

The Times
September 30, 2006

An imagined world has no end.

Tom Gatti is transported by storyteller Abbi Patrix, who rescues folk tales from oblivion and mixes them with personal experiences of the contemporary world.

HERE'S A RIDDLE: I am going to the ends of the earth, where is my destination? The North Pole? The Amazon? The Micronesian islands of Yap? It's Cheltenham — where, in three weeks' time, the celebrated French storyteller Abbi Patrix will be performing (in English) his one-man-show *Au bout du monde*.

The elegant spa town is the unlikely launch-pad for a journey that will traverse the globe from Africa to Afghanistan, introducing us to all manner of comical and terrifying acquaintances — talking wolves and fire-breathing women included — along the way.

Patrix is a well-qualified guide: born into an international family (his mother is a Norwegian journalist; his father was a French designer) in the early 1950s, he was a student at Jacques Lecoq's theatre school in Paris (where Simon McBurney, of Theatre de Complicite, also trained).

The school pushed him to be independent and creative. Traditional theatre was not, he tells me, in freely-flowing English, his "cup of tea": "I didn't like this transposed way of telling a story. I like the direct way."

In 1978, Patrix saw British director Peter Brook's experimental theatre company performing free "carpet shows" (in which the stage is a carpet): here, he realised, was "the direct way" in action.

So when he formed his own company — Compagnie du Cercle — in 1980, they also put on carpet shows, experimenting to discover what sort of material worked best in this back-to-basics environment. The process led Patrix to folk tales. Since then, he has been travelling the world, telling and gathering stories. *Au bout du monde* — a collection of traditional and personal tales — was inspired by snobbish Parisians who referred to the suburbs (where Patrix lives) as "the ends of the earth".

"I took this as a provocation," he says. "I realised that, with stories, my passion was to go from the ends of the earth in the urban sense, to the ends of the earth in the deep, geographical sense."

At one end of the scale is a funny culture-clash story that begins in Paris, with Patrix and his Turkish friend discussing where "the ends of the earth" might be; at the other is the surreal and haunting opening tale, about a boy who, in his search for the ends of the earth, befriends a spider and is stalked by a sorcerer.

This story, rescued from an obscure book, is a fragment of an African epic, and the original source is unknown: Patrix is convinced that he is the only person telling it today. By contrast, another tale — about a boy who complains at his lack of good

fortune, and then goes looking for the reason — is found all over the world, although the substance (including whether or not he finds his luck) varies considerably.

Patric adds to the traditional tale the image of the ends of the earth, which recurs throughout *Au bout du monde*, each time refracted slightly, each time sparking different meanings for the audience.

Patric is so capable of transmitting energy, humour and emotion, that some have insisted he is more shaman than storyteller. It is true that there is something dreamlike about his material — as he sees it, his stories speak to “your inner world, a world composed not of logic but of images, feelings, intuitions, colours”.

But, crucially, his personal stories also speak to your outer world, offering the uninitiated an open door into the world of folk tales — a world which may at first seem alien, but which has a profound sense of shared humanity, as meaningful now as ever.

Perhaps even more meaningful: “Today there is everywhere a movement to the right,” Patric says, “with identity cards, immigration, security.

“The storyteller touches upon something that is beyond national boundaries, something wider, that remembers our human condition.

“This is not a naive thing, it is a vital thing. Otherwise I think the earth will just finish in a bomb.” The punning title of Patric’s show contains a choice: the ends of the earth, or the end of the world?

Abbi Patric appears at The Times Cheltenham Literature festival on October 14

Other storytelling events at Cheltenham include

Ben Haggarty’s Gilgamesh (October 7), Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden’s Metamorphoses (October 8) and Cat Weatherill’s Snowbone (October 14). Beasts and Beauties, a mini-festival of storytelling, is at the Barbican Centre, in London, October 25-27 (020 7638 8891; www.barbican.org.uk)