

Have We Got a Story for You: 18 Years of Storytelling at The Moth

BY **STAV ZIV** / JUNE 30, 2015 11:18 AM EDT

A small helium balloon lazily rose above rows of seats slowly filling with people. Outside, it was a busy Friday evening in Manhattan, but under the high-domed ceiling of the New York Public Library's Celeste Bartos Forum, a crowd gathered in front of a stage adorned with a single microphone. Through the warm din of chatter and upbeat music, the deep, lush hum of a cello signaled the start of the Moth High School GrandSLAM.

For 18 years now, the Moth, a nonprofit dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling, has brought the world "true stories told live" from luminaries and celebrities like Salman Rushdie, Molly Ringwald, Malcolm Gladwell, Ethan Hawke and Al Sharpton. But on a recent June night, it was 10 high school students from across New York City who would step up to that mic, one by one, for five minutes each.

The evening's host, comedian and *Daily Show* correspondent Hasan Minhaj, explained the basic rules of the Moth. The stories have a time limit enforced by the musician bowing her cello—she demonstrated a gentle high note she'd play at the five-minute cutoff and a lower, more menacing tone once they've gone a minute over. And the key, Minhaj added, was that these were not rants or monologues but stories from their lives that must be true.

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"I'm wicked nervous," Diamante Ortiz, the first student to step up to the microphone, said quietly. The audience exploded with applause to encourage the junior from Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood, who began to explain how the loose curls falling over the shoulders of her denim dress became purple after years of asking her mother if she could dye her hair. It wasn't really about the hair, Ortiz says she finally realized. Permission to get purple locks meant her mother saw her as responsible and trustworthy. She joked that her mother was, at that moment, probably taking an absurd number of photos of her, purple hair and all.

Mukhtar Essa, a junior at Flushing High School in Queens, used his newly acquired English to talk about communicating with teachers via Google Translate after he moved from Yemen a few years ago. Now he sees recent arrivals sitting in the back row of the classroom and wishes he could speak their language; he'd like to tell them that it will be OK.

The stories were punctuated with laughing, sniffing and cheering from the audience. As Minhaj had instructed them, they “turned up” the applause more than if it had been Beyoncé up there. Adam Wade, a New Hampshire native who moved to New York City after college, says people come to these shows because they “want to actually feel something.”

Aloft in a Loft

The Moth came out of muggy, bourbon-soaked nights on a porch in Georgia. George Dawes Green grew up on St. Simons Island, where as a young adult he often found himself at his friend Wanda Bullard's house. “We were all on the porch, and the screens were destroyed. Moths would come flocking in and around the porch light,” Green recalls. “As we got drunker, the stories would flow.”

Green later moved to New York City and became a successful novelist. He published *The Caveman's Valentine* and *The Juror*, with the latter made into a 1996 movie starring Demi Moore, Alec Baldwin, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, James Gandolfini and Anne Heche. *The Caveman's Valentine* hit the big screen in 2001, with a screenplay by Green and Samuel L. Jackson in the lead role. “I loved the sort of sophisticated life that I was living, but also felt deeply this lack of simple community,” he says. He also grew annoyed at the “conversation vultures” who would swoop in at the slightest pause at New York parties. “Those generous, lovely nights [on Wanda's porch] were just with me for years afterwards. I just loved the idea of a community of people that would be able to gather and tell stories. Life for everybody in that group was richer.”

He decided to host a storytelling evening in his Manhattan loft on June 6, 1997. He describes that first event as “a disaster,” with people droning on and on. At the time, “there were no public storytelling venues for the kinds of stories we were telling—personal, true stories. It was a dramatically new thing.”

Despite that “piss-poor” start, Green says a few friends urged him to try again. In the next few attempts—which mercifully took place in bars—he added a musician to prod people offstage. The time limit set the events apart from the poetry slams that were popular then, as did the lack of “fancy verbiage.... That's what made the Moth so powerful—the connection between storyteller and audience that didn't have a wall of artistry between the two,” Green says. “There is an art to it, but it's not a fancy art.”

The most important story ingredient, he learned early on, was vulnerability. “A good raconteur talks about failure, their own human failure, and frailty,” he says. “There can be success in the stories, but they have to be grounded on failure.”

The name of his new storytelling endeavor was a nod to the porch and the moths that fluttered around the light. Those events Green held in the late 1990s were the basis of today’s Mainstage shows, the Moth’s flagship program that “features stories by luminaries in the arts and sciences, newsmakers and news breakers, and everyday heroes (and even a few reformed villains!).”

The Moth has been visiting high schools since 1998, but its High School SLAM was launched in 2012. It began podcasting in 2008 and the next year made its debut on the radio, where *The Moth Radio Hour* can now be heard on more than 400 stations. To date, more than 15,000 stories have been told through the Moth.

Like any young nonprofit organization, Green explains, the Moth experienced financial stress in its early years, over things like space rental and payroll. “There were several times when I thought we’d have to call it,” he recalls. “We went through really, really hard times,” dealing with an overabundance of ego and an under-abundance of money. But the moments of almost pulling the plug came and went. The Moth now puts on one or more events per month in 21 cities, including Los Angeles, Boston, Milwaukee, London and Dublin. It has also done special events like a show it produced with the U.S. State Department in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in August 2008. That show “featured locals who had been affected in some way by the region’s civil war,” according to the organization’s first book, *The Moth: 50 True Stories* (2013). Melbourne, Australia, will be added to the list of Moth spots in August, and, in early September, Sydney will have a Mainstage event at the Sydney Opera House.

Analoging On

The hunger for live events that evoke an emotional connection between the raconteur—as Green likes to call Moth storytellers—and listeners has perhaps become more acute in the 21st century. The warmth and honesty Green remembered from Wanda’s porch “has been utterly blown away by Facebook and social media,” he says, guessing that the rise of storytelling may be tied to feelings of detachment that comes with using these platforms. “You can’t smell anybody, it’s not real human interaction.”

Steve Burns, famous for his role as the host of the children’s television show *Blue’s Clues*, stepped onto his first Moth stage in 2010. He is certain the Moth has flourished because of its decidedly old-school approach. “It’s so analog and so unadorned,” he says. “The simplicity of it really cuts through.”

That might explain why dozens of storytelling organizations have been established since the Moth was founded in 1997. There's StoryCorps, Story Lab Chicago, Public School (in Los Angeles) and massmouth in Boston. One of the recent additions is Hartford, Connecticut-based Speak Up, founded by Matthew Dicks, a writer and elementary school teacher who began telling stories with the Moth in 2011. "There's no better place to tell a story than a SLAM. There's no better audience. They want you to succeed no matter what," says Dicks, who has won 20 StorySLAMS and three GrandSLAMS. He and his wife started their organization just over two years ago.

Adam Wade says the first time he got up onstage at a Moth show—to tell a story about feeling sad and alone living in a basement apartment near a cemetery in Fairview, New Jersey, when his only friend was the 400-pound deli guy at the store nearby—he was beyond scared, just as Diamante Ortiz was before talking about her purple hair. But when Wade stepped up to the mic that night at Manhattan's Nuyorican Poets Cafe in December 2003, it was "almost like everybody was opening their arms, ready to hug me."

Now, nearly 12 years after telling his first story, Wade says the minutes he spends onstage are the least nervous part of his day, and he's poised to record his debut storytelling album in July. "You finally go up and it's almost like your body is Alka-Seltzer; all that trouble just comes out of you," he says. "When I go home from a Moth show, I always feel good. I don't drink, but I've got a buzz."

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