

The tell-tale art

The annual SKALD competition brings the art of storytelling out of the dark ages and onto the stage. By **Gretchen Kalwinski** Photograph by **Calbee Booth**

Back in the days of Vikings, *skald* was a term for someone who told stories and performed poetry in exchange for jewels, cash and other booty. Evidently, human nature hasn't changed much in the past few centuries: The annual SKALD storytelling competition, which offers such modern treasures as a \$150 gift certificate from Borders and \$250 in cash, has grown so popular that even the City of Chicago wants to get in on the action.

SKALD was born out of a 1999 WNEP Theater (a theater and comedy troupe) audition in which an actor told a two-minute story instead of performing the usual monologue or scene, WNEP's founding director Don Hall recounts. These auditions were so entertaining, and company members were so eager to do it again, that storytelling quickly became its own show, SKALD. "In fact, most wanted to do it once a month," Hall says. "I knew then that the concept had legs and decided to make it an annual thing."

In past years, stories performed ranged from the irreverent—like the one about a man who gets a desk coffeemaker and becomes the office stud—to the creepy, like "a school janitor who

used a classroom doll to... pleasure himself," recalls SKALD competitor Rebecca Langguth. "It sounds darkly funny, but was heartbreaking." Hall's favorite story was performed by Jonathan Pitts about Pitts's father David (an Ice Capades performer who skated

yet. The city sponsorship means SKALD's program is greatly expanded from last year, so this event includes more than the big storytelling competition on July 29. There's also the MAELSTROM contest on July 28 (see sidebar), in which competitors are given ten seconds to

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with a chimpanzee named Spanky), and the duo's encounter with a serial killer. "It was a true story, and Pitts showed the audience a blowup of the 1960s newspaper article at the end of his tale," Hall says.

At this year's SKALD, Hall hopes WNEP's new partnership with the city's Department of Cultural Affairs will lead to its biggest turnout

create a three-minute story based on audience prompts. Young'uns will hear some tales at KIDSKALD, and a panel composed of storytelling experts such as Leah Guenther, executive director of Dave Eggers's 826CHI writing program, and Greg Allen, the founding director of the Neo-Futurists. In addition, Hall will lead free workshops for adults while WNEP



STAND AND DELIVER Scot Goodhart, from left, Mike Rosolio and Michael Brownlee are among the six contestants who will square off at this year's MAELSTROM.

member Jessica Rogers teaches kids on Monday 24 and Tuesday 25.

In past years, competitors were admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, but this year's high demand forced Hall to hold auditions. "We whittled it down to the best 16—six for MAELSTROM and ten for the [main] SKALD competition," he says. SKALD contestants have six weeks to prepare their story, and Langguth says she plans to use every moment until then. "Last time I participated [in 2001], I practiced with an egg timer," she says.

She also almost passed out from nerves. "I can still remember pulling the host aside and telling him that I didn't think I could go on," Langguth says. "Five years later, you'd think I'd have some kind of calm, but just thinking about it makes me nauseous. Maybe that's what makes it such a wonder of a thing. Folks standing up and sharing something of themselves. It's very intimate, in a way."

SKALD is about sharing stories, but it also involves competition. Yet Langguth's got nothing but love for other participants: "Every year, there are new stories that break your heart or make you bust a gut. Last year, [eventual winner] Brad Norman told a fantastic story about a man who likes to bake. He made the most delicious chocolate-and-peanut-butter cake, and shared it with the audience afterwards."

When asked about how she plans to demolish these other talented competitors, Langguth says, "It's not about annihilation. I really want everyone to tell the best story, if only for my own entertainment."

But then she quickly adds, "Don't get me wrong—I want to win! Badly!"

Just goes to show that things haven't changed that much in the past few centuries: People still rally when booty is involved.

SKALD's story time runs from Monday 24 to July 29. For more details, visit www.wneptheater.org/_html/skald7.html.

Stories on the spot

How good are this year's MAELSTROM contenders? We gave four of them an idea and 10 seconds to improvise the beginning of a tale for us.

Competitor: Scot Goodhart

Suggestion: "Cigarettes on the beach"
Chrissie goes to the beach to "get fucked up." The idea was that she and James would fill a Styrofoam cooler with Natural Light Ice and Marlboro Mediums, then take the 78 to the beach. They've been together for two months; he just moved in with Chrissie and her daughter Kaytlyn, who's not his. The first thing I heard Chrissie say was, "It's God's fucking ashtray is why!" just before she swung at the guy confronting her about where she was depositing her butts. The last thing I heard her say as she was placed in the patrol car was, "I just wanted to get fucked up."

Competitor: Mike Rosolio

Suggestion: "Antlers"
There are a few circumstances that no one, no matter how battle-hardened and worldwise, can be totally prepared to deal with. One of these is waking up in a foreign country. The world makes so much sense when you're stationed in a log cabin-themed hotel in Seattle, and the clarity and comfort found there enhance the stark contrast of stepping off of a train car, blurry eyed from sleep deprivation and \$2 mojitos, expecting to see the San Francisco Bay and finding instead the cruel beauty of British Columbia. While there wasn't actually any danger of being detained against my will, and I was able to find a ticket back to the Golden State within a few hours, the point

is instantly made that the future, no matter how scheduled it seems to be, is impossible to know, and that it might be among the wishes of fate to deliver you to the land of socialized medicine.

Competitor: Michael Brownlee

Suggestion: "Breakneck"
Samantha's aching lungs fought to pull in enough oxygen to keep up with her pumping legs. "Faster. I need to go faster." The footsteps behind her were closing in quick. She lowered her head and pushed herself harder. She could hear the panting breaths of her pursuer. She arched her back and lunged for safety. It was too late. She felt the hot hand on her back and cringed as she heard those awful, breathless words: "Tag. You're it."

Competitor: Cholley Kuhaneck

Suggestion: "The postman rings twice"
I don't like getting mail. This offends my mail carrier. He tried marking all my mail RETURN TO SENDER. I was happy to see it go. He stuffed anything that was not addressed to anyone in particular in my mailbox. It backfired on him. He now had to move beyond Newtonian physics to make everything fit. Finally, he put my mail in everyone else's mailboxes. All night my neighbors came by with pieces of mail for me. I put a note in my mailbox. "I promise I'll get my mail weekly." He left a note, "Write it a hundred times."—GK