

**Rain City Chronicles: Storytelling and Authenticity in Vancouver, BC**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis folkloristically examines a Vancouver-based storytelling night called “Rain City Chronicles,” founded in 2009. Specifically, this thesis examines issues of the performance of truth in storytelling, as well as the folk aesthetic of the event – in particular, what makes a “good story.” Stories at Rain City are supposed to be “true” and “personal,” and therefore fall into the category of personal experience narratives. Through narrative analysis and interviews of past storytellers, I determine that the most memorable Rain City storytellers use humor, authenticity, and storytelling skill to connect with the audience. Ultimately, I show that Rain City narratives have much in common with contemporary legends, as well as with folktale and stand-up comedy.

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## Chapter One: Introduction, Methodology, and Terms

Cloth pennants loop across a simple stage. A lone microphone stands under a warm spotlight. Christmas lights criss-cross the ceiling, casting a friendly glow, while audience members pack together like sardines in a tin. The room is dim, cozy, and thrumming with anticipation. Later, a girl with orange hair will take the stage and tell the halting story of her experience with an online predator. This is Rain City Chronicles.

Rain City Chronicles is a storytelling night founded by Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp in December 2009, and as of 2014 co-hosted by Karp (a marketing and communications professional) and Cory Ashworth (past morning host of the Vancouver radio show, 102.7 The Peak, and currently writing for the *Huffington Post*). The stories told at Rain City Chronicles (henceforth referred to using the emic nickname, "Rain City") are supposed to be true and personal, and follow the theme that Karp and Ashworth have chosen for the evening ("Family Matters," "Animal Instincts," etc). The mandate of Rain City, as published on the home page of its website ([raincitychronicles.com](http://raincitychronicles.com)), is "to create a space for a diverse collection of Vancouverites to share true, personal stories alongside live musical performances, inspired food and drink, and a few surprises." From the outset, Rain City was envisioned as a place where disparate but locally situated people could connect.

Rain City Chronicles now takes place every few months, or whenever the organizers – both of whom have day jobs – find the time to put a show together. Shows are themed, and stories must be submitted to, or discussed and workshopped with, the organizers prior to each show (see "Tell a Story" on [raincitychronicles.com](http://raincitychronicles.com), where

potential storytellers are asked to give their “story pitch” in 500 words). Stories must be true, and should be tied back to the theme of the show. To ensure that stories would flow well, Pinchin created a page of “Storytelling Tips,” subtitled “Highly Required Reading For Future Storytellers” (see Appendix 3 for the full text of this document). Tips include “don’t rant,” “keep the story under seven minutes,” “develop and practice your narrative arc,” etc. Cory Ashworth and Lizzy Karp are the careful curators of each event, ensuring that the stories are interesting, that their tellers know how to tell them, and that the line-up of stories flows well, so that (for example) two similar stories do not follow on each other's heels. It is also important to Karp that there be musical guests. Karp loves live music, and from the outset, she wanted there to be a live musical component to Rain City. She felt that music offers exactly the kind of break the audience needs at an event like Rain City (Karp F2012).<sup>1</sup> After listening to several stories in a row, the audience is ready for a mental break in the form of a musical interlude. For this reason, there are usually two musical guests at each Rain City event: one before the intermission, and one to close the show. In order to limit my scope, I will not be exploring the musical element of Rain City in this thesis. My focus throughout this thesis is on narratives and their performance.

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<sup>1</sup>The reference information for my interviews is listed both in the References section, and in Appendix One: Fieldwork Sources. In Appendix One, dates are listed using the format F2012 (2012 is the year, F is for Fieldwork). To help the reader to easily distinguish between published sources and fieldwork sources, wherever I cite portions of my interviews in the body text of my thesis, I will follow the format as listed in Appendix One, e.g. (Ashworth F2013).

The story of Rain City will be elaborated in Chapter Two, but it is useful to begin with an understanding of its origins. In 2009, Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp – who at the time did not know each other – had independently moved to Vancouver from Ontario, and were finding it difficult to settle into the Vancouver community. To address their frustration at this relative isolation, and to connect some interesting people they had met, they decided to create a one-time event. At this event, their friends would get up on stage and tell a personal story on the theme of "Firsts," thereby getting to know one another and forming a network of interesting people. The first Rain City Chronicles was held on December 1, 2009, at Little Mountain Gallery – a small art gallery just off Main Street in Vancouver (see Fig. 1 for event poster).

Many of my informants (e.g. Amanda McCuaig, for which see McCuaig F2012) described this first Rain City Chronicles as a comfortable, living-room environment, where it seemed natural to share stories with one another. Pinchin and Karp thought it would be fun to sell tickets (five dollars apiece) and make it a public event. They put a lot of work into the venue to make it feel homey, carefully decorating the venue to make it feel more intimate, and brewing homemade apple cider. However, despite their hard work, they never expected the event to be so successful. They still marvel that by the time the show started, there was standing room only.

The first Rain City show I attended was the "Family Matters" show, at the Waldorf Hotel on March 30, 2011 (see Fig. 2 for event poster). The Waldorf is an old bar and now cultural venue in East Vancouver. As I descended into the basement, I remember thinking "What have I got myself into?" At the bottom of the stairs was a dark, tiny

theatre, where I squeezed into a folding chair in rows so close together my knees pressed up against the seat in front of me. Before the show began, I wondered how I was going to get through it.

