

THE Women's Times

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Stand-Up Women
Comedy, improv & the new storytelling

Photo by Michael Lavin Flower

The New Story Hour

Edgy performers take the stage with true-life tales

The timeless rite of storytelling has acquired a decidedly modern twist. Once the province of Homeric bards and West African *griots* (not to mention grandparents and babysitters), storytelling is now headline entertainment for audiences in New York City, Boston and other urban centers. In our region, a champion of the new "nightclub style" of storytelling is cultivating both the tellers and hearers of these oral-history-with-an-edge tales.

Darlene White, a native of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, launched the Pittsfield Storytelling Festival in May. White planned the three-event series—the first of its kind in the Berkshires—to introduce local audiences to the types of energetic, urbane performances that first captured her interest four years ago. The series concludes this month, with a performance by New York City storytelling group Speakeasy at the Lichtenstein Center for the Arts on July 7 at 8pm.

It was a show by another group of New York storytellers, called the Moth, that hooked White. The group was appearing at Mass MoCA, and White, a short story writer always looking to polish her narratives, was curious about the storytelling techniques of its members, who she assumed were "old timers." She bought tickets and settled into her chair. White was amazed by what she heard.

"I didn't expect them to be so hip and modern," she recalls, still marveling at how a single evening turned into a passionate new pursuit. "My heart was pounding. This girl [veteran storyteller



Michaela Murphy at the Moth's "Out on a Limb: Stories from the Edge"

Michaela Murphy] was telling stories I would tell. I thought: how does this happen?"

She made it her mission to find out.

It was only later, when she was knee-deep in the world of storytelling, that she understood the Moth's groundbreaking role in advancing the art. Now composed of professional and amateur storytellers, the group was started in 1997 by George Dawes Green, who, after moving from New York City from Georgia, missed the lazy down-South evenings spent sitting on the front porch swapping stories with friends. He brought together some new acquaintances and, before long, the group—minus the moths that used to grace the Georgia

gatherings—grew too large to continue meeting in Green's apartment. Today the Moth, called "New York's hottest and hippest literary ticket" by the *Wall Street Journal*, offers six storytelling programs, including slams and mainstage shows. Performances have featured both amateurs and well-known personalities like Andy Borowitz, Rosie O'Donnell, Lewis Black, Susan Orlean, Janeane Garofalo, George Plimpton, Margaret Cho and Frank McCourt.

White was eager to create something similar in the Berkshires. She did a series of literary shows at Papyri Books in North Adams, Mass., stretching the long-standing WordPlay open-mike event into WordPlay

Onstage, White, like many other performers, shares some of her most personal anecdotes. Relationships, family dysfunction and sex are recurring themes. "Storytellers revel in things and celebrate things that other people would like to forget happened," she explains.

Stage. Her next step was to produce a storytelling show, "Jupiter Supersized," in the space now occupied by Barrington Stage Company.

Three years after first seeing the Moth at Mass MoCA, White found herself racing through the streets of Greenwich Village, trying to find the Nuyorican Poet's Café where—in a matter of minutes—a Moth slam session was about to begin. She wanted to be a contestant. With only moments to spare, she flew through the door.

"I figured I would be a stranger among strangers," she says. "Everyone there knew each other." Names were put in a hat, and hers was picked. She got up, told her story and won the contest.

Many of those who are drawn to the storytelling stage are writers like White who are interested in honing their craft. "For me, it was a great way to streamline writing, and to fit the beginning, middle and end into five minutes," says Andy Christie, a New York-based writer, illustrator and animator. Christie also values the "instant feedback" from the audience: "Finding out what people find funny and what they gasp at helps me formulate the written piece."

Christie admits, however, that while he got into storytelling as a way to sharpen his writing, he realized that he truly enjoyed being on stage. "It's a later-in-life version of wanting to be a rock star," he says.

Like White, Christie was drawn into storytelling unexpectedly. He went to hear Moth storytellers one night and was instantly smitten. The lineup included *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik, as well as performers whose names were less recognizable, including a firefighter and a teacher.

"I was riveted and could not stop watching," Christie says. He went to see a few Moth slams, stuck his name in a hat, and—"luckily for me," he says—won the competition. That was four years ago. Since then, Christie has been an active participant in the storytelling arena, performing in Moth mainstage shows, and launching two

groups, Speakeasy and Liar!, both of which are part of this summer's Pittsfield Storytelling Festival.

