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Storytelling and Stand-up

written by Maria Ciampa

“Most events in life can be categorized in one of two ways - a good time or a good story. So, even when bad things happen, I think, ‘Oh well, it’ll be a good story,’” says Margot Leitman, co-creator of Stripped Stories, a sex storytelling show out of New York.

“I’ve done lots of storytelling shows: Speakeasy Stories, The Liar Show, Lower East Side Stories, Storytelling at the Creek, New York Shitty, Nights of our Lives,” recites Leitman. She also teaches storytelling classes through the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, where classes sell out within 5 hours of being posted online – which raises the question: why the sudden increase in comedic storytelling shows? And how are these shows any different from regular stand up comedy shows?

“People want to get real in their comedy,” says Leitman. “The audience wants to hear a heartfelt story. Also, we have a primal need to hear and tell stories around the campfire.” This sentiment is echoed by Sherry Weaver, producer of Speakeasy Stories, a twice monthly show in New York. “The Moth started it all. It goes back to sitting around the campfire, talking.”

The Moth, to which Weaver refers, is a not-for-profit storytelling organization that produces shows nationally. Founded in New York in 1997 by poet, novelist, and Georgia native George Dawes Green, The Moth started with an invitation of a few friends to his New York apartment to share stories. From there, The Moth moved to bigger venues in New York. Today, The Moth has six programs and has presented over 3,000 live stories to over 100,000 audience members.

Storytelling is a genre all its own, a separate form from stand-up comedy. All the stories told on these shows are true, unlike all the jokes in a stand-up set. Storytellers come from various artistic backgrounds, and names at the The Moth include Moby, Lili Taylor, Terri Garr, and Candace Bushnell. Conversely, there are Moth storytellers with less of a presence in the arts like Jim Bouton, Former Major League pitcher with the Yankees, and Joe Lockhart, Former White House Press Secretary. However, many storytellers on The Moth are well versed in comedy, including Lewis Black, Margaret Cho, Janeane Garofalo, Colin Quinn, and Rosie O’Donnell.

Kate Teller, Associate Producer at The Moth, is flattered that so many comedic storytelling producers credit The Moth as their inspiration, saying, “It’s a testament that a personal narrative is



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progressively becoming more important.” But have people taken storytelling in a different direction from what The Moth intended? Not really, says Teller, “We love humorous people. At The Moth, we see comedy as one way in which to tell your story.”

Other storytelling shows popping up in New York and Boston, while they may be inspired by The Moth, tend to gravitate even more toward the funny. Weaver explains, “We might have a serious story or two each night. All shows have some humor. Some stories have you rolling in the aisle, others have a laugh that jumps out in the middle of a sad story.” Jake Goldman, co-producer of the storytelling show “True Tales from College” says, “For the most part, our show and other storytelling shows are lighter [than The Moth].” Goldman, who cited the Moth CD as an example says, “Out of the 60 stories on that CD, maybe 10 are really sad. The Moth crowd likes a sad story now and then. If stories at our show don’t end on a lighter note, it can be awkward.”

If there’s someone onstage with a mic telling a funny story, how is storytelling different from stand-up comedy? “Storytelling has a different rhythm from stand-up,” Sara Benincasa, producer and host of “The Family Hour with Auntie Sara” at Ochi’s Lounge, explains. “It isn’t beat-beat-punch. It can be less scripted than stand-up. Stand-up is faster, packed with more laughs.” So the main difference between storytelling and stand up comedy is that with storytelling, you don’t have the pressure to get a laugh every other line. Jessica Sutich, Producer and Host of Boston’s “A Night of Oral Tradition” agrees with Benincasa. “In a five minute stand-up set, you must make things very concise. You don’t have room let humor come naturally, like in a story.”

Are all great stand up comedians great storytellers? Not necessarily. “At Stripped Stories,” Rozzi says, “We’ve had stand ups that could not just tell the story, they had to keep doing stand-up bits.” Goldman described stand-up comedians who try out storytelling as “a bit punchier because they know how to get laughs and where they will get laughs.” Benincasa thinks the two forms complement each other, saying, “I think great stand-up comics have always blended humor and pathos, and storytelling gives you plenty of room to do that.”

Adam Wade, ten-time StorySlam Champion at The Moth, and the 2006 GrandSLAM Champion, says that coming from a background in stand-up comedy, it took a while to get comfortable with silence. “At a storytelling show, the silence is good because they’re listening. It took me a year to figure that out.” Wade says his goal as a performer is not to be the person that can “tell 50 jokes off the bat” and have people not remember any of it. “I want people to remember my whole act. I want them to say, ‘He didn’t knock it out of the park, but he was sincere, and endearing.’ I want to leave people with a universal story through my personal experience.”

Goldman says, “The mark of a great storyteller is when they reveal things about themselves and inject humor into a sad situation.” The theme of revealing more in a storytelling shows as compared to stand up comedy shows is common. Sutich explains, “In stand up, there is a barrier - you are keeping the audience at a distance. But when you’re storytelling, you’re revealing something about

who you are. You can't avoid it." Leitman recalls a few stand ups who have panicked before going onstage at Stripped Stories. "I think they panic because you tend to be incredibly revealing with storytelling, and with stand up, you are guarded. I am always impressed when they panic - they really reveal themselves."

Although the storytelling movement is large and growing, storytelling shows (excluding The Moth) tend to be held in smaller venues. Weaver says, "When someone tells you a story, it's so personal. You need a dark room, not too many people, alcohol." The sense of intimacy created by show content makes smaller venues more attractive. "The audience is very much a part of the story. I like a smaller space. You can see their faces, you can engage with them." Sutich adds.

Comedians also swear that storytelling audiences are different than stand-up audiences. The main differences, says Rozzi, is, "It's unlikely there will be heckling from a storytelling audience. They tend to be more attentive. They're not going to be like, 'Yeah! Tell me about that time your mother died!'" Goldman describes them as more "bookish." All comedic storytellers agree the audience is there to hear other people's true stories. Says Benincasa, "They expect to laugh, but there might be stretches of time where they're just listening. There might even be stretches of time where they're moved by what they hear."

For all storytellers interviewed, their love of storytelling is palpable. Their commitment to the art is highlighted by acknowledging that while there may be less pay, the sense of satisfaction at sharing your true story is immeasurable. Leitman explains, "I know that you can affect people's lives through stand up, but people have emailed me days after hearing my story, saying, 'I went through that too and hearing you was amazing.' I love that in ten minutes I can get people to judge me, gasp, cry, pray for me to get over it, and then laugh."

But it's not just for the love of it. Storytelling is growing in popularity, with some gaining fame for just that: telling stories. Speakeasy Stories is being considered for Montreal Comedy Festival. Stripped Stories is going on national tour in April 2009. True Tales from College and Family Hour with Auntie Sara continues to build a following. Wade says, "The Moth put me on their podcast with Jonathan Ames and it's been the biggest break. It's not Comedy Central Premium Blend, but the Moth gets 150,000 downloads a week from people interested in stories. That's my target audience! For a guy who's done shows for anywhere from four to one hundred people, well, that's huge."

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