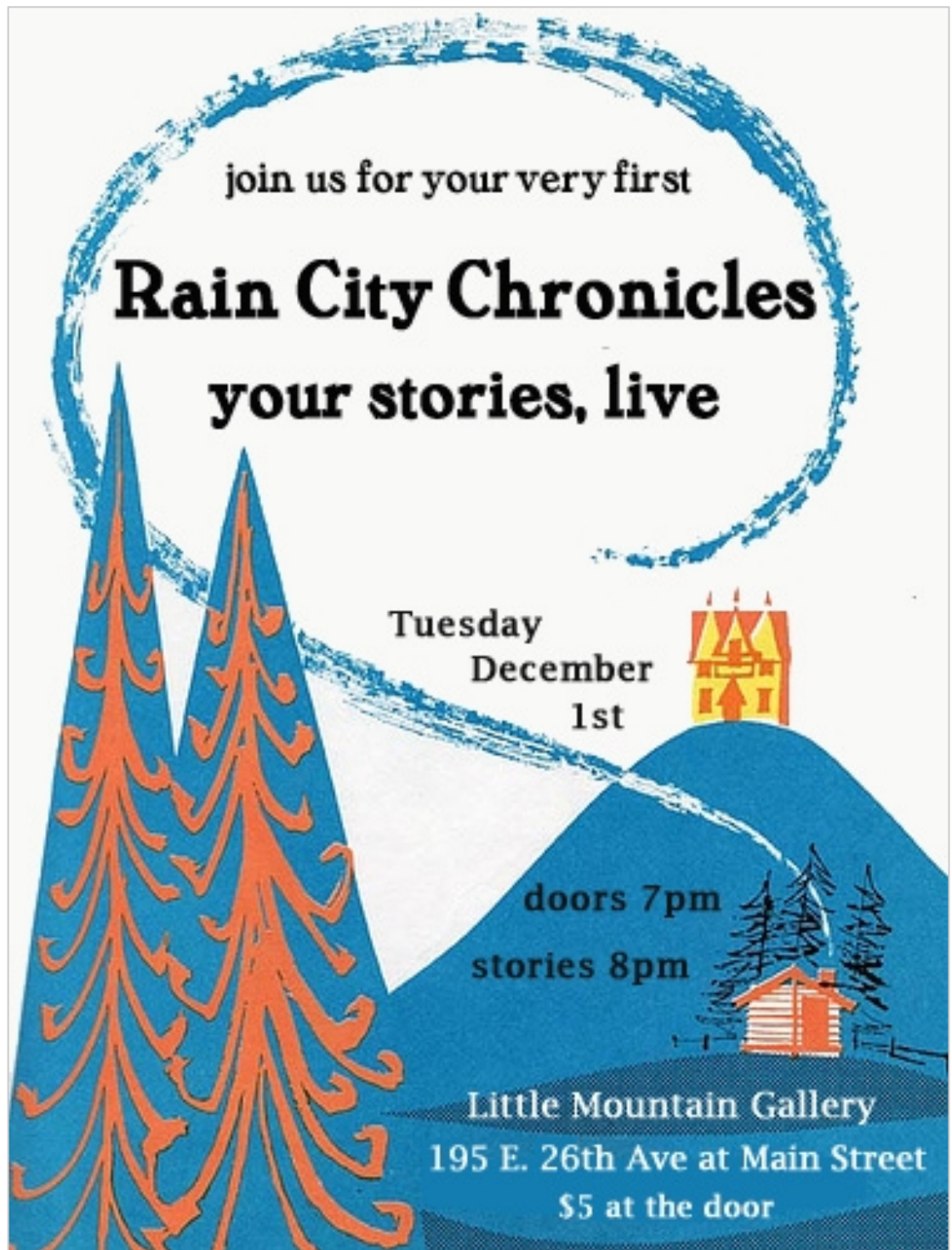


Figure 1: Poster for the first Rain City show



Figure 2: Poster for the "Family Matters" show

From my seat, I took in my surroundings: white holiday lights twinkled on the ceiling; a cloth pennant looped gracefully across the stage; on stage there was a single microphone. When it was time for the show to begin, Lizzy Karp and Karen Pinchin introduced themselves as hosts of the evening. They then introduced their first storyteller – and the event had begun. At this show, I heard stories that made me laugh, and stories that made my eyes well up with tears. I heard a story of a blind man's trip to Texas for a Rattlesnake Roundup – a trip his brother had taken him on, because it would be more “tactile” than a trip to the museum – and laughed until I cried. And then I heard a story of a man's struggle with his sexuality in the face of family pressure, realizing only afterwards that his entire family was right there in the audience to support him. I heard a graphic story of a girl, self-proclaimed “black sheep” of the family, whose “family” in the aftermath of a recent invasive surgery had been her friends. These people bared their souls on that stage. They told an audience of strangers details that many people would not tell their own families.

