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## The Moth's Experts Share the Secrets to Successful Storytelling

By Julie Seabaugh Wed., Feb. 29 2012 at 9:00 AM

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**Rudy Rush**

The key to quality storytelling isn't necessarily to be funny. At least that's what some of the folks lined up to participate in The Moth Mainstage event *Rush: Stories of Ticking Clocks* at UCLA's Royce Hall on Thursday, March 1, are probably hoping is true. In addition to host Rudy Rush (*Showtime at the Apollo* and *Def Comedy Jam*) and Emmy-nominated *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* writer Brian Finkelstein, "serious" literary purveyors like screenwriter and novelist [Jerry Stahl](#) and essayist and monologist Jenny Allen, and decidedly non-comedy types including poker player Annie Duke and UCLA hand surgeon [Kodi Azari](#) will be unspooling true-life yarns wound around the theme of "chasing the ephemeral, battling the ravages of the endless tick tick or begging the universe for just one more second." Not necessarily fertile territory for mining light-hearted chuckles.

So what *is* the secret to doing well at [The Moth](#), the NYC-based not-for-profit institution that encompasses sold-out, open-call storytelling sessions of various levels (from StorySLAMs to GrandSLAMs and mainstage events), plus community-education programs, an annual fund-raising Moth Ball, a podcast and the Peabody Award-winning *Moth Radio Hour* on 200-plus public radio stations? We asked some experts:

**2011 StorySLAM winner Selena Coppock:**

"The given theme is a good jumping-off point, and I find that a story is well received if it really does fall under the umbrella of that theme, even if the storyteller is pretty creative with that, but isn't too predictable in fitting the theme. ... Also, a good story must truly be a story, with a bit of a journey either literally or figuratively, not just an anecdote or a complaint.

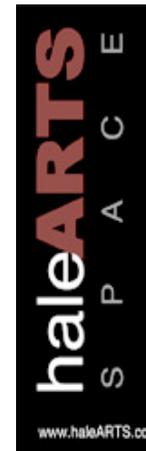
"And I find that while storytelling is completely honest and no-holds-barred, when people tell stories at The Moth that are confessional in a mean way, or sort of, 'I used to be a jerk and I did this thing one time,' the audience and judges don't like that. We want to root for an underdog. The confessional, repentant story might be interesting and cathartic for the storyteller, but it doesn't really get the audience on his side, you know? Stories with self-awareness and a touch of self-deprecation tend to endear the storyteller to the audience more so. For example, the story that I won with was a story about being mugged by a kid on a bike, then I chased him down and got my purse back. The audience was on my side with that one."

**Multiple GrandSLAM winner Adam Wade:**

"I think it's a combination of knowing the audience, not being afraid to be your true self, and working as hard as you possibly can on your story (so it has a strong beginning, middle and ending). ... Also never overeat before a StorySLAM. I've been doing them for years and I always have just a buttered white roll from a local deli. It's good to be a little hungry."

**Comedian [Lauren Weedman](#), former *Daily Show* correspondent, *True Blood*, *Reno 911!* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* actress and host of StorySLAMs across Southern California:**

"There are these host rules that the producers of The Moth force me to say every month, and I have to say



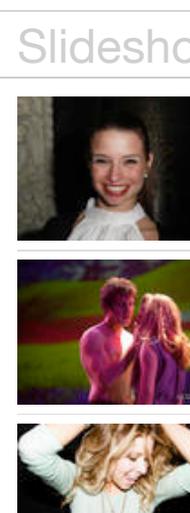
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that it's amazing how often people don't actually stick to the rules -- which they are supposedly judged on -- and it always seems that the folks that stick to those rules end up with maybe not life-changing stories every time, but for sure 'successful' stories are the ones that:



Lauren Weedman

--TIME: Stick to the five- to six-minute time limit. The people who go over make everyone tense, especially when they have this 'You're not timing me, dammit!' attitude.

--TRUTH: They have this deep resonance of truth and are stories that still seem to have a lot of meaning for the person who's telling the story. They obviously like telling the story and remembering the particular moment.

-- STORY ELEMENTS: For sure this makes a difference. I've never competed in The Moth because I am horrible at endings. I like to end things with 'I gave my dog away,' and then walk offstage with people hating me. I've gotten used to doing that but The Moth folks like that ending ... that moment of how it wrapped up and what the person learned. I used to think it was cliched, but in a five-minute story it always seems to help.

"The one thing that is not a Moth-sanctioned rule is that I feel like the most successful stories -- the ones that win -- have an element of vulnerability. It's not about being the hero or being clever; it has this element of openheartedness that seems like they've never told the story before. It's a really tough element to have, I think, especially if you're not used to being onstage.

"And there also just the mind-blowing stories that, no matter what, are just mindblowing. But even with those has to come the element of the storyteller surprising themselves a bit onstage as well as all the great story elements."

*The Moth Mainstage: Rush: Stories of Ticking Clocks. UCLA's Royce Hall, 340 Royce Drive, Westwood, Thurs., March 1, 8 p.m. (310) 825-2101, \$15-\$20. [uclalive.org](http://uclalive.org)*

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