

Story Takes a Turn

The recent popularity of personal storytelling draws crowds to many stages.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM

For thousands of years, people around the world have told and retold folk and fairy tales, myths and legends. Through the oral tradition, these classic stories have been passed down from generation to generation, continuing a rich tradition of storytelling for families, communities and cultures.

Alongside this cherished tradition, we are now seeing an explosion in the popularity of personal storytelling, culled from our own lives and derived from our own experiences. Such narratives draw on our unique communities and diverse cultures.

The advent of popular storytelling events, from fringe festivals to The Moth and its StorySLAMs (more on these later), offers new and vibrant venues where audiences go to hear and share personal stories in myriad formats. And it's a logical migration path for Toastmasters too.

Getting Personal

"People's cravings for personal stories have a lot to do with their need for community," says David Levy, CC, ALS, of the Building Tomorrow's Communicators club in Cincinnati, Ohio. Levy is co-founder of Cincinnati's True Theatre, a monthly program where people tell true stories. "It's amazing how little we know about our neighbors," he says. "We live in communities yet all we do is go to work, go to the store and go home. We're not a part of our community. People want that."

David Pokorny agrees. The former stand-up comic and Toastmaster founded West Side Stories in Petaluma, California. He hosts events in which 10 willing storytellers are picked at random—reflecting his belief that *everyone* has a story to tell—to present personal five-minute pieces. A specific theme inspires and shapes the program. It all makes for compelling theater, he says.

"With all due respect to the folk and fairy tales we've heard for 500 or 1,000 years ... I know those stories already. I know how they end. With personal stories, I listen because I *don't* already know how they will end!"

Pokorny says personal narratives have a universal quality, because the tellers give you an authentic glimpse into their inner lives. "It's this person onstage who is opening up and really breaking down the fourth wall," he says. "They are (figuratively) naked up there, telling their own story. Sometimes it's heart-wrenching,



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Indeed, a hallmark of personal stories is their authenticity. These aren't actors sharing their stories; these are true narratives, and whatever the emotion of the story, it is real and raw, and that's what draws us in.

The Moth Emerges

In 1997 The Moth was born. The storytelling gathering was conceived by New York writer George Dawes Green in an attempt to re-create the feel of his childhood in Georgia, where stories were told on the front porch of the house. He longed for the feeling of community that came from swapping personal stories.

As the gatherings stretched from his living room into his hallway and to small and then larger venues, the popularity of personal stories proliferated. Now, 20 years later, The Moth has presented more than 18,000 stories to standing-room-only crowds worldwide, and it has inspired numerous emulators who cater to their local communities.

Currently, the storytelling organization produces more than 500 live shows each year in nearly 30 cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago, London and Melbourne, Australia. Shows include Mainstage programs, which are curated events featuring five tellers who develop and shape their stories with the help of directors; community programs that teach the craft of personal storytelling; and StorySLAMs, open-mic competitions open to anyone with a five-minute story to share related to that show's theme. Winners of SLAMs in different cities ultimately compete for the title of GrandSLAM champion.

The Moth Radio Hour features storytelling from around the world and airs on more than 400 radio stations. One recent episode, recorded at the Sydney Opera House in Australia, featured a young Malaysian Australian man talking about how he began to appreciate his culture by listening to rap music.

There is also The Moth Podcast. If you visit the website (www.themoth.org), you can check out its Story Library and listen to everything from the most recently released stories to the first ones ever aired.

Making The Moth Local

Levy and Pokorny launched their own versions of The Moth in Southern Ohio and Northern California, respectively, to tap into their community's hunger to

hear and tell personal stories. So did Kay DeMartini, a former stand-up comic, improviser, storyteller and TV personality. DeMartini presents a personal-story-telling event in Oakland, California, called BustingOut.

"All stories have a message and a power," DeMartini says. "That's why legends are created and why stories continue on and have an impact. Yet our [own stories] are autobiographical—and powerful too."

DeMartini is also a storytelling coach to speakers, including Toastmasters transitioning from speaking in their clubs to storytelling at public events. "I get them in touch with their story and recognize that they do have a story," she says. "Then I help them understand how to tell it."