The most immediate personal effect of attending Rain City was that I felt closer to everyone around me (especially and quite literally the other audience members). I walked away with a deepened sense of the community in Vancouver. Whereas I used to walk through a crowd and see a crowd, now I walked through a crowd and saw hundreds of faces with stories behind them. True stories, compelling stories – stories to make you laugh, and stories to make you cry. Every face I looked into for months after Rain City gave me this impression. To use a recent coinage from the Dictionary of Obscure

Sorrows (an online “compendium of invented words written by John Koenig”), I had had a “sonder.”<sup>2</sup>

When I began my master's research on Rain City, I thought I would find that others, like me, had walked away from Rain City with a more profound sense of the Vancouver community. I thought that perhaps for people less shy than I am, Rain City might be a place where people make new acquaintances. Indeed I found that for some, Rain City Chronicles has been a primary and necessary means of connecting with people. Cory Ashworth found Rain City to be an excellent place to meet new people:

That's the other thing, is like – when I look back at when I started going to Rain City, and NOW – it's like, literally half the storytellers that I went and saw – are obviously Lizzy's friends – but now they're MY friends, too, and it's just so weird, you know? (Ashworth F2013)

However, the more I talked to past storytellers and audience members, the more it became clear to me that the majority of people I spoke with already knew each other. Many attendees are artists, journalists, musicians, comedians, or close friends of the above. Amanda McCuaig, an artist in her early thirties, pointed out to me that the same people who attend Rain City also attend the other artistic events in the city.

The people you see at Rain City are the people you see at Talent Time, are the people you see at music shows, are the people who all go to the same weddings...part of it is it's a Creative Class, so we're all sort of in the same places, so that hub is quite small. There's 150 of us in our group, I would estimate, that I

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<sup>2</sup> Sonder: n. the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk. (The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows 2012)



see all the time. We're in a city of 600,000 people! [*laughing*] Where is everyone else? (McCuaig F2012)

McCuaig's point has led me to realize that while a Rain City show is a good evening to hear true stories from interesting people, it is not necessarily a venue for expanding one's own community or circle of friends. Rather, it is a venue for an existing network – the "Creative Class" of Vancouver (the term McCuaig used to describe her social group, before verbally citing Florida 2002 to me)– to get together and catch up with one another. My initial research question, then ("how does attending a Rain City show affect people's experience of the wider Vancouver community?") did not grab the imaginations of my informants. Instead, we spent a good deal of time talking about what makes a "good story," and what makes the Rain City experience so special. These concerns became a focus for this thesis.

My primary research question has since become: what exactly *is* a Rain City narrative? Beyond classifying it as a "personal narrative," how can I classify it as a folkloric genre?

### **The Personal Experience Narrative genre**

According to Sandra Dolby, one of the foremost scholars on personal experience narrative, the personal experience narrative (here often referred to as the "personal narrative") is "a prose narrative relating a personal experience, usually told in the first person, and containing non-traditional content. . . based on an actual event" (Dolby 1996, 556-7). That is to say, personal experience narratives (as distinct from folktales, for example) depict events that actually happened in the lived experience of the teller. These events may include

an amusing incident from the teller's childhood, a school or work experience, a once-embarrassing social mishap that time has turned into a humorous *faux pas*, perhaps an encounter with the supernatural or unexplainable, or maybe a painful lesson in the proverbial school of hard knocks. (Dolby 1983, 268)

Indeed, these are the topics explored by Rain City storytellers.

Nevertheless, according to Randal Allison, personal experience narratives are “consciously constructed” and “follow accepted norms for traditional performance, such as form, function, or style” (Allison 1997). Personal experience narratives report single events, are usually secular, and serve one of three functions: to entertain, to warn, and to present some aspect of the storyteller's character or personal values (Dolby 1996, 557).

As I discuss later in this thesis, one of the main functions of a Rain City narrative is entertainment. However, many stories also function as warnings – for instance, a warning never to turn one's back on a frightened bear (8-Buchanan P2012), or a reminder to ask questions before moving into a heritage building (7-O'Neill P2012).<sup>3</sup> Even these warnings, however, are presented in a humorous light.

One additional function performed by Rain City narratives is discussed in Chapter Five: Rain City narratives help audience members to feel seen and understood, merely through the honest recounting of lived experience. In this way, the personal narratives told at Rain City encourage the audience to relate to the storyteller, and vice versa. This often unspoken dialogue between audience and storyteller creates a sense of connection that is very valuable to Vancouverites in their twenties and thirties (see Chapter Two).

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix Two gives a comprehensive list of podcast titles, dates, and storytellers. In what follows, the citation “(7-Johannesen P2012)” refers the reader to Appendix Three, Item #7 (Under the Influence, June 29, 2012), Shauna Johannesen. I have prefixed the date, in this case 2012, with the letter P, to indicate “Podcast material.” I hope that this will help the reader to more easily distinguish between secondary sources (2012), primary fieldwork materials (F2012), and podcast materials (P2012).

In fact, Sandra Dolby notes that “perhaps the most telling function [of personal narratives] is that they invite intimacy, a chance for the teller and the listener to know each other better” (Dolby 1996, 558). While the storyteller’s sense of humor can protect him or her (a phenomenon we return to in Chapter Four), the storyteller may be speaking from an emotionally vulnerable place (Dolby 1983, 274). It is this emotional vulnerability that makes the personal narrative so inviting and engaging: “The conventions of the story make self-revelation acceptable and entertaining, but the courage of the storyteller in articulating usually covert values makes the storytelling an engaging experience” (Dolby 1983, 274).

