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STAGE OF TURBULENCE Malcolm Gladwell does his signature Sideshow Bob impression.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID POLENBERG

Word of Moth

A legendary local storytelling event turns ten. By **Michael Miller**

Over the past decade, the Moth storytelling series has showcased raconteurs ranging from the well-established (Richard Price, Moby) to the somewhat obscure (hot-dog-eating champ "Hungry" Charles Hardy). The organization has branched out in the years since it started, helping high-school kids and even going on tour. But it's still best known for its performance nights—happenings, really—which are notorious for their rogue energy and droll unpredictability. On Monday 12, the Moth will celebrate its tenth birthday—with a Moth Ball, natch, hosted by comedian, author and Bush buster Andy Borowitz. He'll referee a showdown between Malcolm Gladwell and Adam Gopnik, who have no doubt been trash-talking each other in the *New Yorker* offices for weeks. In anticipation of the fete, we asked a handful of alums to reminisce about the Moth's frequently madcap events.

Philip Gourevitch, author of *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed...*: Part of the kick of the Moth, in the early years especially, was the sense that everybody was performing without a net. You'd rehearse the story, sure, but memorization was considered terminally uncool, so you were up there winging it. It was guerrilla theater. The audience didn't know what was coming—and the performers didn't quite know how it was going to come out either.

Bliss Broyard, author of *One Drop:* The first time I ever told a story at the Moth, in 1999, at the now defunct Lansky Lounge in the Lower East Side, I remember how I was standing by the bar, waiting to go on, and I thought to myself, Wow, your knees really do knock when you're nervous. But that fear and exhilaration is what makes the experience of being a storyteller and an audience member so powerful and addictive.

Gay Talese, author of *A Writer's Life:* Hell, I'm 75, I grew up when talking on the telephone was high technology, but today people are into their iPods, into their singular world of watching the screen and being on the Internet. But at the Moth, you have voices, people making eye contact. It seems so contemporary and yet so old-fashioned, and what it does is cast doubt on the notion that we're trapped in our technology.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink:* The Moth moment I will never forget was Philip Gourevitch telling a story about a woman he met in Africa. I remember feeling a rude shock when it was over and I realized that I wasn't in Africa along with him.

Philip Gourevitch: It was a story about fighting a duel over a woman named Fatima—a duel with pistols, of course, on a beach in Togo. George Plimpton was the MC, and he kept playing this little flute and trying to charm a nonexistent snake. The last thing I remember seeing on stage was [actor] Andre Gregory tearing his own shirt off for reasons not immediately apparent.

Jonathan Ames, author of *Wake Up, Sir!:* One of my best Moth memories occurred back in 1999. We were having a show at BAM and George Plimpton was hosting. I was scheduled to do an improvised story, and it was time for Mr. Plimpton, whom I had never met but greatly admired, to bring me to the stage. He said into the microphone: "What a lot of people don't know is that my middle name is Ames. I'm George Ames Plimpton, and I think the next storyteller is a long-lost cousin of mine.... So please welcome to the stage my cousin Jonathan Ames!" Well, I was shocked. The incredibly famous George Plimpton was claiming to be related to me, but I knew this couldn't be. I'm as Jewish as a piece of matzo and Plimpton was as Waspy as a blue blazer at a coast-of-Maine cocktail party. I ambled up to the stage and said into the microphone, "What a lot of people don't know is that my middle name is Plimpton. I'm Jonathan Plimpton Ames." It doesn't seem so funny now, but at the time there was a great roar of laughter and George Plimpton smiled beatifically, and after that we became very good friends, though we never became cousins.

"Plimpton was onstage playing a flute, charming a nonexistent snake."

Dan Kennedy, author of *Loser Goes First:* I remember being at a Moth party in 2004 when Malcolm Gladwell's hair caught fire in the kitchen. I remember Buck Henry hitting on my girlfriend. I remember sharing a stage with everyone from Lewis Lapham to a wickedly funny reformed pickpocket named O.T.

Melissa Bank, author of *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing:* I'd been worried about the telling part—the performance—which turned out to be almost beside the point. The point was the story itself. [Moth executive producer] Lea Thau helped me find the emotional truth and narrative coherence in an experience that had haunted me for years. Who can ever do that for somebody else? It was sort of a miracle.

The Moth Ball is on Mon 12 (see listings). For a longer version of this article, go to timeoutnewyork.com.