essentially a one-man show from devolving into a lecture. The camera, usually looking over Potts' shoulder, varies its frame enough to maintain visual interest, but it is O'Callahan's animated way of speaking (even his explanations are performance) that carries the burden of sustaining the viewer's attention.

A 15-page booklet supplements the videocassette with additional comments and suggestions for classroom exercises. Together the materials successfully demonstrate that storytelling can indeed be an excellent innovative technique for teaching. In the course of the video, O'Callahan professes several objectives which he hopes to achieve through storytelling. The foremost of these is to restore to a people immersed in printed and electronic media the appreciation of and capacity for oral narrative and for creative language use in general. O'Callahan argues that through storytelling people can discover their own untapped capacities for imaginative and expressive language; this can be an exciting and liberating experience. Ideally, students are also led to a deeper appreciation of the "soul" of other cultures by listening to the oral traditions of other lands. Likewise, the oral traditions of our own land, from Native American tales to Jack tales, are essential to our self-understanding: "If you would be a part of this land you should know something of what made it, and part of it is the oral traditions."

O'Callahan is very conscious of the dynamics of his art as communication, and it is his insider's view of storytelling that would be of most interest to folklorists. In discussing the unique qualities of storytelling events, O'Callahan displays an awareness of the subtleties that folklorists concerned with the rhetorical aspects of performance in context often remark upon. O'Callahan stresses repeatedly the importance of the auditor's subjective, imaginative response in the decoding of a performance. He observes that storytelling is a very personal medium which by its very spareness invites the imagination of the listener to share in the creative process: "the listener pulls out his own message." Also, in discussing narrative technique, O'Callahan explicates the functional roles of several paralinguistic and kinesic features of performance, including intonation, rhythm, repetition, gesture and facial expression.

Because storytelling for O'Callahan and other revivalists is a self-consciously dramatic act, folklorists will notice the ways in which these performances differ stylistically from traditional performances. Of course, traditional formulaic, paralinguistic, and structural con-

ventions are lost, because O'Callahan recreates the stories in terms of an aesthetic that is perhaps better suited to the non-traditional contexts in which he performs. Folklorists who find themselves working in public school programs are on occasion called upon to perform traditional narrative; they must also deal with this question of how best to render the material. Should one strive for fidelity to tradition or for effectiveness for a nontraditional audience? O'Callahan opts for the latter approach, and is perhaps spared the folklorist's misgivings. But he is to be commended for avoiding the folksy affectations of many revivalist storytellers. However, our final response to this videotape, and to the idealistic objectives O'Callahan proclaims for revivalist storytelling, must be that this makes us aware of the even greater value of experiencing the genuine oral traditions of various peoples, whether first-hand or through ethnographic film.