Prior to the work of Dolby, the personal experience narrative was largely ignored as a folkloric genre, seen as less “traditional” than the other folklore genres, and less pertinent to a study of “the folk.” From the late 1970s to the 1990s (see Dolby 1977; Dolby 1983; Dolby 1989; Dolby 1996), Sandra Dolby argued that “the form, style, and function of such stories are consistent from story to the next. Thus, one can argue that the genre itself is traditional” (Dolby 1996, 557). Allison adds that “few other forms of narrative expression can provide the same depth of revelation of the social life of a community as can the personal experience narratives of its members” (Allison 1997, 636). Furthermore, “as performances, these narratives reflect what is important to the group in terms of performance style, narrative content, and social concerns and norms of the group” (Allison 1997, 636). Dolby would agree, noting that “ethical values, personal goals and hopes, dominant themes and guiding principles – all of these covert but dynamic forces are hidden in these unassuming, everyday tales” (Dolby 1983, 275). I am fortunate to be writing this thesis at a time when I do not have to defend my attention to

this valuable genre – a genre that can be performed by any group member and which reveals

more of the day-to-day realities of group standards than other traditional narrative forms in that they are drawn from (or at least alleged to be drawn from) the real experiences of their performers in the present, rather than from the near or distant past life of the group or its legendary figures. (Allison 1997, 637)

In addition to its own content and functions, the personal narrative also has its own form. In Chapter Three, I discuss and expand on the significant contributions of another important scholar, William Labov, to our understanding and close analysis of the personal narrative form. For now, suffice it to say that the personal narrative form is distinguished by the following four elements:

1. Use of standardized opening / closing phrases
2. A setting or frame for the story (Labov's "abstract" [see Labov 2013, 27])
3. A moral (or in some cases Labov's "coda" [see Labov 2013, 32])
4. Humor.

### **The Contemporary Legend genre**

Later in this thesis, I will suggest that the personal narratives told at Rain City are similar in form and function to the contemporary legend genre. Consequently, the contemporary legend genre deserves some attention here. In what follows, I summarize the overview of contemporary legend research presented in Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith's *Contemporary Legend: A Reader*.

Contemporary legends have been a subject of folkloristic analysis since at least the mid-1800s in Britain (Bennett and Smith 1996, xxiv). In the early 1900s, scholars began to notice a "new" folk narrative, which by the 1930s was widely known as "newspaper

folklore” (xxvi). Indeed, also in the 1930s, Alexander Woolcott published a “Shouts and Murmurs” column in *The New Yorker* – a column featuring an “almost endless stream of supernatural, bizarre and humorous narratives” (xxvi). Woolcott noticed that certain narratives, such as the “Vanishing Lady” story, were told by many different people in different places. He noted that each teller believed the story to be true, and claimed to have heard it from a friend of a friend (xxvii-xxviii).

Stith Thompson’s *Motif Index of Folk Literature* appeared in 1932, and included motifs that have since been recognized in contemporary legends. These included G60 “Human flesh eaten unwillingly” and N334 “Accidental fatal ending of game or joke” (Bennett and Smith xxix). Motif E332.3.3.1, “The Vanishing Hitchhiker,” appeared in the revised index in 1958.

Throughout the 1960s, scholars added to the list of story motifs. In 1971, Linda Dégh argued that contemporary legends are in fact “traditional” insofar as they “reflect age-old concerns” (Bennett and Smith xxxi, summarizing Dégh 1971). The thrust of Dégh’s argument, as summarized by Bennett and Smith, was that “the heart of a legend is belief, not text, and therefore esthetic considerations should not be a criterion by which it is judged” (Bennett and Smith xxxi). Bennett and Smith call Dégh’s essay – entitled “The ‘belief legend’ in modern society: Form, function, and relationship to other genres” – “the single most decisive contribution in defining contemporary legend for that generation of scholars” (xxxix).

Also in 1971, Alan Dundes presented his paper, “On the Psychology of Legend.” Dundes called on scholars to focus more on the modes and purposes of legend transmission than on the collection and classification of motifs (Dundes 1971). Dundes

challenged the academic community to determine the significance and relevance of contemporary legend “with respect to the ultimate goal of understanding the nature of man” (Dundes 1971, 21).

In 1981, Jan Harold Brunvand published *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, which was widely read by scholars and the public alike. Soon afterwards, the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) was founded. Since the 1980s, there has been an “explosion in the number of legend anthologies” (Bennett and Smith xxxv).

In 1998, Jan Harold Brunvand defined legends as “stories regarded by their tellers as true...[They are] generally secular and are set in the less remote past in a conventional earthly locale” (Brunvand 1998, 196). He accounted for the popularity of what he calls “urban legends” by listing the following three elements: a suspenseful and humorous storyline, an element of actual belief, and a warning or moral (205). Incidentally, in my research on Rain City, all three of these factors were listed by at least one informant as being factors that contribute to a “good story.”

Bennett and Smith note that around 1990, the folklorists, anthropologists, and psychologists already studying contemporary legend were joined by sociologists interested in collective behavior (xxxvi). The sociologists brought with them new approaches to contemporary legend, especially social functionalism (xxxvii). Since that time, there has been a fundamental divide in the contemporary legend scholarship between those who are primarily interested in the history and narrative features of the legend, and those who are primarily interested in the belief element – those who look for social/psychological meanings and contexts (xxvii-xxviii). In this thesis, I explore perspectives from both sides of the divide, since my informants indicated to me that Rain

City narratives are distinguished both by their narrative elements and by an element of truth or belief.

