

A Personal Introduction to *Juan Bobo in the Bronx!*

by Howard Martin Katzoff



Back in 1995 in the last century, I was but a young storyteller . November was coming up and I was looking for a good folk tale. I wanted material to create a play for our annual Hispanic Heritage assembly. Well, I came all the way into New York City to one of those humungus bookstores and I browsed through tales from all around the world. I pulled out *Juan Bobo and the Horse of Seven Colors* by Jan Mike. Bingo! From Puerto Rico!! Perfect!!!

As I read the book over a cup of coffee at the bookstore's Cafe, I saw that it was not only a wonderful little story, but that it contained drama and comedy elements which even my most inexperienced young actors could master for the stage. Most importantly, there were plenty of parts for everyone, and a great variety of parts, too. Over the next several years, our play evolved into *Juan Bobo's Journey*. That first year, we had only enough time to produce a few scenes. Actors from other classes would come along over the next few years and invent additional scenes and transitions between scenes. The characters would evolve creatively as different Juan Bobos, Juanita Bobos, King Luises (or Queen Adrianas), Magic Horses, Throne Carriers and Grandpas contributed their unique personalities as they played and *played with* their parts. We moved the basic story along different lines inspired by the talents of different actors. One of the best Juan Bobos was an acrobatic sixth grader who literally came spinning onto the stage. In Springfield, Massachusetts, where I taught Drama, *Juan Bobo's Journey* became a big hit both with audiences and with my acting classes who crafted many successful productions.

When I came here to District 8 in the year 2000, I brought my Juan Bobo play to classes at PS 60, PS 140 and MS 201. This time, as the teachers and students in our schools learned about Creative Dramatics from me, I came to learn exactly who this Juan Bobo was. It turned out that he was a far more powerful little guy than I had ever imagined.

My first teacher of Juan Bobo-ology was a 5th grader at PS 60. As I told her class my version of "Juan Bobo and the Magical Horse", I noticed that she was especially delighted. She would nod her head as if she recognized certain elements in the story. When I finished, there came that special silence when the story-telling is finished but the story-listening is still absorbing. My junior teacher was the first to gently break that silence. "My grandpa tells Juan Bobo stories" she declared. In a flash, I recognized that Juan Bobo was not just a character in this particular tale. He was, in fact, a larger cultural phenomenon. "Would you ask your grandpa to tell you a story and will you write it down for me?" I asked.

The following week, she greeted me with her grandpa's story written down by her mother. Another little girl said that her aunt also knew Juan Bobo stories. She wrote one down, too. These first contributions to what will become our District 8 Juan Bobo Anthology appear unedited on the following pages. Over the next several months, from colleagues and parents, especially ones who have cultural roots in Puerto Rico, I learned that there were many Juan Bobo stories, songs and even adult jokes. As one school secretary said when I asked her if she knew who Juan Bobo was, "We grew up with him. He was like part of the family."

I discussed Juan Bobo with a few of our AUSSIE consultants who advised me about how we might use Juan Bobo to create Balanced Literacy lessons. We create these lessons not only to celebrate and solidify our students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, but also their drawing, singing, dancing and acting out skills. Juan Bobo, our little pedagogue from Puerto Rico, has not only inspired a play we can teach our students, but he has started an educational Movement in which we celebrate and strengthen literacy and the arts together.