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LEISURE & ARTS

Saloon Stories

By William McGowan

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New York

N ow that the Lower East Side is being gentrified, and places to get an overpriced martini seem to outnumber places to score cheap drugs, this downtown Manhattan neighborhood is no stranger to the sight of beefy doormen holding eager weekend patrons at bay outside hip new bars. But this is a Monday night, not the weekend, and what's attracted the crowd outside of Lansky Lounge, a former Delancey Street speakeasy named after the infamous gangster, is a night of old-fashioned storytelling. Now in the middle of its second season, "Stories at the Moth" is New York's hottest and hippest literary ticket. Tired of the usual rounds of readings, performance art and online palaver, Manhattan's literary groovesters are packing themselves into this new happening, putting a trendy new twist on mankind's oldest form of verbal entertainment.

Mixing big-name literary talents with a host of lesser known, but no less able, tale-tellers, "The Moth" has in its short lifetime showcased such luminaries as Frank McCourt and George Plimpton and such rising stars as Jonathan Ames, author of the recently published "The Extra Man," and Peter Trachtenberg, whose 1997 memoir, "7 Tattoos," looks likely to become a downtown classic. While a majority of the storytellers are part of the New York journalistic, literary or theater communities in one way or another, "The Moth" encourages the drafting of civilians -- people whose life experience, combined with natural flair for spinning a good yarn about it, makes them compelling presences before a crowd that regularly averages 120 people. Neither fame nor anonymity guarantees success; some are good, some not so good.

The brainchild of writer George Green, best known as the author of "The Juror," "The Moth" was born with the small fortune that Mr. Green received for the movie rights to that book. Mr. Green had been raised on St. Simon's Island off the coast of Georgia, and missed the informal story-swapping traditions that defined the tight-knit sense of community there. Manhattan was a sound-bite culture, "where people are asked to say witty things and then move on," Mr. Green complains, a place where the ability to spin a good

yarn had atrophied -- along with the sense of human connectivity that only narrative can sustain.

At first Mr. Green wanted to open up a nonprofit arts center and bar devoted entirely to storytelling, and he took a lease on a two-story space in Alphabet City, another Lower East Side area. But Storyville, as the experiment was called, only proved that writers and storytellers should drink in bars but should never try to own one. Although Mr. Green generated a lot of media buzz, the rigors of renovating the space and obtaining the liquor license proved overwhelming. Aside from one exceptionally good party, Storyville never got off the ground. A year and a half after signing the lease, Mr. Green decamped, trailed by a litigious landlord.

After that, Mr. Green and his board decided that the enterprise would simply float, moth-like, among a handful of existing downtown venues, though Lansky's is its most frequent home. "We can focus on stories now," notes board member Jamie Raab, who is publisher of Warner Books. "The drinks are someone else's problem."

A typical night at "The Moth" opens with a cocktail hour, with Mr. Green greeting the regulars in a hail of "ha-has" and "hey-mans." The evening then segues into four different stories arranged around a single unifying theme, with a host providing ribald continuity. Some nights the theme is straightforward: Traveling Stories, Saloon Stories, Hollywood Horror Stories, Stories on Insanity. Other nights are more conceptual, exploring such cryptic ideas as "Abnormalities and Curiosities" or "Methods for Overcoming Puzzlement." (This Monday, Feb. 1, at Liquids, the theme is Urban Dog Tales; reservations are suggested.) The storytellers get 12 minutes, a limit firmly, though often humorously, enforced by sax virtuoso Ray Blue, who cuts in with a sinewy riff to warn the long-winded that time is up.

The stories at "The Moth" are not entirely spontaneous; Joey Xanders, the artistic director, works the performers rigorously before they go on, emphasizing a classical sense of narrative that distinguishes what gets told at "The Moth" from the performance art of an Anna Deavere Smith or the monologue art of a Spalding Gray. "A story is not a monologue; it is not scripted and it is not read," Ms. Xanders explains. "It is a narrative that is character motivated, following a sequence of events in which the character is transformed, in the process telling us something larger about life." Attention Brill's Content: There is no effort to differentiate fiction from nonfiction. Ms. Xanders advises that the story should always take precedence over the facts.

