



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Telling Tales With a Tear and a Smile



Chad Batka for The New York Times

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Adam Wade uses a bittersweet tone to express romantic yearning.

By JASON ZINOMAN
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When she was 18, Ophira Eisenberg drunkenly cheated on her boyfriend with a guy she barely knew. This led to panic, lies, confrontation and, inevitably, a breakup.

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It could easily be an operatic teenage drama, but Ms. Eisenberg, now in her 30s, told this story last week at Upright Citizens Brigade in Chelsea with directness, humor and understatement. Her point of view came across in the details: she described sex on the beach as "like grinding pepper."

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Wearing a leopard-skin jacket, her bangs swaying as her arms spun circles in the air, Ms. Eisenberg did not overhype or wallow. Instead she evoked a naïve kid indifferent to consequences. Told largely in flashback, the wry story ended abruptly. No lesson learned elbowed its way clumsily into the narrative. She let the story speak for itself. That was more than enough.

Ms. Eisenberg, a comic from Calgary, Alberta, works in a variety of formats: stand-up, radio, essay. But the one that most thoroughly shows off her considerable talents is storytelling. With more potential for expansiveness, this live art has become a kind of cultural counterweight to the enforced brevity of Twitter.

While telling stories is about as old as life itself, storytelling, as a subgenre of comedy and increasingly theater, is relatively new, growing rapidly over the past decade. It now has its own stars, [classes](#), open-[mike](#) nights and even its first national scandal. Mike Daisey’s notorious multinarrative polemic “The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs” is something of an anomaly. Most storytellers offer modest tales of 5 to 10 minutes that pivot on a personal moment. The Moth, which produces shows in cities across the country, remains the most popular showcase, but a dizzying number of quirky, diverse small-scale alternatives have emerged throughout New York.

The soft-spoken Seth Lind hosts a charming monthly show in the East Village called [Told](#). Kevin Allison, a veteran of the MTV series “The State,” leads a more rambunctious one, [Risk!](#) at the Pit, while at Union Hall in Brooklyn, the imposing Jeff Simmermon runs [And I Am Not Lying](#), mixing burlesque with first-person tales. Like in stand-up, a small, diverse group of seasoned artists regularly perform in these showcases.

Some, like Todd Bieber, employ multimedia, as in his account of making spectacularly lame low-budget TV commercials in his hometown in “[Commercial Interruption](#).” Cyndi Freeman elegantly mixes confession with impressions and burlesque to create an Andy Kaufman-like stunt.

But storytelling’s bread and butter is dramatic heartache and romantic misadventure. In a hypnotically slow delivery Dave Hill, wearing plaid pants at Sideshow Goshko, a well-programmed night at the 92Y Tribeca, began a story about meeting a girl of his dreams with typical self-deprecation: “I was spending a quiet night at home, me and the Internet.”

No one expresses romantic yearning with as much gusto as [Adam Wade](#), a prolific performer from Hoboken, N.J., whose tales have the bittersweet tone of a Kenneth Lonergan play. Rubbing the back of his neck bashfully he describes working miserable jobs or spending a night hanging out in empty hotel rooms in bursts of sentences that seem so impatient to get out that he often jumps ahead to the next one before getting to the period. Mr. Wade occasionally gets angry — the rage of the nerd is a major theme of storytelling — but his characteristic moment is when a minor episode inspires an exhilarating if doomed sense of joy. It’s usually because of a girl fated not to be the one.

This twee, endearing style has become common and is often grating in less able hands. Like any genre, storytelling has its clichés. So many monologues begin with a carefully wrought bang of a first line and end with an ingratiating moral. Every dating nightmare seems to have one red flag, and when did the accordion become the new guitar?

Stand-up comics, conditioned to pursue laughs doggedly, can have trouble adjusting. Janeane Garafolo’s aimless recent performance at Risk was just basically a list of jokes. And yet Colin Quinn’s heartbreakingly funny [description](#) of bombing at a gig at Robert



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De Niro’s birthday party has a kind of relentless comic energy.

What distinguishes Ms. Eisenberg is how thoughtfully she adjusts to the form she’s working in while retaining the essence of her bleakly stylish humor. In her [stand-up](#) she cheerily describes suicidal tendencies or finding her husband’s ex-girlfriend’s severed head. (“Oh my God, she’s prettier than me.”) When she was single, she says, she put on her JDate profile that her hobbies include “depression and making you guess why I’m angry.” This same mordant intensity appears in her storytelling, but in a slower cadence with more gravitas.

The finest story I saw her deliver, in a [video online](#) via the Moth, was also her most sober. She told of a horrible car accident that she survived as a small child. For more than 11 minutes Ms. Eisenberg carefully controls her stoic tone, using unexpected comic timing to stave off maudlin sentiment. In a poignant effort to improve her spirits her dad offers to buy her anything she wants. In that moment in the monologue, life or death takes a backseat to a critical question about a Barbie Dream House.

Ms. Eisenberg doesn’t just mix humor with tragedy but also shows that one can serve the other. A genuine smile married to a watery eye can be a powerful thing. One of the subtle things she does in this story is express with blunt honesty how easily someone can enjoy being a victim. “I relished the attention,” she says flatly, “It felt like I had accomplished something.”

In capturing this human moment Ms. Eisenberg does what comedians do so well: She explores the taboo, but without the persistent relief provided by consistent punch lines. In doing that, she shows how a story can use humor but not be shackled to it, how it can be emotional without pandering, and how difficult ideas can be articulated entertainingly.

What she demonstrates is that storytelling can give a certain kind of comedy a chance to grow.

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