

The Moth - part of the Melbourne Writers Festival - Saturday 24th August 2013

Sara, Kristy and Ophelia introduced themselves then explained the running order for the session. They each took turns outlining different main points to be considered when working on a story. It was really helpful to hear their different voices and adjust to the various accents although I'm still not clear on their roles - one was a director but which one and what the other two did is lost. I was impressed by the way they simply began the workshop and by their grooming - they all had lovely hair, well cut, washed and brushed, very clean and tidy clothes - not looking straight out of the shopping bag but clean, pressed and very much suited to their styles. The rest of us looked like Saturday morning at the market!

The next step was for us all to watch a video of a "Moth" performance: not a professional storyteller, an actor, or presenter but simply a man who had a go. His story was well crafted, nuanced, funny and frightening by turns, and flowed smoothly from beginning to end. (Which probably explains why his microphone technique was not the best.)

The presenters then took turns to outline the seven things to be considered when preparing (or directing) a Moth story.

1. Define your theme - key characters / elements; who is your audience; one sentence summary; one word summary.
2. Set up the stakes - create a sense of urgency; why is your solution of critical importance; articulate this succinctly very early to grab the attention of the audience.
3. Make critical choices - any story could include multiple elements but only keep those that relate to the theme to make the most of what you have and to keep to the time limit.
4. Show vrs tell - include specific examples of the kinds of things you want to talk about, let them see / feel it for themselves.
5. Develop the arc of the story so that developments frame up the theme / conflict etc without giving away the solution
6. Have a strong ending - have you addressed all the issues you raised in your story? Are you closing a strongly as you opened?
7. Be yourself - storytelling is not a formula, and personal stories especially must reflect who you were when the story began and who you are when you have finished it.

These seven things are not prescriptive but used by the director to fine-tune the story as a Moth show is developed. Typically the director spends 10 - 30 hours either on the phone, or via email with storytellers prior to a rehearsal before a show is presented.

There are only two things you need to memorize: the sentence you are going to use at the beginning and the one you will use to close. The rest of the words and phrases must grow out of your relationship with the theme, where you are personally as you tell it and the reactions of the audience. The teller needs to be open to allowing the fact of public performance and reactions of those listening to give the teller insight into his or her story while at the same time not allowing it to derail the telling.

I was really interested to find that much of this information is the kind of information we have been including in our storytelling workshops - the information I was given when I first learned storytelling and the suggestions I now give to those asking me how to do it.

We then broke into three groups and worked with one of the presenters. Her suggestions for deciding on a story were to think about: First, Last, Best, Worst things that happened to us.

Individuals then talked about one or other of these then we each had an attempt at telling the story (aiming for 3 minutes each). As each story was told the presenter asked questions related to the points outlined above - and I have to say that she saw in my story something that I hoped may have been there but that no body else had ever commented on. It was very emotional.

I was so very much impressed with the ability of each of the people in my small group to come up with a story and to participate in the feedback about them.

Finally the whole group re-assembled, names were pulled out of a bag and each on got to tell his or her story to the whole group. The presenter who had been with that teller in the small group then commented to the whole group about the development of the story.

It was one of the best storytelling sessions I have attended. Most of the stories were unpolished but each and every one exhibited gem like qualities that sent me away inspired. This was a diverse group, occupations, life situations, qualifications but the depth of talent released by this workshop was breathtaking. I wanted to spend longer with the attendees and find out how they had come to this session, where they wanted to go with their storytelling and when we could meet again. I made do with handing out some Storytelling Australia (Victoria) cards and hope that some of them make contact with our group.