Whether the stories measure up to Ms. Xanders's exacting ideal is a matter of debate. "Some nights are great and some nights are real clunkers," Mr. Green freely admits. But in aggregate the stories represent an impressive archive of human curiosity and diversity, underscoring just why storytelling has been such an addictive form of human entertainment for millennia.

Back in the first season, the audience for a night of "Abnormalities and Curiosities" was mesmerized by Romy Ashby's tale of Maggie, a young movie-theater usherette in the Pacific Northwest in the 1920s who fell in love with a circus sword-swallower just before he met a gruesome death. Last Halloween, Ms. Ashby followed up with an even more macabre tale: that of Hamilton Fish -- the real-life New York serial killer, not the aristocratic New York congressman -- who murdered little Grace Budd in 1928 and later shorted out Sing Sing's electric chair with needles he had masochistically jammed under his skin. ("Pain is OK," Ms. Ashby credits Fish with saying. "Until it hurts.") The manic and foppish Jonathan Ames, who has described himself as "a Jewish Duke of Windsor," has been a repeater too, putting the audience in stitches with tales of cross-dressing experiments gone awry and the frustrations of picking up Parisian women.

Writer and Mirabella editor Nell Casey adopted her mother's voice in such a convincing way to tell the story of her parents break-up in the 1970s that even her mother, who was in the audience that night, looked startled. Another rather vivid presence was funnyman Joe Queenan, who stole the show on an evening of Scary Wedding Stories with a description of the Satanic wedding he once attended complete with Black Mass. ("Hail Beelzebub! Ave Lucifer!" the guests were urged to chant.)

With minimal production values, "The Moth" is a rather elemental experience. While this immediacy is exciting for the audience, even the most practiced authors and actors find it excruciating. "The thing to remember is that this is the hardest thing anyone will ever do in terms of performing in front of a crowd," Mr. Green says. "Actors rehearse lines; people on interview shows work off cues from the host. There is no form as terrifying. It is just you and your 12 minutes."

The crowd can be intimidating. "Sometimes they [the storytellers] are so bad you just want to shoot them," says "Moth" regular and cyber producer Kara Von Funk, when asked about the night of Crime Stories when one egregious windbag got heckled off the stage. For the most part, though, the audience is polite, explains Ms. Casey, who in addition to telling stories at "The Moth" is also on its board. "People have this sense that they could be up there too, and that vicarious identification is part of what makes it so compelling."

Celebrated actresses and performance artists don't necessarily make good storytellers, as the much-touted Ann Magnuson proved one night. Nor do big-selling writers, such as "Sex and the City" author Candace Bushnell, who had the audience snoring with a pointless, narcissistic account of upper-class English weddings. Ms. Xanders maintains that successful storytelling involves "the ability to get yourself out of the story so that the story itself takes over."

It is probably not surprising to note that it is the older storytellers who are often the most impressive. As Mr. Green describes it, the slower narrative pace of graybeards like Frank McCourt and George Plimpton "gets the

audience to come to them." But what is surprising is the cross-generational sense of community that is often conjured, particularly rare in what is an otherwise demographically segmented media culture where Gen-X solipsism rules. "Looking at the crowd, all the twentysomething guys in Clark Kent glasses, I thought they'd never laugh but in fact they did," recalls the fortysomething Mr. Queenan.

Sometimes the "Moth" people claim that they have no agenda beyond a "night of entertainment with a party thrown in at the end," as one board member puts it. There is, however, more to it than that. "Any story is a blow against the media empire, opening up your pores to the possibilities and varieties of human experience in a way that traditional media simply cannot do," maintains frequent host Roland Legiardi-Laura, explaining just why a recent "Moth" story about upstate New Yorkers who fly their private planes to weekend caterpillar races was so compelling. "One reason that something like this works is that popular culture is incapable of providing satisfying stories to people. It is too crass, unable to convey the incredible idiosyncrasy of human life."

Not that the series hasn't been the object of media co-optation. National Public Radio has picked up a number of "Moth" performers, and a variety of cable TV and Internet companies have been talking to "The Moth" about establishing some kind of synergy. Mr. Green is ambivalent about such moves and claims that "telling stories to small groups of people in intimate settings" -- the original mission -- is still the priority.

But at the moment the most pressing problem is the overflow crowds. "You can't do this to us," huffed one self-described "story addict," stomping away from Lansky Lounge with her companion when even the standing room disappeared. "We were here when you first opened. We were here before you were cool."

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