According to Paul Smith, contemporary legends are

Primarily nonsupernatural, secular narratives that are set in the real world. Told as if they happened recently, they focus on ordinary individuals in familiar places, and they portray situations that are perceived as important by the narrators and listeners alike – situations that the performers and their audiences may have experienced, are currently experiencing, or could possibly experience. As such, they describe plausible, ordinary situations and events, although often with an unusual twist. (Smith 1997, 493)

Smith adds that some common themes include warnings, accidents, pleasant surprises, embarrassing situations, and out-of-luck stories – all themes explored at Rain City (Smith 1997, 494). Furthermore, contemporary legends are presented as being true stories, and Smith contends that some may in fact be true – “not necessarily literally true but containing a truth that comes from typifying life in the current century” (Smith 1997, 494). Whatever the case, truth is actively negotiated by tellers and listeners, who either support the narrator’s statement of belief or reject it. Contemporary legends serve multiple functions, including the delivery of moral messages, and the justification of “why we behave in particular ways in certain situations” (Smith 1997, 494). Finally, contemporary legends “allow us to express our fears, provide commentary and explanations of abnormal situations or strange behavior, or warn against involvement in particular types of situations” (Smith 1997, 494). All of the above characteristics of the contemporary legend can be applied to the Rain City personal narratives.

Before I continue, I must introduce, explore, and define one further term that arises in my analysis. The term is “authenticity.” Because my informants used words like “authentic” and “real” in their interviews, and because the “authenticity” of a storyteller

was very important to the Rain City audience, this term has become significant enough for me to explore it in lengthy and careful detail. In so doing, I demonstrate my understanding that “authenticity” is not a straightforward word, nor a throwaway word, but rather a word with a long, fraught history. I use the term consciously in my analysis.

### **Authenticity: Not a folklorist’s favorite word**

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is derived from the ancient Greek *αὐθέντης* (authentes), meaning generally "perpetrator," "author" or "doer," with the strong connotation of "murderer" (Liddell and Scott 1940). Liddell and Scott had earlier defined *αὐθέντης* as "one who does anything with his own hand" (Liddell and Scott 1889).

From the same root as *αὐθέντης* comes *αὐθεντία* (authentia), also relevant for our purposes according to the OED. *Αὐθεντία* denotes "absolute sway, authority" (Liddell and Scott 1940). Words in the ancient Greek lexicon beginning with the same root (*αὐθεντ-*) convey a similar meaning – consider *αὐθεντικός* (authentikos – warranted, principal, authoritative) and *αὐθεντέω* (authenteo – to have full power or authority over).

It is interesting to note that many of the words cited by the OED as ancestral to our "authenticity" are derived from legal documents with a concern for "authentication." However, a study of the Greek lexicon reveals several other words beginning with the root *αὐθ-* which come closer to the meaning which I (and my informants at Rain City) attach to the word. Consider *αὐθομολογέομαι* (authomologeomai – to confess of oneself), *αὐθομολογούμενον* (authomologoumenon – a thing that speaks for itself), *αὐθάγιος* (authagios – absolutely holy). This of course is no justification for using the word this



way in the discussion to follow, for naturally the only version of the word worthy of discussion here is the one arising from the Rain City context. However, one wonders how much of the sense of the word the OED has lost by its focus on the written historical record.

From the Greek was derived the Latin *authenticus*, used in the 2nd century AD to denote documents that were "original." By the 3rd century AD, Tertullian used the term to denote something that was "true."

During the Middle Ages there arose a concern in the Christian world for relics – objects of veneration that supposedly had some direct link to a holy person. It was very important to know that these objects be "authentic" in order to believe that they were imbued with supernatural powers (for example the power to heal). If the holiness of an object was questioned, the Holy See could check records to find "Incontrovertible official validation of sacred status," based partly on the known origins of the object, and partly on the miracles the object had performed in the past (Lindholm 2008, 14-15).

By the 12th century the word *authenticus* could denote something authoritative or legally valid. From this Latin sense came the concurrent Middle French *authentique* and Anglo-Norman *authentique* (authoritative, especially with reference to a legal document). By 1375 or so, we find that not only a thing, but also a person can be referred to in English as authentic – that is to say, legally or duly qualified, or in some other way "genuine."

In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the expansion of print culture and mechanically-produced goods, consumers began to value goods that were unique – seemingly more genuine, more wholesome, more connected to a particular artist (Milnes

and Sinanan 2010, 2-3; Lodge 2010, 185). This concern with origins persists in the art world today: "Authentic art objects are original, real, and pure; they are what they purport to be, their provenance and authorship are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one" (Lindholm 2008, 16).

At the same time, a group of philosophers including Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and the theologian Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) developed the notion that not only were pre-industrial goods more pure and real, but so were pre-industrial people. This notion extended to children and "primitive" people – people who seemed more in touch with their inner emotional lives. Rousseau believed that you were only living if you were directly experiencing authentic feeling (Lindholm 2008, 8), and thus perceived emotional rawness of children and "primitive" cultural groups to be a sign of their pure, primal, and thereby superior being. According to anthropologist Charles Lindholm, "Rousseau's Confessions were the harbinger of a new ideal in which exploring and revealing one's essential nature was taken as an absolute good, even if this meant flying in the face of the moral standards of society" (Lindholm 2008, 8).