Though storytelling rules vary by group and event, there are widely recognized expectations. First of all, the stories must be true. There can be hyperbole, but the recounted experience must be part of the storyteller's own personal history. Second, stories generally run from 10 to 12 minutes; in some cases, like the Moth StorySLAM in which the audience judges the storytellers, performers are limited to five minutes. Third, absolutely no crib sheets or cheat sheets are allowed. Fourth, there must be a narrative arc, with a clear beginning, middle and end to the story.

The late Spaulding Grey is credited with bringing storytelling into vogue in the mid-80s. Grey, with his signature delivery style—sitting behind an onstage table with notes and a glass of water—would regale his audience with expertly unfolded, wryly told tales based on his personal experiences.

Laughter ripples through the audience during most performances by today's storytellers. White and others are quick to point out that what they do isn't stand-up comedy, though humor is a common element. "To tell a good story you have to look at it with wry humor," she says. Onstage, White, like many other performers, shares some of her most personal anecdotes. Relationships, family dysfunction and sex are recurring themes. "Storytellers revel in things and celebrate things that other people would like to forget happened," she explains.

Peggy Melanson, a storyteller who lives in Holyoke, Mass., says she specializes in "transforming difficulties into humor." She's a writer who was introduced to the art about 10 years ago by Norah Dooley, a storyteller who saw her potential and urged her to attend one of Brother Blue's storytelling

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nights, still held weekly on the campus of Harvard University.

Melanson—known professionally as Chef Nostalgia—always performs alone. At the beginning of her shows, she passes out menus to the audience listing story appetizers, a main course and dessert. She speaks onstage for about an hour, recounting stories that span about five minutes, although the “main course” story usually runs from 15–18 minutes. Her latest production—staged free as a public thank you to all of the people who helped her during her battle with breast cancer—drew more than 150 people to Northampton, Mass.’s New Century Theatre last month.

Her stories pivot on humor. “It’s my way of handling unusual life circumstances,” she explains via email. In a series of stories called “The Devil Made Me Do It,” she talks about growing up Catholic; other titles include “The Mugger,” “Smoking in the Alley,” “Grammy and the Old Maid,” “Lost in Chicopee” and “Giving the Dog a Bath.”

Melanson follows what she calls the “know rules”: “Know what kind of stories you tell. Know your audience. Most importantly, know when to end a story.”

Even highly practiced storytellers confess to having performance anxiety. White sometimes stays up all night preparing her material. “I will never get up there unprepared, no matter what it takes,” she says.

As someone who’s experienced lifelong stage fright, Christie admits to being “terrified” before every performance. “But once the meter starts ticking, I’m fine,” he says. Over the years, he’s become more secure as a performer. “At the beginning I wrote everything out, in multiple drafts, changed it, and spent several days rehearsing it,” he says. “As I became more comfortable, I found I could wing it onstage.”

“I still write stories, but I don’t walk around the room rehearsing them anymore,” he continues. “I remember the key points and the narrative

arc, but the connective tissue between scenes is more free flowing. [It] feels like the audience believes me more this way.”

Storytelling has become a big-tent attraction; it lures both men and women as performers and audience members. White says women find performing particularly empowering. “Owning your stories and celebrating them is a way of standing solid on your own turf,” she says.

Do women tell stories differently than men? White laughs. “We do everything differently than men!” she responds, then adds: “Most of the time, I’m not even aware of gender that much and that’s really fun. If you’re good in storytelling, talent is the common denominator.”

Christie points out one difference he’s noticed between male and female performers: “What surprised me—and it may be politically incorrect to say this—[is that] women seem more open about sex, and men seem more open about emotions.”

“Maybe once you decide to get up on stage, you address things you might not in your day-to-day life,” he speculates. “You’re out there, and you take risks. You think, ‘I’m going to do this scary, dangerous exposure of myself, so I might as well tap into something I wouldn’t ordinarily talk about.’” He hastens to add: “I don’t know if it’s wrong for me to be surprised at that, but I am surprised.”

What doesn’t surprise any of the storytelling insiders is the art form’s rising popularity. This spring, Moth performers for the first time embarked on a national 10-city tour. In Los Angeles, where the tour premiered, more than 1,500 people showed up to listen.

“It’s definitely kind of bloomed and exploded,” says Christie. “This is what storytelling is all about, like an uncle telling you how he fell off his boat in the South Seas.” Only, in the case of the new storytellers, the tale is probably a far sight funnier—and audiences are lining up to hear it.

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