

# Charlotte Blake Alston, Master Storyteller/Narrator Teacher/Study Guide

## *Meet Charlotte Blake Alston*



**Charlotte Blake Alston** is a nationally acclaimed storyteller, narrator, instrumentalist, librettist and singer who performs in venues throughout North America and abroad. She is the host of *Sound All Around*, the Philadelphia Orchestra's Preschool concert series and has appeared as host or narrator on the orchestra's school and family concerts since 1991.

She has been a featured host, storyteller and narrator on the Carnegie Hall Family and School Concert series' since 1995. She has made multiple appearances in such venues as the Smithsonian Institution, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the National Storytelling Festival and the National Festival of Black Storytelling. Her international appearances include performances or festival appearances in Accra, Ghana; Cape Town, South Africa; Beijing, China; Basel, Switzerland and the Cape Clear Island Storytelling Festival in Ireland. She has appeared as a narrator for several choirs and orchestras around the country including the Cleveland Orchestra, The Indianapolis Symphony and the Baltimore Symphony.

Ms. Alston has performed at both Presidential and Gubernatorial Inaugural activities. More recently she has been a commissioned librettist, creating texts for orchestral and choral works. She has received numerous honors and awards including a *Pew Fellowship in the Arts*, the Commonwealth of PA. *Artist of the Year Award*, the National Storytelling Network's *Circle of Excellence Award* and the *Zora Neale Hurston Award*, the highest award conferred by the National Association of Black Storytellers. Her latest libretto, *The Children's March*, commissioned by Singing City Choir for the 2013 Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts (PIFA Festival) premiered on April 26, 2013.

<http://www.charlotteblakealston.com>

## *Activities suggested by the storyteller's visit*

### **Before the Performance**

#### **Familiarize children with African and African American Folktales by:**

- Reading aloud or having children read several folktales (consult your school librarian for help in determining which books or stories would work well for your grade level).
- Choose an Anansi story, a tall tale, a dilemma tale (the resolution of conflict is left to the listeners to discuss), a story that offers an explanation for a natural phenomenon (a porquoi or why tale) such as “Why Mosquitoes Buzz In People’s Ears.” Do any of the stories have morals or lessons? What are they?
- Try to find versions of the same story. Have children make comparisons between the two.
- Encourage students to tell – not read – a story they are already familiar with. Discuss the differences between telling a story and reading that same story from a book.
- Have your students brainstorm what they think a storyteller might do to make a story interesting to an audience. Make a list on chart paper. Encourage them to watch and listen carefully during the performance to observe the storyteller’s voice, facial expressions and body movements. Are there instruments used? How are they used in telling the story?

\*Important Note: Always refer to the African continent as just that – a continent. It is as diverse, if not more so, than the European continent. There are 54 separate countries and hundreds of ethnic groups, languages, cultural traditions and belief systems within each country’s border. Just as we make a point to clearly identify Poles, Czechs, Armenians, Scots, Celts, Welsh, Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, or the Hmong, we must also make a point to do the same when referring to the inhabitants of the vast and ethnically diverse continent of Africa.

#### **Familiarize your students with the names, locations and diverse cultures of the African continent by:**

- Identifying the ethnic group, culture or country associated with the stories you use. Write and speak the name of the group or region of origin when referring to the story. (For example, Anansi stories were created by the Ashanti people of what is now Ghana in the western part of the continent. Sungura, the trickster rabbit comes from Kenya on the opposite side of the continent. The land areas, peoples and lifestyles are different.)
- Identifying on a map or globe – not just the African continent – the country (and ethnic group or culture where possible) of the story’s origin: The Ashanti of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Baganda of Uganda, the Shona of Zimbabwe, for example.
- Selecting an ethnic group, country or region of the continent. Research and explore the cultural traditions, foods, clothing, family structures and languages of that region.
- Searching the internet. Type on or click-on an African country and download or print out the information. What do you discover that you didn’t know? Did you discover information that is on your “brainstormed” list?

## **During the Performance**

- Listen and observe the storyteller carefully. Participate when asked.
- Notice how the storyteller uses her voice and take notice of any additional items that the teller uses to enhance the story.
- Visualize the setting and characters of the story.
- Be aware of what in the stories makes you laugh, feel empathy, excitement, sorrow, fear or suspense. Did any of the situations in the story sound familiar to you? What were they?
- If the story has animal characters, pay attention to their behavior in the story. Do they take on human characteristics?
- Notice if a character – human or animal – learns a lesson in the story. Is there an aspect of the story that the listener can learn from?

## **After the Performance**

- Review the list that was brainstormed prior to the performance. Ask your students to identify items on the list that the storyteller incorporated into her storytelling style. Ask them to recall anything the storyteller did that was not included on the list.
- What specific things held their attention most?
- Did any of the stories leave them with something to think about or discuss? What, if any lessons were learned from the stories? Which stories? What were the lessons?
- If there were instruments, how were they used to enhance the story?
- Which of the stories did you enjoy the most? Retell the story in your own way.
- Illustrate one of the stories.
- Research and select your own story for telling.
- Create your own story, one that teaches a lesson perhaps.

## **SUGGESTED READING LIST**

***Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti***

Gerald McDermott

***Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale***

Verna Aardema and Leo Dillon

***African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World (The Pantheon Fairy Tale and Folklore Library) Paperback***

Roger Abrahams (Author)

***Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales (Coretta Scott King Author Award Winner)***

Virginia Hamilton

***African Folk Tales (Dover Children's Thrift Classics)***

Hugh Vernon-Jackson and Yuko Green

***African-American Folktales (American Storytelling)***

Richard Young and Judy Dockrey Young

***African-American Folktales for Young Readers: Including Favorite Stories from African and African-American Storytellers...***

Judy Dockrey Young and Richard Alan Young

***Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale (Picture Puffin)***

John Steptoe

***The Legend of The Dancing Trees: An African American Folktale***

Kenneth Curry

***Indaba My Children: African Folktales***

Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa

## *INTERNET RESOURCES*

Charlotte Blake Alston

<http://www.charlotteblakealston.com/>

Anike Foundation: Developing Education in Africa.

<http://anikefoundation.org>

American Folklore: African American Folklore

<http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/africanamerican-folklore/>

YouTube: African and African American Folktales

<https://youtu.be/iNYBT59j4rk>

Wikipedia: African American Folktales

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American\\_folktales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_folktales)

National Humanities Center: The Trickster in African American Literature

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/trickster.htm>

Yale National Institute: Using African and African-American Folktales in a Genre Study

[http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative\\_06.03.09\\_u](http://teachers.yale.edu/curriculum/viewer/initiative_06.03.09_u)

Mr. Donn's Site for Kids & Teachers: African Fables for Kids

<http://africa.mrdonn.org/fables.html>