For his own part, Herder favored art, particularly poetry, which seemed to spring from this "natural" place. He called such poetry *Naturpoesie*, and identified *Empfindsamkeit* (responsiveness to sentiment) as being exemplified by the "folk" (Bendix 1997, 29). Herder certainly condescended to the folk, but he admired them; he was not anti-Semitic and he would sooner celebrate an ethnic minority than subdue it. Indeed, at one time Herder wrote, "National pride is absurd, ridiculous, and harmful. But love for one's nation is duty for everyone" (Herder 1877-1913, 32:519; translation by Regina Bendix [Bendix 1997, 41]). Herder was interested in various groups which he perceived

to be more authentic than European city culture. These included the Hindu people of India (Herder was responsible for an orientalist Romantic vision of India at this time) and especially the more pastoral people of his own country, Germany (Bendix 1997, 35).

In the early nineteenth century, Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1787-1859) Grimm began traveling around Germany collecting *Märchen* – fairy tales – from these pastoral people: stories which they felt were innocent, pure, and authentically German (Bendix 1997, 51). "[The Grimms] searched for an authenticity lodged in the past that would nourish and educate their compatriots' present and future with the purity of a German spirit of the past" (Bendix 1997, 59-60). Notably, the Grimms were interested in uncovering an "anonymous or collective authenticity" as opposed to an individual, authorial one (Bendix 1997, 67).

By the mid-20th century, in what Lionel Trilling has called the "great refusal of human connection" (Trilling 1974, 71), existentialist philosophers Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) took authenticity on a sharp introspective turn. Heidegger felt that people were stuck in an "everyday feeling" (*Alltaglichkeit*) which prevented them from living a life of sensitivity in what he called *eigentlichkeit* (loosely translated as "own feeling") (Bendix 1997, 18). Sartre felt that his adult struggle to become "civilized" had betrayed his true inner self, and so he turned inwards to explore his being. These ideas of authenticity are so personal as to be asocial, and have been criticized for causing adherents to withdraw from society (Bendix 1997, 19).

Unfortunately, by the mid-1900s, some thinkers on authenticity (such as Heidegger, himself a member of the Nazi Party who did not practice what he preached) looked further back, becoming narrowly and overly fixated on Herder's concept of the national

"authentic," as well as its inferred opposite: the inauthentic. Lindholm has pointed out that "through participation in the united congregation," the nation-state can provide humanity with potent feelings of transcendence and deeper reality (Lindholm 2008, 98-99). However, "[a]ssertion of a primordial authenticity of blood has provided the rationale for nationalistic, ethnic, racial, religious, or tribal anti-modernist and anti-universalistic social movements everywhere, often with dire consequences" (Lindholm 2008, 111). Herder had long before warned of the dangers of nationalism, and sure enough, by the 1930s in Germany, nationalism had become a serious issue. Certain individuals, it was argued, did not fit into the image of Germany's "pure" and "authentic" past, and would have to be removed if Germany was to return to its supposedly "pure" state (Lindholm 2008, 102-103). This unwelcome crowd included immigrant ethnic minorities, such as the Jewish people, who were systematically rooted out and exterminated. What seems to us now the coldest and most horrible of crimes must have seemed at one time a reasonable method of returning a nation to an "authentic" state. And it is largely because of the role that folklore played in this crime that the word "authenticity" is so loaded and so painful to our discipline today.

Thus have I come to understand that the "authentic" has been used by various people at various times to gain power and cause pain. When I made my first academic lunge into folklore studies, however, I was unaware of the baggage of this concept. I had only ever thought of the "real" or "authentic" as a word denoting intense feeling – the feeling that you are in touch with something larger than yourself, and yet something so intimate and personal as to make you feel you have identity and belonging just by grasping it. Bendix calls this a "quality of experience" that includes "the chills running

down one's spine during musical performances. . . moments that may stir one to tears, laughter, elation. . ." (Bendix 1997, 13). I believe that it is in this very experiential sense that my informants at Rain City Chronicles understand the "authentic" – the "real," the "genuine," the "true." Where I use these words, I use them in full understanding of their baggage, and yet I intend to reclaim them. For the experience that these words denote, and the beautiful things that can happen in pursuit of them, must be explored, and must be explored by folklore studies. "The greatest strength of folklore studies is the perennial finger they hold to the pulse of what human beings, through their expressive culture, crave or fear most deeply" (Bendix 1997, 21). I pursue the authentic as honestly as I believe many before me have pursued it, and I hope that the following discussion can help to redefine and reclaim a loaded word still in popular use today.

### **Authenticity: Current Understandings**

Many have tried to define authenticity in terms of its history; others explore authenticity in terms of the desires that motivate people to seek it. In *Culture and authenticity*, Lindholm traces the origins of the modern sense of the word, thus trying to pin down what authenticity *is* (see above), while also noting what authenticity *does*: "Authenticity gathers people together in collectives that are felt to be real, essential, and vital, providing participants with meaning, unity, and a surpassing sense of belonging" (Lindholm 2008, 1). This, surely, is the more productive approach to the topic; after all, Bendix states, "the crucial questions to be answered are not, 'what is authenticity?' but 'who needs authenticity and why?' and 'how has authenticity been used?'" (Bendix 1997, 21). Lindholm notes that throughout history and across cultures, human beings "have

sought refuge and inspiration in their own pursuits of authentic being" (Lindholm 2008, 2), and Bendix agrees that "the search for authenticity is fundamentally an emotional and moral quest" (Bendix 1997, 7). This pursuit can become dangerous, when, desperate for "real feeling," a person takes personal risks such as sky diving, white-water rafting, or unprotected sex with an exotic stranger (Lindholm 2008, 47). In short, the pursuit of authenticity is not merely a theoretical academic question; it is also a widely felt human desire, and therefore worthy of attention.

