

Going Solo Gets Crowded



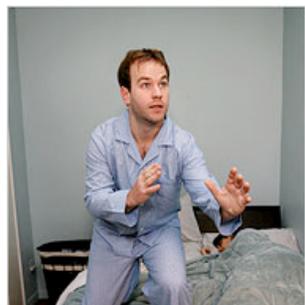
Photographs by Michael Falco for The New York Times

Performers at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe during a Tuesday night Moth story slam.

By **ALEX WILLIAMS**
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IT'S open-mike night at the Moth's monthly story slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in Manhattan. The events, where participants tell stories about their lives, are loose and spontaneous, and the emphasis is on authenticity — "ums" are awarded bonus points.

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But Robert Hurst, his name picked from a hat to appear on stage, seems like a pro.

With perfect timing and a booming voice, Mr. Hurst, 43, relates a humorous childhood tale about his grandmother in Louisiana preparing dinner for the family: squirrel casserole.

"If you ate the brains," he recalls, "you could make a wish."

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
Mike Birbiglia parlayed his storytelling into an off-Broadway show.

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Jessica Ebelhar/The New York Times
AUTHOR Katharine Russell Rich.

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Michael Falco for The New York Times
TALES People line up at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe for a recent Moth story slam.

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STYLE

Have You Heard?

Adam Wade
Seattle, San Francisco and Philadelphia. “Like the folk revival in the ’60s, or stand-up comedy in the ’80s, all of a sudden everyone’s doing it,” said Adam Wade, a part-time television producer and frequent Moth slam winner.

A young, sweat-drenched crowd of more than 200 people roars in approval. And the judges, picked from the audience, reward him with a score in the nines.

Turns out, Mr. Hurst is a pro. A trained Shakespearean actor and improvisational comedian, Mr. Hurst recently started performing at Moth events. He said after his performance on Tuesday that he hoped to leverage the exposure into a one-man show off Broadway.

Opportunity for commercial success “is definitely in the air,” Mr. Hurst said. “Hopefully I can play a strange Southern childhood into a career.”

Since they began in 1997, storytelling nights hosted by the Moth, a nonprofit, have helped aspiring writers try out new material in a nurturing environment. But lately, storytelling has exploded into a thriving genre all its own, a new avenue to prominence for writers and, increasingly, for actors and comedians. In a sense, storytelling has become the new stand-up — a way to be noticed by the literary agents, actors and directors who increasingly populate the audiences.

The Moth — the dominant name in the live storytelling scene — has expanded its number of shows to 85 this year in New York and Los Angeles, from 26 in 2006. The group now holds four open-mike slams in different New York venues each month, compared with once a month in 2006, and has expanded to Los Angeles, where it holds two slams a month. Attendance is surging, to a projected 15,000 this year from 4,000 in 2006, organizers said. Events continue to sell out, even at larger venues. In the next two years, the Moth plans to expand to at least 10 cities.

Long a farm league for “This American Life,” the storytelling public radio show, the Moth rolled out its own show this month, broadcast on more than 70 public radio stations, said Lea Thau, the Moth’s executive director. And since becoming available last summer on iTunes, its performance podcasts have been downloaded more than 6.5 million times.

Similar events are popping up around New York, as well as in cities like



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INNOVATION
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Last year, Mr. Wade, 34, and another storyteller, Jake Goldman, started a monthly storytelling event, True Tales From College, at Ochi's Lounge at Comix, a Manhattan club. Mr. Wade, who lost his job at an Internet company in November, said he aspires to vault into a career like [Garrison Keillor's](#).

The lure of success threatens to change the Moth, which has always tried to encourage ordinary people to climb on stage to share their personal, often earnest, tales.

"Comics and actors are coming in — pros," said James Braly, whose stories at the Moth were developed into an Off Broadway one-man show, "Life in a Marital Institution." The real challenge, he said, "is retaining the warmth, and the spontaneity."

While a few storytellers in the past have sold books and screenplays, the number of rags-to-riches tales has spiked noticeably, attracting a new generation of hopefuls, said Catherine Burns, the artistic director of the Moth. In recent years, she said, at least a dozen Moth storytellers have signed book or other entertainment deals.