A common mistake of beginning tellers is not understanding how to be audience-centered. "Often, how people want to tell their story is very different from how audiences want to hear a story," DeMartini says. "Performers love telling their stories but they've forgotten that the person that's most important is the listener." For example, some tellers give far too much background information, which may be significant to the teller but clouds the listener's ability to follow the story. DeMartini, Levy and Pokorny each stress the value of rehearsals to obtain coaching, reduce performance anxiety and build community among the performers.

Love Story

For 32-year-old Lariann Hand of Lakeview Toastmasters in Oakland, California, joining Toastmasters was about boosting self-esteem and confidence. A pastry chef at the time she joined, Hand served in officer roles and competed in speech contests. When Oakland's Sweet Bar café announced its inaugural StorySLAM a few Februarys ago on the theme of "Stupid Love," Hand entered and shared her autobiographical story of young love gone awry on a past Valentine's Day.

Inspired by a speech she'd heard in her club about vulnerability and humility, she recounted her painful tale of oversized stuffed animals, a trip to the emergency room and other craziness



that happened that holiday. However, her story, “Young Love,” had a happy ending when told live ... she won the SLAM!

Tall Tale to Monodrama

Carolann Murphy, CC, CL, hails from Ireland, famed for its long history of folklore and mythology. President of Wicklow Toastmasters in County Wicklow, she has excelled at entertaining and draws on her love of theater, literature and social issues for her speech and story topics. Murphy, a recent Tall Tales winner in District 71, says her performances are inspired by William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Mask” and her own true children’s story “The Magdalene Women,” which shines a light on Magdalene Laundries (or asylums) from 1765 to 1996 in Ireland.

Winning the Tall Tales contest spurred Murphy to create a fictional monodrama (a dramatic piece for one performer) based on historical fact. Titled “Are You There John?” it’s about a townswoman imprisoned in Wicklow Jail in the mid-1800s for a crime she didn’t commit. She performed the tale of abuse and heartache last year in a local drama festival.

Beyond Comedy

In 2004, stand-up comic Mary Armstrong-Smith joined Nora Toastmasters in Indianapolis, Indiana. She says the members offered something that she wasn’t getting in her comedy career. Like Kay DeMartini, who found stand-up to be somewhat artificial and canned as comics chased laughs, Armstrong-Smith, ACB, found the comedy construction confining and formulaic.

“It’s setup-punch [line], setup-punch, tag, tag tag,” she says. “And it has to be quick and ‘surface.’ You can’t go deeper.” As a natural storyteller, she excelled in the Toastmasters Humorous Speech Contest. Armstrong-Smith won at the district level, and her success led her to develop a great deal of new material, often of a more serious nature.

By 2007, she was performing her first original play, *Garden Variety Neurotic*, for the Indianapolis Theatre Fringe Festival. It’s about growing up with two mentally ill parents. Four years later, she unveiled a deeply personal piece about forgiveness, called *A Box of Darkness*.

Performing it, says Armstrong-Smith, was scarier than performing stand-up comedy. “In this one-woman piece I was baring my soul.” And that’s exactly what connects with audiences.

On the Fringe

Fringe festivals welcome solo performers, troupes, musicians and others to perform in sets or shows that can run to an hour in length. The most well-known of these is the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Organizers of the annual event say it’s the largest arts festival in the world. In 2016, more than 3,000 shows were presented over three weeks in nearly 300 venues throughout Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland. Organizers pride themselves on highlighting performers outside the mainstream, including unknown artists looking to build their careers.

Performers at fringe festivals either apply to speak, or in some cases are selected by a jury. If you are selected, marketing your piece is important, says Armstrong-Smith. To boost attendance at her Indianapolis Theatre Fringe Festival performance, she promoted it independently through postcards.

Story On!

Toastmasters will find great value in advanced manuals such as *Storytelling*, *Interpretive Reading* and *Humorously Speaking*, in which they can learn about writing and delivering presentations based on their own life and experiences. Even *The Professional Speaker* recognizes the role of story in keynotes.

Some districts have specialty clubs focusing on storytelling or poetry. Others have their own story contests. Best of all, the world beyond Toastmasters invites members to bring their stories to life at events such as Moth programs, StorySLAMs and fringe festivals. So tap into your own stories, show your humanity and build community as you share your narrative with others. Story on! ■

Craig Harrison, DTM, PDG, is a professional speaker who created the monodrama “Homegrown Humor” to share his personal experiences growing up in Berkeley, California, in the 1960s. To learn more about his storytelling, visit www.HackinBoo.com.

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