

Roundtable: Theatre Mavens Who Guide Storytellers

By Julio Martinez Photos: Chris Kane

LA STAGE ALLIANCE Executive Director Terence McFarland invited six representatives of the LA theatre scene who deal with storytelling in various forms. The non-traditional aspirations and goals of this sextet who gathered for lunch recently at the popular Off Vine Restaurant in Hollywood are certainly impressive and, in fact, impress each another. There is such a sense of rapt attention amongst the group as each relates his or her individual journey of theatrical discovery that the smiling, accommodating server takes awhile to get the diners to actually order food.

A sense of rapport and empathy flows freely around a table that includes storytelling mavens Stacie Chaiken (*What's the Story?*), Beverly Mickens (*Story Salon*), Ellen Switkes (*Cornucopia*), Moving Arts Artistic Director Paul Stein (*The Car Plays*), Ruskin Group Theatre producer Mike E. Myers (*L.A. Café Plays*) and Bryan Davidson, Literary Manager, The Theatre @ Boston Court.

The common theme that permeates everyone's endeavors is a desire to achieve a theatrical intimacy far deeper than could be attained by traditional production. For the three women in attendance, that very personal communication occurs when a single voice, devoid of sets, costumes and props, reveals the essence of the speaker's soul to an audience.

If there is a local earth mother figure to the theatrical art of storytelling it just might be Beverly Mickens, founder and host of *Story Salon*, Southern California's longest running, regularly performing, live storytelling ensemble. Founded in 1996, the gypsy-like troupe has performed in myriad venues, from coffeehouses to festival stages to such spaces as Raven Playhouse, Whitmore-Lindley and NoHo Arts Center.

"I started out as an actor like everybody else," Mickens admits. "Mostly what charged me into what I am doing now were my early attempts at doing standup comedy, originally in New York and then here in LA. The more I did it the more I felt constrained by the need to get laughs. I was intimidated by the format of setup/punchline. I realized my stuff didn't fall into that kind of rhythm.

"A friend of mine suggested I find a performance outlet that would allow me to simply tell stories. At the time I thought it was a crazy idea but I gave it a go. Once I started doing it, I realized how much I enjoyed not telling jokes and I was actually astonished at how relaxing and rewarding that was."

Mickens soon accumulated a small troupe of like-minded folk that started performing weekly in a North Hollywood coffeehouse. Mickens recalls, "To make sure everyone understood what the agenda was, I called these storytelling sessions 'Anything But Standup.' You could get up there and say anything you wanted, only you

couldn't tell jokes. At the time we had no idea how it was going to work out."

Today, *Story Salon* is a weekly event (currently at the Coffee Fix in Studio City) where 10 to 11 storytellers get up and do five to seven minute personal narratives. Since its inception, *Story Salon* has inspired numerous fully produced one-person shows, three books (including recently published *The Story Salon Big Book of Stories*), a CD (*The Mario Sessions*) and a series of weekly international podcasts.

"I tell the storytellers to do whatever moves them," says Mickens. "It doesn't have to be funny or important. It only has to be their original take on whatever they want to talk about. And my job is to be welcoming, embracing and encouraging, but ultimately to just get out of their way. What constantly amazes me is how much these stories reveal about the human condition. I am also struck by the reactions of the audience members. People are almost desperate for that kind of intimacy."

Nodding her head almost in rhythm to Mickens' discourse is Stacie Chaiken. "Listening to Beverly talk, I realize so much of where I now come from started with *Story Salon*. I originally came to LA from New York as an actress and I have worked in theatre, television and film, always interpreting other people's work. And I discovered I was not being fulfilled.

"In search of another creative outlet, I started writing my own story. Around that time I discovered 'Anything But Standup' and started relating these stories I had been developing. In that context I built my one-person theatre piece, *Looking for Louie*. I would try something out in front of an audience every week. When I got braver, I would sometimes improvise from mental bullet points. That is how my first play was built. I have since performed *Looking for Louie* around the world with some success."

Chaiken admits her involvement in the process of storytelling changed dramatically when she went from performer to teacher. "I began teaching acting at USC and they asked me to teach solo performance. The problem I had in doing that was I became too important to the students. I was the only mirror and the students were writing for me. I kept watching the work get less interesting and less their own."

Chaiken found her answer to this teaching dilemma when she created a group workshop of 15 aspiring undergraduate theatre students who were able to hear their words reflect off each other. She has continued the process with her weekly ongoing solo performance workshop *What's the Story?* held at the Powerhouse Theatre in Santa Monica since 2001.

"It is a nurturing process," Chaiken affirms.



