Child-led story acting builds on a child’s innate interest in fantasy play to make concrete the connections between thoughts and written words and written words and actions. But perhaps just as valuable, a child’s stories provide a revealing glimpse for the parent or teacher scribe into the child’s thought processes and the influence of all the forms of stories children experience from popular media and culture. As time for pretending and play in general are endangered in the schools, children’s museums can learn from Paley’s work and adopt her “anthropologist of childhood” approach to learn how children really use our spaces.

What is Story Acting? Story acting is a method of recording and acting out of children’s stories refined by award winning teacher and author Vivian Gussin Paley. Paley found that this practice not only reinforced her students’ emerging literacy and understanding of how stories work, but also it was a powerful way for adults to learn about how children think, their interests, their worries, and their relationships. She used this technique to explore topics such as exclusionary play (You Can’t Say, You Can’t Play), gender roles (Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner), and race (White Teacher, Kwanzaa and Me, The Girl with the Brown Crayon) in 13 books about children’s stories.

Elements of the process
1) Dictation -- the child dictates the story.
   a) It can be as short as they want but no longer than one page. If necessary, use “to be continued…” at the end of the first page for voluble story tellers.
   b) The adult records the story with minimal coaching. The goal is not to create the best story but to learn how the child thinks.
2) Act out the story on the same day it is told.
   a) Let the child choose who they will be in their story or they can watch their story.
   b) Enlist other children to take parts, including stationary roles such as trees or buildings.
   c) Avoid getting bogged down in the selection of parts by enlisting actors in clockwise order around the stage. Children can decline to act, but move briskly to include the next child and avoid quibbling about parts and special friends. The goal is to give every child a chance to participate.

Introducing Story Acting for the first time
1) Define the stage with a rug or tape on the floor.
2) Act out a sample child’s story. Could come from one of Paley’s books if need be.
3) Invite new stories. Let children sign up to dictate a story during free time or take dictation on the spot.
Rewards and Challenges for Story Acting in a Children’s Museum context

1) Although children understand this activity readily, it will be enriched by repetition. Consider ways to make it a cherished tradition for them such as offering it at a predictable time each day or week, or as part of a multisession class. Could there be a story dictation station on the floor and a Story O’ Clock time when the morning’s stories are acted out? Or could you provide clipboards for parents to record stories in the exhibits with informal acting out at the end or even at home as a way of reflecting on the museum visit?

2) Unlike Paley’s class of Kinders, the children’s museum serves a wide range of ages, often within the same family, who can not easily be excluded from the activity because they aren’t the “right age.”
   a) Younger siblings can be included in secondary roles—another baby, another monkey, etc.
   b) Even a two year old can tell a story. Even if it is only one word, a story consisting of “bunny” and the action of hopping begins to make a connection for the child and is readily understood by other toddlers.
   c) Older children can be enlisted to help with story dictation or take more complicated roles.
   d) Older children can be offered art supplies and stapled booklets and invited to continue their longer stories in a book.

Vivian Gussin Paley bibliography

White Teacher (1979)
Wally’s Stories (1981)
Mollie is Three: Growing up in School (1986)
Bad Guys Don’t Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at Four (1988)
The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter (1990)
You Can’t Say You Can’t Play (1992)
Kwanzaa and Me: A Teacher’s Story (1995)
The Girl with the Brown Crayon (1997)
The Kindness of Children (1999)
In Mrs. Tully’s Room: A Child-Care Portrait (2001)
The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play (2010)

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Useful video on YouTube: Helicopter Stories, Letting Imagination Fly by Makebelieve Arts, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkJl8dyzRQQ&t=479s