Katherine Russell Rich, a former magazine editor, sold her memoir, "Dreaming in Hindi," which she developed in part from her stories at the Moth, to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in a six-figure deal (the book came out in July). Elna Baker, a comedian, earned enough on her advance for her coming memoir, "The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance," to quit her job as a hostess at Nobu.

It's not just books. Mike Birbiglia had a recent hit one-man show off Broadway, "Sleepwalk With Me," which is also being turned into a movie.

Jonathan Ames leveraged his spoken-word career into several books and an [HBO](#) series, "Bored to Death," starring [Ted Danson](#) and Jason Schwartzman, to have its premiere next month. A film version of his book "The Extra Man," starring [Kevin Kline](#) and Katie Holmes, is scheduled for release next year.

As word of such deals circulates, "slams have become lovingly cutthroat," Ms. Burns said.

More than a few hopefuls are clawing their way to be the next David Ellis Dickerson, a former writer for Hallmark. His stories at the Moth about how writing greeting cards led the former evangelical Christian to lose his religion and virginity, landed him appearances on "This American Life" and a \$225,000 book contract with Riverhead Books for a memoir, "House of Cards," due out in October.

Agents are also now sniffing around, said Adam Chromy, a literary agent who, with his colleague Jamie Brenner, represents Mr. Dickerson.

"A lot of my best clients, I'm finding at the Moth," Mr. Chromy said. At events, he said, half the people telling stories already have representation, and other agents and publishers are usually there looking for talent.

People who can win over a live, if half-drunk, audience have skills beyond writing, he said. "If you are able to do a good reading, you probably have a facility for self-promotion," Mr. Chromy explained. "Publishers are looking for that, too. Everybody says they're going to be a great promoter, but a lot of people freeze up."

And Hollywood celebrities are making appearances. Mr. Wade, of True Tales From College, said he performed at a Moth Ball and was approached afterward by the director Darren Aronofsky to audition for his movie "The Wrestler." (He didn't get a part.)

Steve Osborne, a retired New York City police lieutenant, performed in 2006 before an

audience of 1,500 at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles, the opening night of a 10-city national Moth tour. After the show, he said, [Sharon Stone](#) approached him, gushing how much she liked his stories. (Mr. Osborne is now a Hollywood script consultant.)

Such commercial sizzle is a far cry from the low-key, familial spirit upon which the Moth was founded. The group was started by George Dawes Green, a poet and novelist, who held the first session in his New York apartment to recreate the intimate front-porch storytelling he had cherished growing up in St. Simons Island, Ga.

“It sort of reminds you of that period of ‘[Saturday Night Live](#)’ when one after another of those personalities were going on to be superstars — [Bill Murray](#), Gilda Radner,” Mr. Green said. “Obviously, as soon as that happens, it’s going to change the Moth.”

Organizers talk frequently, he said, about their concerns that accompany new commercial opportunities. “The essence of the Moth are these nights, these very simple gatherings,” he said. “We can’t get too far away from that, because if we do, we lose the magic.” Indeed, as storytelling evolves beyond its roots, it may change into something unrecognizable to old-timers.

Peter Aguero, a New York musician and comedian who started performing at the Moth last year, recently spun off a regular event of his own, the BTK Band, at bars like the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, in which he and a group of musicians improvise thematically appropriate groove rock as people perform stories. Cyndi Freeman and her husband, Brad Lawrence, Moth veterans, are starting an event in September at the Creek, a club in Long Island City, that fuses storytelling with burlesque.

The Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, the New York improvisational comedy company that mints Amy Poehlers, not David Sedaris, has two storytelling events running and is starting an open-mike event this fall, said Anthony King, the group’s artistic director.

Storytelling in this manner has apparently become so relevant to the moment that it can no longer be confined to a few sporadic events populated by a small group of would-be memoirists. After all, it’s basically just confession, Mr. King said, and everyone seems to be confessing the most intimate details of their lives on social-networking sites like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

“The private is now public,” Mr. King said. “And great source material.”

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