Lindholm presents an interesting case study of the importance of authenticity to a significant portion of Canada's population: country music fans. In order to be perceived as "authentic," successful country artists have to

play live music and entertain their audiences in person. . .give revealing and intimate interviews. . .and make themselves readily available to their fans. Ideally, to show they are not snobs, they should speak with rural accents, keep their vocabulary and grammar simple, and talk openly about their personal tribulations. [. . .] The atmosphere of an authentic country performance is informal and celebratory. (Lindholm 2008, 36)

For a country music fan, this is "real music about real life for real people" (Lindholm 2008, 29) – this is the stuff of life, the modern Rousseauian confession, the real hard truth. In this way, country music is like a Rain City show. Never mind how much forethought, expertise, and practice the artist has put in before the performance (Lindholm 2008, 37); what is important is that the audience feels like the performer is being spontaneous with them – just being themselves. "It is characteristic of contemporary conversation that we tend to place a value on self-revelation. We haven't had a satisfying conversation unless we've gotten 'something personal'" (Todd 2008, 171).

Jerry Pocius has argued that the study of authenticity "is a middle-class intellectual issue that has little relevance in much day-to-day life of ordinary working-class people" (Pocius 2005, 344). Moreover, he states that "for many we talk to, there is little concern with separating the authentic from the fake; instead, the fake and the real exist simultaneously, and people finally pay little attention to whether they are witnessing something that is genuine or spurious" (Pocius 2005, 344). I believe Pocius is absolutely right: most people do not care. It is normal and unproblematic for a WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) spectator to know the fight is fixed (therefore "fake") and yet simultaneously to feel that he/she is watching something "real" (real injuries, blood, etc) (Pocius 2005, 350). Knowing that the fight is fixed does not take away from the entertainment value of a wrestling match. However, for the young professionals who attend Rain City – for instance members of the radio-journalism community – authenticity matters. Stories that come across as impersonal or untrue disrupt the flow of the event. A story that does not come across as "real" creates an awkward hole in the evening, and does not make the cut when it comes to choosing which stories to include in the podcast.

However, there are boundaries to how "real" a storyteller should be. During my interview with Karen Pinchin, she described a performance that was very real in terms of the feelings expressed by the storyteller, but was also racist and made no attempt to connect to the audience (Pinchin F2012).

Clearly, then, the type of authenticity that Rain City is looking for is more than simply the unloading of one's personal thoughts and feelings on stage. Instead, Rain City is looking for something more – something that connects the audience to the storyteller.

The storyteller is meant to tell a personal experience narrative – something “true” and “real” that comes from his or her lived experience. The goal of Rain City is to connect audience members and storytellers through the medium of shared experience.

Pocius argues that "if we as folklorists hope to understand the dynamics of ordinary everyday contemporary life, then we must begin to move beyond the issue of constructed authenticity once and for all" (Pocius 2005, 361). I return, however, that in the case of an extra-ordinary middle-class event, the concept of authenticity remains relevant – indeed, when asked to describe a "good" Rain City story, many of my informants used words like "real" and "true." Pocius does allow that "people know some parts may be accurate, some reproductions, some inventions, some improvisations. But in the end, it is the experience, the impact that counts" (Pocius 2005, 359). I could not agree more. For my purposes, and for the purposes of my informants at Rain City, the term “authenticity” is central to the understanding of just what is going on at a Rain City show. For the Rain City audience, there is a felt difference between an “authentic” and an “inauthentic” performance. An authentic performance has a greater impact. Authenticity matters to the experience of my informants, and so for the purposes of the following analysis, it matters to me.

## **Methodology**

I began writing this thesis as a graduate student at Memorial University in St. John's, NL. I knew that I could be in Vancouver – would have direct experience with Rain City – only during the summer, in between semesters of course work. Sure enough, the summer of 2012 was my only chance to go back to Vancouver and interview



participants in Rain City. I was able to attend two live Rain City shows, and interview thirteen participants of Rain City. I knew I would be attending the "Under the Influence" show in June 2012, and was hoping to be able to interview audience members during the intermission and after the show.

In the spring of 2012, before applying for ethics clearance with ICEHR (the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research) at Memorial University, I called both Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp (co-founders and then co-hosts of Rain City Chronicles) to make sure that they were on board with my research ideas. They expressed their interest in the project. However, they were not keen on the idea of me announcing my presence as a researcher at a live Rain City event. In a telephone conversation with me, Pinchin expressed her concern that having a known researcher in the room might affect the comfortable atmosphere that she and Karp have fostered. She felt – and I agreed – that knowing there was a researcher in the room might change the way storytellers presented themselves, or the types of details they shared. We agreed that I would proceed by discreet participant observation, and by conducting interviews outside of the event itself. This limited my scope – I would have liked to interview audience members at the event itself, to ask them how they found out about Rain City, and what they thought of the event. In the end, I tracked down past storytellers by scouring the Internet for contact information and emailing each of them with a description of my project and an expression of my interest to interview them. There is considerable material here for ample discussion and analysis – not only were my interviews quite lengthy, but I have subsequently completed an in-depth analysis of the podcasts released by Rain City, which has given me a strong sense of the Rain City aesthetic.