Stacie Chaiken says for *What's the Story?* "People bring in the raw material and I don't care what it is as long as it means something to the student."



Paul Stein of Moving Arts: "I wanted to force intimacy and involvement on the audience on the highest scale and that is how the concept of *The Car Plays* evolved."



Ellen Switkes says *Cornucopia* performances "trigger amazing responses from audience members. It hits people at a very deep personal level."

"People bring in the raw material and I don't care what it is as long as it means something to the student. I kind of keep my hands off until I get where they want to go. Then I'll start messing with them a little and suggesting things. Mainly, I want these writers to hear their words reflect back at them so they can understand how their work is being heard and they can make the choices that will better communicate who they are and what they truly want to say."

What's the Story? weekly workshops are highlighted by monthly work-in-progress performances where the storytellers perform for invited, performer-friendly audiences.

Attention turns to Ellen Switkes who also feels compelled to pay tribute to Mickens. "There really is a community at Story Salon, a core group of people that have supported and nurtured each other for years. I would like to contrast that to *Cornucopia*, which I would call a hyper community. Also, unlike Stacy's *What's the Story?* I do not run a developmental workshop.

A former television talent coordinator and producer on *Entertainment Tonight*, Switkes is very specific about her objectives. "I have created a monthly booked show at Fran Montano's Actors Workout Studio in North Hollywood, co-produced by Phil D'Amour. I go all over town finding stories and storytellers that speak to me. Once I have the content I want, I put together a cohesive hour, a synergistic meeting of creative output. The show is rehearsed; it's polished. For the most part, the stories relate personal experiences. It is intensely intimate.

"The stories are always phenomenal and always diverse. Afterward, the audience members

invariably go up to the performers and relate how much individual stories related to their own lives. The *Cornucopia* performances always trigger amazing responses from audience members. It hits people at a very deep personal level."

Both Paul Stein and Mike E. Myers have been listening intently as the three storytelling women relate their theatrical experiences. Each admits, as directors of large membership-based theatre companies, their path to alternative theatrical ventures took a decidedly different route.

"I am involved with Moving Arts Theatre Company, a Silverlake-based ensemble which was started in 1992," says Stein. "It primarily does challenging, bold new work: LA premieres, West Coast premieres, world premieres. I joined the company as a guest director in 2002. I directed a play. The play did very well and they asked me to join the company. I was appointed artistic director in April, 2005.

It quickly became apparent to Stein the company operated in an atmosphere of results over process. Since it is a membership company, the reality was: if a member wasn't cast in a show, he or she didn't want to be involved in the process of putting on that show. "So, I began pondering how to get a large ensemble of actors to actively take part in the company as a group."

After mounting a successful workshop production of a E.M Lewis play that utilized 16 actors, relating five simultaneous storylines, helmed by four directors, Stein was satisfied the company could work as a cohesive unit, marshaled towards a single endeavor. He then turned his attention to audience development.

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"I wanted to force intimacy and involvement on the audience on the highest scale and that is how the concept of *The Car Plays* evolved. I felt it would be a great theatrical experience that would certainly involve the company and would be a great commentary on life in Los Angeles."

In May, Stein brought in writers from the company's two writing workshops as well as writers and directors who were regular members of the company. "We started throwing out ideas. The individual plays had to be written to be specifically performed in a car and no place else. We discussed the events that would happen in a car and the character motivations for these events."

Out of 46 scripted 10-minute plays submitted, Stein narrowed it down to 20. Ultimately, the project involved the efforts of 42 actors, 12 writers and 10 directors. Produced this last September, *The Car Plays* consisted of four sets of five plays, performed in individual cars. The audience would segue from car to car, with actors actually performing each work 15 times in a performance schedule that ran for four hours.

"We utilized a car hop who would take a group of 10 audience members and put two in the back seat of five individual cars," explains Stein. "The actors would get in the front seat and the action would begin with the back seat audience watching. I purposely made sure each play was

different. One play involved a father saying goodbye to his son who had just joined the army with the audience watching this exchange. One broke the fourth wall, which was a mom yelling at her kids in the back seat who just happened to be the audience members.

"The audience reactions were astounding. So many mentioned the intimacy of the event and the involvement they felt. I am amazed this whole process came out of my trying to think of a way to get the company involved and motivated; it became so much more than that."

Mike E. Myers smiles broadly while listening to Stein convey his concerns at keeping a large group of actors happy. "Ruskin Group Theatre opened in 2003 in an airplane hanger at Santa Monica Airport," he relates. "Our commission was to try to produce new playwrights and bring back neglected works from the past while doing a lot of outreach work. Our first year almost drove us crazy trying to accomplish all this. It was also very difficult to develop a company ethic that kept everybody focused and directed towards a common goal."

