



Tale-tellers get to the core of Big Apple on Moth's wings

ARA JANSEN

What could a pickpocket and a cop have in common? They've both told their tales through The Moth, a group which has brought the art of oral storytelling back into focus with amazing results.

One of New York's hottest literary phenomena, The Moth has rekindled the magical art and at the same time is connecting people in a city which often thrives on anonymity.

The Moth offers people the chance to tell their story for 10 minutes in front of an audience in an intimate setting. For its executive and creative director Lea Thau, this is the kind of story sharing which gets right to the heart of her adopted city.

Born and raised in Denmark, the 36-year-old Thau went to New York to work at the United Nations. "I wanted to do something that really got the heart and soul of New York rather than working in an international environment," she says of her decision to start working for The Moth almost eight years ago.

While her role has grown, Thau started looking after The Moth's community program, working with adults and rehab groups to teach them to tell their stories as a way of lifting their self-esteem and contributing to the community.

In the decade that The Moth has been running, it has expanded that community program and now holds "story slams" which take the best stories and storytellers from local events on to a bigger stage. Best of all, you don't have to be a professional artist in any way, simply someone with a good story to tell. It hosts about 12 events a season which are notorious for selling out in record time.

The not-for-profit group has also seen its fair share of famous speakers, including Janeane Garofalo, Spalding Gray, Candace Bushnell, Joe Jackson, Ethan Hawke, Margaret Cho, Moby, Rosie O'Donnell, Suzanne Vega and Frank McCourt.

There is a plan to move The Moth out of New York and next year marks the first slam in Los Angeles with a view to holding the first national storytelling slam-off.

Thau is bringing The Moth to Perth as part of the Perth Writers Festival. Hosted by American author and storyteller Dan Kennedy, who will also tell a story, five Australian storytellers will offer up 10-minute tales without the aid of a script.

They are Paul Carter, author of *Don't Tell Mum I Work on the Rigs*, *She thinks I'm a Piano Player in a Warehouse*, novelist,

journalist, translator and academic Maureen Freely, Manhattan novelist and magazine writer Peter Goodwin, Sydney restaurateur and writer Pauline Nguyen and Sydney-based playwright, poet and journalist Craig Sherborne.

As with all Moth events, there is always a theme and this one is Journeys.

"We go out of our way to find really unique stories and everyday stories," says Thau. "We try and find five different voices on the same theme: funny and sad, young and old and varying personalities.

"What's important is that it's not just writers and performers. We want different points of view so there is an astronaut or a cop or just someone with a good story."

The Moth has a whole workshop program in place to help potential storytellers create, weave and tell their tale. The most important criteria is that the stories have to be real, not fantasy or science-fiction, and mostly come from their own lives. Thau says that's important because it gets to the heart of the matter and yields the most powerful stories.

"We are ruthless with emotional truth," she says. "If you are not buying the story because they still have unfinished business, that's a lot of what we sort out in our programs when we work with people.

"Not all that finds its way into the story but it needs to be complete to round off the story. But of course they don't have to all be sad and they can range from poignant to hilarious in one night."

Speakers at The Moth don't necessarily rehearse but they certainly workshop their stories. It's not simply about delivering a monologue, it's about telling a story with real passion so the audience connects deeply with it.

"We want the listeners to have the feeling there is a real person on stage who has felt that story. The audience is a huge part of witnessing that," Thau says.

"Some of these people are very nervous and when they feel the audience hanging on their every word or holding their breath, they can feel this energy come towards them and they come to life. And it's not just the gregarious people; we've had very shy people come into their own."

For Thau, one of the highlights of seeing a Moth show is that all the people on stage end up teaching something to their audience with their emotional truth.

The Moth started on a small island off Georgia where founder, author George Dawes Green, used to sit on his front porch

with friends and tell spellbinding stories. The glowing lights would attract moths.

Dawes moved to New York and during rounds of cocktail parties started to loathe small talk and utterings in 30-second bites. He missed the sense of connection from the porch days so he started The Moth in his Big Apple living room. That also helped him connect with the city.

In a place as big as New York City, it's your ability to be anonymous and alienated which is a curse and a blessing.

"You can be among millions of people and you don't talk to anyone and keep to yourself. That enhances the need to connect with other humans," Thau says.

"So many of forms of storytelling have become very much like theatre but The Moth keeps it as real and authentic as possible so people can connect."

The Moth is at the Octagon Theatre on Saturday. Tickets have sold out.



Word of Moth: Director Lea Thau