

# Look who's talking

## Storytelling on stage packs in crowds for performance venues

By **CLAUDE SOLNIK**

When Tracey Segarra scheduled her first storytelling show for the Merrick Theater earlier this year, she wasn't certain how many people would show up at this 180-seat venue. She found her answer in two words: Sold out.

While stand-up comedians and singers have long attracted crowds, storytellers today are packing audiences in at coffee houses, theaters and other venues as possibly the oldest form of entertainment becomes the newest.

They're also creating a new opportunity for venues, audiences and performers as live entertainment faces sometimes crushing competition from electronic media.

"The stories aren't memorized," Segarra, director of marketing for accounting and consulting firm Margolin, Winer & Evens in Garden City, said. "I tell my stories a little bit differently each time. That creates the immediacy. It's as if they're just talking to you."

If storytelling is attracting audiences and practitioners, that may not be surprising. Who doesn't love a good story whether in a bar, ballroom, backyard or on stage? Henry Miller in his novel "The Colossus of Maroussi" wrote about a great speaker who seemed to write wonderful speeches — and tear them up as he spoke.

"What's great about these shows is I get a mix of storytellers," Segarra said. "Not everybody will like everybody."

Jude Treder-Wolff, a performer, trainer and show organizer for (Mostly) True Things, a storytelling show where audiences guess which tale isn't entirely true, sees storytelling as relevant entertainment in an electronic age.

"I would compare it to a movie or stand up," she said. "People are taken on an emotional journey. Somebody went through something. The best stories are about struggle."

Treder-Wolff said initially audiences weren't sure what to expect. They had to develop a taste for true tales told on stage.

"That's why I'm proud we get nice audiences," she said of crowds. "At first, Long Island audiences didn't know what I was talking about. They thought storytelling was myths and fairy tales. It can be inspiring, to hear something that someone else has been through."

John Dorcic, a host and co-producer of Mortified, where people read work (songs, scripts, stories, letters...) from their youth, sees stories as a primal part of the human experience.

"It's the original art form," Dorcic, who

also teaches improvisation classes at Theater 294, said. "It takes us back to when we're sitting around a fire just telling a story. Films today are big, superhero movies. There's no place for subtle, small storytelling on the big screen. People are gravitating toward this art form. It's the most visceral, simple type of storytelling."

While many stories are funny, others are moving, prompting a shiver of recognition as audiences see themselves or their lives on stage.

"There's always been stand-up comedy. It's somewhat removed," Segarra said. "Some stand-up comics are great at telling stories, but you don't feel that connection you feel from a storyteller. There's something from the arc of storytelling. You see where the person is at the beginning. There's the drama, the catalyst. You get invested in that."

The economics also don't hurt from John Leguizamo to Michael Moore, Lily Tomlin to Whoopi Goldberg and storytelling showcases.

"For the venues, it's inexpensive to put on," Treder-Wolff said. "It's a portable show. All I have to bring is the storytellers and some music tracks. They're the most economical shows going. And they go into a lot of different environments."

The Moth, a radio show on NPR in which storytellers ply their craft, essentially spawned a storytelling scene and circuit. Segarra (a Moth grand slam winner) is among those who present their own storytelling shows, often with a theme.

Segarra's next show, Now You're Talking Presents Anticipation, Oct. 15 at the Merrick Theater, gives an idea of the diversity of storytellers.

John Aldridge, a Montauk lobster fisherman who survived turbulent waters for a dozen hours, takes the stage along with Mary Theresa Archbold, a performer who appeared on This American Life; Josh

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Johnson, a comedian who appeared on The Daily Show; comedian Mark Pagan and playwright Jeff Solomon.

"The Moth has been doing this for 20 years. It's spawned a lot of other people who realize this is an art form that draws people in," Segarra said. "There's some-



Photo by Jason Falchook

**TRACEY SEGARRA: Storytelling shows organized by Segarra and others are turning into the hottest thing on stage, joining stand-up comedy, singers and a wide range of shows.**

thing about people standing on a stage and telling a true story from their life that's very compelling."

Treder-Wolff produces a storytelling show in Port Jefferson and New York City including music and performers who weave in white lies, while others tell the whole truth.

"True stories are the most popular thing now in storytelling," Treder-Wolff said of events where audiences ferret out falsity. "The game does make people stand up and go, 'What's inconsistent here?' Sometimes, the little white lies get by."

While many people's favorite stories may be fiction, Segarra believes sincerity more than brevity is the heart of storytelling.

"That's what people are drawn to, that these are real stories that happened in people's lives," Segarra said. "The stories that I love the most don't always end up tied in a pretty little bow. People could always lie if they want to, but what's the fun in that?"

The Herman Melville school of storytelling calls for a great subject matter for a great story. Segarra, though, isn't so sure big subjects always breed good stories. "Some of the best stories are small stories where nothing huge happens," she said.

Segarra said there are different, but compatible, storytelling cultures. The National Storytelling Network includes traditional story tellers who perform at libraries, schools and other venues, telling fables, myths and

other tales. "I'm trying to bring the two worlds together," she said of fact and fiction.

Storytelling also has business applications: A sales pitch is essentially a story about a product, a court case is a story about a crime and an article like this is called a story.

"Think about Steve Jobs when he introduced the first Apple computer. He's able to tell a story," Segarra said. "Think of people in business. People don't remember facts and figures. They remember stories."

Treder-Wolff has coached social workers, teachers, trainers and people in business through workshops about how to be better storytellers.

"I'm teaching them how to use stories to deliver their information," Treder-Wolff said. "It could be a professional from any stripe who wants to get their information across. It's more effective if there's a story the listener can follow."

Segarra gave a storytelling workshop at Margolin, Winer & Evens to help employees understand the role stories play in their life and business and how they fit in with talking with clients and prospects.

"I'm going to be giving a two-hour workshop on storytelling at Molloy College," Segarra said of an event on the horizon. "Storytelling is how we all connect with each other."

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