After tossing around a number of large scale production concepts, the idea of creating a whole series of short plays set in a café developed quite rapidly from a suggestion to a concept to a fully realized production plan, under the producing guidance of company members Myers, Erin Kelly and Michael Laurie. Myers admits their concept

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"I tell the storytellers to do whatever moves them," relates Beverly Mickens of Story Salon. "It doesn't have to be funny or important."



Bryan Davidson of The Theatre @ Boston Court: "We are artist driven and we have a developmental outlet called the New Play Festival."



was exciting but potentially dangerous.

"We decided to select a group of writers, actors and directors and give them 10 hours to develop plays that would be performed in front of an audience the same day they were created," Myers relates. "Our format begins at 9 am, every third Sunday of the month. Five writers I have recruited meet me at Back on Broadway Restaurant in Santa Monica. They have been given a theme for their play. Ten envelopes, each containing an actor's photo and resume, are provided. Each writer selects two. They are told they have to sit there in the café and write a 7 to 10 page play that takes place in a café.

"The plays are picked up at 1 pm. We then go back to the theatre. Lucky for us, right across from us is the Barker Hangar with 50,000 square feet of space. Judy Barker, who owns the hangar, is one of my best friends so any time I need unlimited rehearsal space or anything else, she finds me room.

"Each pair of actors rehearse in their own space, working with a director for five hours, memorizing the work by 6 pm. Everyone must be ready to perform by 7:30. We do a second show at 9:30. The first show is always sold out weeks in advance and the second show fills up very quickly. Audiences relate to the performances as a personal, intimate experience that has affected their own lives."

Myers is proud of the work that has been presented. "A lot of the people who have written the LA Café Plays have turned them into short stories or have utilized them to get TV work or are developing them into full plays. One writer, Laura Black, adapted her play, *A Rendezvous*, into a short film that is to be released soon.

LA Café Plays has featured a number of celebrities, including Dylan McDermott (*The Practice*), Olivia D'Abo (*The Wonder Years*) and Dan Lauria (*Jag*). "It is the only time in my theatrical career I have experienced everyone being on the same playing field," Meyers states. "You'll hear the guy in the lighting booth screaming about changed cues and assistant directors trying to figure out how to get a prop that is suddenly needed. The best thing about it the sense of community. We have five writers, five directors, 10 actors and every play has an assistant director.

"What we figured out is exactly what Paul said about the work at Moving Arts. Eliminating the result mentality and concentrating on the creation is a completely liberating process. It also has its practical side because it helps us keep our company members working and involved with the vitality of the company."

As the luncheon discussion evolves around the table, Bryan Davidson seems to be soaking up the information as if he were mentally taking

notes. "I got out of UCLA with a Masters and I wasn't much prepared to do anything," he confesses. "Through an internship I got a job with ASK Theatre Project and I stayed there for five years. In a lot of ways that was my real grad school."

Davidson relates particularly to Stacy Chaiken's evolutionary process of working with her writer/storytellers. "ASK was a non-profit project dedicated to the creation of new works," he states. "The philosophy was much about the Project's relationship with the writer over that person's career. It wasn't just about a reading. A reading was a single tool that amplified a larger approach. We also had the luxury of not having to produce anything to a ticket-buying public so there was no pressure for commercial success. The situation was rare."

Davidson, who is a successful playwright in his own right, has found great pleasure in allying himself with a number of alternative theatre projects over the years. He has performed dramaturge stints with Edgefest, the LA History Project and Native Voices at the Autry.

"For the last few seasons, I have been one of the literary managers at The Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena. We are artist driven and we have a developmental outlet called the New Play Festival. Our first one was called *Four Play*, followed by *Six Pack*. We don't have a name for the next series yet."

All six of the luncheon guests were aware that paramount to the success of their individual theatrical goals was finding an audience to consistently support their efforts. Switkes sums up her dilemma. "Actors Workout is a small space and Cornucopia only performs one monthly, yet I am very aware I am in competition with everything else that is happening in LA."

"I have to believe a particular kind of listening audience person is drawn to story tellers," interjects Mickens. "If we remain consistent, the audience will find us."

"One advantage of doing large cast projects like *The Car Plays* is a good deal of the early audiences will be made up of friends and family of the performers," interjects Stein. "We make sure patrons know they are appreciated and needed. We make sure they have that experience from the time they enter our environment."

Myers adds, "The most encouraging thing I have heard today from everyone is how much audiences have connected emotionally to the work we do. That is something people will consistently seek out. We just have to keep doing it."

The rest of the table mostly nods silently in assent. Then, dessert arrives. ■