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THE HUMAN COMEDY OF ADAM WADE

BY SARAH LARSON

Adam Wade started out as a comedian; he found his way to storytelling after realizing that he needed to be himself.

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Fans of the storytelling series the Moth (<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/stories-that-will-plain-curl-your-eyelashes-a-love-letter-to-the-moth>) who watched the “Girls” season finale on Sunday night were likely pleased to see some of its heroes, including Ophira Eisenberg and Adam Wade, interact with Hannah Horvath. “No notes!” Wade tells Hannah as she’s about to go onstage at Housing Works. “What are you, an idiot? You’ll be disqualified!” If you know his work, this exchange is funny for a couple of reasons. One, Wade is a good choice to vocalize “No notes,” one of the key tenets of Moth-dom—he’s won the Moth Story Slam twenty times. Two, the reason he’s so successful is that his stories embody another, unspoken tenet of the Moth: heart. Wade’s narrative persona is a salt-of-the earth guy with a sensitive soul. He has stories about befriending bus drivers, Cabbage Patch dolls, and old ladies; he tells us about a chaste affair in college that involves spooning and Eskimo kisses. We don’t imagine him calling a stranger an idiot. On “Girls,” Hannah hands her notes to him and goes onstage.

Wade started out as a comedian; he found his way to storytelling circuitously, after realizing, essentially, that he needed to be himself. That self is gentle, smart, humble, and weird, with dreams of love and fulfillment so fervent that you can hear them quavering in his voice. He grew up in Manchester, New Hampshire, and has an old-time New England accent. Sometimes when he’s telling an emotional story, his voice breaks; sometimes you can hear him tear up. He tells stories about humiliation and heartache, about small but thrilling human connections and tiny victories that feel huge. The rise of nerd culture has no doubt helped him. Onstage, he seems to be the adolescent misfit within everyone’s soul.

I first became aware of Wade a few years ago, at a baseball game. A mutual friend of ours, a comedy writer, had been given four front-row seats (from a generous network bigwig) to a Saturday-afternoon Yankees-Red Sox game. He invited three fellow goofy New Englanders; we’d all been struggling in New York for years and couldn’t believe

our good luck. Before heading to the Bronx, we met at a sandwich shop in the West Village. There, I was introduced to Wade. He had such an aw-shucks, aw-geeze vibe that I wasn't sure at first if it was a put-on. It wasn't. He was very excited about the game and also about the sandwich shop. He seemed to really know his sandwiches. We stayed too long at the sandwich shop, and when we got to Yankee Stadium the game had started.

Yankee Stadium was enormous, as if the Millennium Falcon had landed in the Bronx. We showed people our tickets and were led through a vast series of hallways, escalators, and a restaurant. There may have been a velvet rope. When we emerged into the daylight, the usher brought us closer and closer to the field, and we began giggling in disbelief. Front row, behind home plate. People waited on us, bringing free food and drinks. One time, when we quietly mocked A-Rod, A-Rod turned around and glared at us. We were on television, and some friends in Los Angeles texted and told us to high-five each other, and we did, and they saw the high-five on TV and laughed. It was a beautiful day; a bunch of our heroes batted and caught right in front of us; the Red Sox won. The whole thing was like a bizarre, wonderful dream.

I didn't see Wade again after that day, but I started listening to his Moth stories, and I began to wonder if perhaps the sandwiches *were* just as meaningful to him as the seats behind home plate—in part because, as he tells it, such pleasures were among his most significant for a long time. They feature prominently in his stories: special orange juice that's the highlight of his day in college, a beloved milkshake he makes at his job in high school and shares with a crush; chicken tenders that he squirrels away at that same job and eats in the lavatory; dinners at the Clam King (<http://themoth.org/posts/stories/theclamking>), where he hangs out on Saturday nights with his grandmother and great-aunt when he's a teen-ager. Currently, Wade is overjoyed about the meatballs that his eighty-year-old landlady in Hoboken makes him on Sundays. He has a blog about it: see for yourself (<http://sundayswithmarie.tumblr.com/>). He describes these foods lovingly. In life, he wants what we all want, he is thwarted or he succeeds, and in the meantime he can rely on a good sandwich.

For the listener, Wade is expressing not just our inner misfit but our inner small-town kid; though he's forty and gainfully employed, successful and well known, he still seems to self-identify as a little guy from the sticks who's just glad to be given a shot. On Saturday, I talked to him on the phone, and he told me about his background—information I felt I should ask, even though I knew it from his stories.

He came to New York after graduating from Keene State College, to do a one-credit film course at N.Y.U. that came with an internship at Twentieth Century Fox, and free housing, in a dorm. (“And free food!” he told me.) He got a job at a Times Square BBQ joint, where he found a community of friends. “To this day, that was my biggest break,” he told me: his co-workers helped him find a basement apartment in Fairview, New Jersey. After a year or two, he became a page at NBC (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpJrD-Oazgw>), where he befriended the security guards, the cleaning guys, the lighting guys. “People went out of their way, or they felt bad or whatever,” he told me. “I needed that.” He started doing standup at open mics and at the Luna Lounge, working with a guitar.

