3: The Emperor’s New Clothes

Adapted by Rob John, read by Sir Derek Jacobi

Background
- First published in 1837, alongside The Little Mermaid, as part of Hans Christian Andersen’s third volume of Fairy Tales, Told for Children.
- It was based on an earlier Spanish tale dating from medieval times.

Synopsis
A foolish emperor doesn’t spend any time doing the things an emperor ought to do – he is only interested in trying on new clothes and parading them in front of his people.

One day two strangers arrive, offering the chance to try some magical cloth, which will be invisible to anyone who is a fool, or not fit for their job. The Emperor orders some cloth to be prepared, paying two bags of gold for it. The Chief Minister and a servant cannot see the cloth, but neither wants to admit to this lest they be regarded as no good at their jobs. The Emperor thinks the same thing, and orders a suit of clothes to be made, (at the cost of more gold).

The cheating strangers help him into the imaginary clothes and he goes on a procession through the town. None of the townspeople want to admit that they can’t see the clothes, until a small boy pipes up that the Emperor has nothing on at all. This causes the rest of the crowd to start whispering and laughing – they realise the boy is right. The Emperor just carries on with his parade – thinking the people must all be fools.

Sequence of events
Suggestions for use include: cues for oral storytelling, support for storyboarding, story planning/writing etc.

Characters
- Emperor
- Two Swindlers
- Chief Minister
- Servant
- Small Boy
- Small Boy’s Father

Theme(s)
- Honesty and dishonesty
- Being true to what you think rather than going along with what others are saying
- Foolishness and pomposity

Understanding, interpreting and responding to texts
- Describe the different reasons why first the minister, then the servant, then the Emperor and finally the townspeople pretend that they can see the Emperor’s clothes.
- Why does the small boy’s father initially say that his son is wrong?
- Why do you think it takes a child to point out what all the adults can see?
• How do you think you would have acted if you had been...
  - ...the minister?
  - ...the Emperor?
  - ...the small boy’s father?
• Describe the two swindlers. What is their appearance? Who do you think the tall one might represent - and why?

Additional text-specific activities
• Create an advertising campaign for the amazing magic cloth – what else could you make from it and how would you advertise this?
• Act out a news report from the procession. Does the reporter pretend to see the clothes? What happens when (s)he hears the small boy?
• What would happen if the cloth really was magic? Re-write the story in such a way that only some people can see the cloth – who can’t see it and what happens as a result?
• Freeze-frame the point where the Emperor is parading his new clothes. What is going on in the heads of the different characters – the Emperor, his courtiers, the swindlers, the small boy and his father
• Thought tracking – follow on from the freeze frame moment with an individual character, showing how their thoughts progress.

Location of episode transcript:
http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/schoolradio/pdfs/transcripts/the_emperors_new_clothes.pdf