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So the stories go

April 28, 2011

By Peter Crimmins

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Story slam participant Margot Leitman remembers her greatest performance: a phone dating profile she set up at 12-years old. (Peter Crimmins/For NewsWorks)

Rejection. Awkwardness. Failure. These are her richest elements for comedy.

"I have a story that ends with the line: 'At a time I felt really dead in my life, thank you for making me feel alive.' People laughed at that," said MargotLeitman, a memoir performer. "I'm thinking, 'You should be crying.' No, nobody's crying."

Leitman joined eight other performers on the stage of the Perelman Theater at the Kimmel Center for an evening of stand-up memoir. Philadelphia's First Person Arts imported them from across the country as part of the Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts.

All of the performers cut their teeth on the competitive story-slam circuit, wherein autobiographical performers vie for audience approval. Humor tends to get an immediate reaction.

Few of the performers have played in Philadelphia before. Although the reputation of Philly's notorious sports fans caused some apprehension, Leitman knew the audience would be people who "listen to NPR and read the New Yorker."

"In my head, I always say--even when I go for a job interview--I always do the 'Rocky' theme in my head. That's how I pump myself up," said storyteller Adam Wade. "It'll be nice to do the 'Rocky' theme in my head when I do a show in Philadelphia."

If there are story-slam stars, Wade may be one of them. He has won the Grand Slam several times at The Moth, a New York storytelling venue. In Philadelphia, he told a tale about his young obsession with Roy Orbison's song "Running Scared."

"It developed into its own personal meaning when I fell in love for the first time, when I was in fourth grade, with Mary Ellen Winters. She was an older woman, a sixth-grader," said Wade in the green room of the Perelman. "She had a boyfriend who was a popular sixth-grader. He looked like he was out of Teen Beat. I don't look like I'm in Teen Beat."

Wade discovered Mr. Orbison and Ms. Winters at the same time, and used the former to work up courage for the later. On stage, Wade uses his nervous energy, his rural New Hampshire drawl, and his geeky innocence to win over the audience to the emotional pratfalls of his childhood.

"I am what I am," said Wade. "It took me years to figure out I'm trying to be something I'm not. I'm a nervous guy, so when I'm up there, I'm shaking a little, I'm cracking a little, but there's a hidden confidence in that."

Unlike the narrator in "Running Scared," Wade didn't get the girl. But on Wednesday night he had the audience in his pocket.

Adam Wade, originally from rural New Hampshire now living in New York City, recalls his first love in 4th grade, his 6th grade rival, and the song that gave him courage to pursue it: Roy Orbison's "Runnin' Scared."

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More to Telling at Perelman Theater — NicoletteNH 2011-04-28 13:20
While at this "slam" the stories were not judged, for those who were there that night the clear "winner" of the

evening was a Baltimore English teacher, Jon Aaron, whose account of keeping alive the memory of a daughter who died shortly after birth was poignant and the perfect healing story. His story was on the theme, "Wordly Possessions," was told with an economy of words, the perfect words, and had a clear story arc with a point of change that moved the story from being sad to uplifting. Too bad it wasn't mentioned in this article.

Storytellers — **AmandaHug** 2011-04-28 17:05

Have to disagree with the previous comment. Yes, there was no judging, which, as a regular on the Philly story scene, I really enjoyed the vibe brought to this event by the lack of scoring/competition. I sincerely thought the storytellers all did an amazing job. Many stories were hilarious or moving or gave the listener a good feel for who the storyteller was. I agree that Jon Aaron's lovely story was very moving. I also honestly, found it a tad freaky. However, were we judging, no one in the group of twelve I was with would have chosen that as "the winner" (based on informal polling). Just goes to show that it's all subjective. As for this story, I thought it was great to publicize Wade and Leitman. They are more high-profile and can help bring much-needed attention to the Philly Storytelling world. Would not have minded some words on Katonya Mosley, the local in the bunch, but I think it was a great piece anyway! It was a fantastic event

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