After he was a page, he was a production assistant on “Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn.” One day, while Wade was out doing an errand (<http://www.feralaudio.com/64-adam-wade/>) for Quinn, Jerry Seinfeld came in and talked to the crew. Quinn felt bad about Wade’s having missed Seinfeld, and he offered to watch a tape of Wade’s comedy. “Colin was such a good guy,” Wade told me. “He called me into his office and said, ‘Can I be honest? You gotta stop playing the guitar. The stories in between, the audience really reacts. You tell stories around the office. Do that.’” Wade took this advice to heart. “Within like a year I was doing the Moth,” he told me. He now supports himself through storytelling: teaching at the Magnet Theatre, performing several times a week. He released a CD, “The Human Comedy,” in September, and he’s working on a book. He hopes to work in film and television.

The rise of storytelling as a popular art form in the past couple of decades has broadened and deepened entertainment considerably, and it’s also raised a few philosophical questions. It’s converged with journalism, theatre, public radio, podcasting, and standup comedy; it’s made performers out of people who might not have become performers. Like Upright Citizens Brigade, the Moth has become a cultural force in New York and nationally, inspiring throngs of people to take risks and expose their inner selves, for better and for worse. Storytelling can thrive on awkwardness, soul-baring, confessionalism. For the cringe-prone listener, this can be dangerous. But when it’s done well, the rewards are exceptionally high: listening to someone tell an intimate story with sensitivity and humor can be unforgettable.

Wade found that the more honest and personal he got, the better he did. He realized that, unlike in comedy, a quiet audience was good: it meant that people were listening. But they react audibly, too. On podcasts and on tracks from Wade’s album, you regularly hear the crowd say “Aw.” Sometimes the “aw” is sympathetic, because he’s just revealed some excruciating thing that happened to him, and sometimes it’s like an “aw, cute,” the noise you might make while clutching your heart and watching a video of a sloth taking a bath. A performance genre that fosters an atmosphere of group “aw”

makes me uneasy, and a performer who inspires lots of them might raise suspicion. But Wade is a truly gifted storyteller. Moments in his stories that walk up to, or just beyond, the line of acceptable public sentimentality are often followed by blunt humor. In “My First Job and Susie,” a story on his album, he tells us that Susie, a hostess at a restaurant he worked at, had a green tooth, from an injury: “All the other hostesses used to talk about it behind her back. They saw it as an imperfection. But to me, that made her perfect.” *Aw*. He pauses, then says, “Susie had a boyfriend, and he was a prick.” The crowd laughs its head off—much louder than the “aw”s.

Sometimes, students come into storytelling classes thinking that it’s a route to money or fame. Wade discourages this line of thinking. “I tell them, ‘Just try to focus on the basics. Just be honest,’” he told me. Empathy and vulnerability can be a challenge for people, as well as revealing their own flaws. “If I’m having a conversation with you, I’m talking to you from my heart to your heart,” Wade told me. “And if I’m acting like a know-it-all, or acting a little bit smarter than you, I’m going to start talking down to you.” In storytelling, he said, this happens, too. A few days ago, I listened to a podcast I found on iTunes in which Wade was featured as a guest, advising a trial lawyer about how to use storytelling when speaking to a jury. At one point, the lawyer has an idea. “We could easily get up and say, ‘Johnny was frightened,’” he says. But what about adding details? “‘Johnny’s palms were sweating. He had a lump in his throat the size of a crater. He couldn’t stop biting his nails. He was fighting back the tears!’”

“More detail is good,” Wade says, politely. “You don’t want to overdo it.” What is harder to teach is having the dignity not to overtly manipulate your audience.

On “Girls,” Hannah tells a story about love and betrayal, and she does it the right way: honestly, with perspective, humor, and empathy; she’s figured something out about her life, and it feels good for everybody. Frankie Valli’s “Can’t Take My Eyes off You” starts playing, and the scene switches to another café, where Shoshanna dances with her boss, played by Wade’s old mentor Colin Quinn. They’ve figured out how to save the café and therefore how to save themselves; their friendly waltz is a lovely moment of pure joy.

When I talked to Wade on Saturday, he was as aw-shucks as he was that day at the baseball game. “Tomorrow’s gonna be a big day!” he said. I asked if he had special plans for the “Girls” finale, and he was momentarily confused. Yes, he said—he and other Moth people would be watching it at a special screening at Housing Works. But that’s not what he’d been referring to. “Sundays Marie cooks, so I’m going to be getting something,” he said, sounding excited. Possibly meatballs.

Watch: The Moth and *The New Yorker* present a night of stories in celebration of the magazine's ninetieth anniversary, in 2015.



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