I applied for and was granted ICEHR (Interdisciplinary Committee for Ethics in Human Research) clearance in May 2012, at which time I was also awarded a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship from SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) to pursue my research on Rain City. In June, I flew back to Vancouver and began to schedule interviews, most of which took place between June and August 2012.

Ten of my informants were past storytellers who had replied to my emails; one (Kevin Cherney) was an audience member, to whom I was referred by Karp; two (Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp) were the original hosts of the event; and one (Cory Ashworth, a past storyteller) had since become a co-host of the event. My interviews took place in various locations all over Vancouver – wherever was both convenient for my informants and relatively quiet for the sake of my voice recorder (a Roland R-05 WAV/MP3 recorder). I found myself in many kinds of locations: heritage houses, apartments, restaurants, coffee shops on Main Street, and once, an open-air deli right next to the train tracks with unforeseen trains and helicopters screaming by. By necessity, I also conducted a couple of interviews over Skype. One of these (with Ashworth) went smoothly, although we could not get the video function to work; the other (with Kaitlin Fontana, who was living in New York City) was quite rocky, likely due to a poor Internet connection. Nevertheless, despite some unforeseen challenges (the helicopters were the worst), my interviews were a joy to conduct and I learned a great deal from the intelligent individuals who agreed to speak with me.

I began my interviews by asking my informants how they felt about the sense of community in Vancouver. I then moved on to ask about their specific experiences of

Rain City Chronicles, and finished by asking for their opinions of what makes a "good story." As mentioned above, my questions were guided by my own personal experience of Rain City, which had made me feel differently about the Vancouver community as a whole. However, I discovered through speaking with my informants that most of them considered attending Rain City to be a special but not paradigm-shifting way to spend an evening. Most of my informants felt the same about Vancouver before and after attending Rain City. Additionally, many of my informants already knew each other, or were part of roughly similar social circles, and I found that they did not attend Rain City in order to meet new people. Nevertheless, my informants were universally thoughtful, intelligent people who not only took my questions seriously and applied their own thoughtful analysis to my subject matter, but also contributed many of their own insights which inspired me along the way. So as I sat down, in fall 2012 and spring 2013, to listen through my interviews once more, I found myself reconsidering my research questions.

At this point, it may be noted that I was worn out academically and took a leave of absence for one year, during which I wrote down occasional ideas on Rain City, but otherwise took a complete mental break. What I noticed, as I let thoughts on Rain City percolate under no pressure to write about them, was that I was very much interested in the ideas of truth and authenticity that my informants had raised. It seemed that although their experiences of Rain City had differed, they shared a sense that Rain City stories should be "true" and "real." The importance of "authenticity" is explored in detail later in this chapter.

This thesis was largely written in the summer of 2014. After returning to my research, I completed an in-depth analysis of the Rain City Chronicles podcasts, which at

the time included 52 stories and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three. My review of the published literature took me from literature on tale and legend (Dundes 1999, Fine 1992, Lunt 1969, Mullen 1998, Olrik 1999, Propp 1999, and Thomas 1977) to literature on truth and authenticity (Bendix 1997, Lindholm 2008, Milnes and Sinanan 2010, and Pocius 2005), autobiography (Langness and Frank 1981, Peneff 1990, Samuel and Thompson 1990, Sawin 2004, and Tonkin 1990), belonging (Pocius 2000), linguistics (Bennett 1990), and even tourism (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Qureshi 2011, Tuan 2007). I found that to understand Rain City Chronicles I must approach it from many diverse angles. In the pages that follow, I have painted a portrait of Rain City that both demonstrates its complexity and does justice to its simple mission: to create a comfortable space for people to share their stories.

I have begun by introducing you to the characters, the setting of my story (Vancouver, BC), and my own position as narrator (via my methodology and personal connection to the subject). In Chapter Two: "Setting the Stage," I look at the geographical and social context of Rain City, in order to show that its genesis in Vancouver was no accident. I discuss Rain City's beginnings, which are entwined with the stories of its founders, and follow its trials and successes over the past five years. In Chapter Three: "A Good Story: Podcast Analysis," I analyze the Rain City stories made available via podcast in order to determine some basic narrative elements of the Rain City personal narrative genre. In Chapter Four: "A Good Story: The Folk Aesthetic," I investigate my informants' assessment of what makes a "good story," specifically a good Rain City story. I conclude that the personal narratives told at Rain City most closely resemble contemporary legends, and should be classified as such. In Chapter Five:

“Personal Voice, Constructed Identity, and Being Heard,” I discuss the ways in which Rain City has impacted its storytellers. To conclude, I hint at the implications of Rain City's success, not only for Rain City itself, but also for the Vancouver community, and for the future of personal storytelling shows.

## **Chapter Two: "If it doesn't exist, create it"**

Vancouver is a large coastal city of 603,502 people, located between the ocean and the mountains of the lower mainland of British Columbia (City of Vancouver 2014). It is divided into many distinct neighborhoods (see City of Vancouver 2014 for a list), in some cases by bodies of water, and in others, by differences in income and architecture.

Downtown Vancouver, for instance, is a bustling neighborhood composed of shiny modern high-rises (both residential and business), and populated by both the very rich (in the buildings) and the very poor (on the streets). Kitsilano is a quiet, wealthy neighborhood across the water from Downtown, and close to the University of British Columbia. In Kitsilano, homes are small and expensive, and, judging by the grocery stores and restaurants in the area, most residents prefer to eat organic food. Commercial Drive, in East Vancouver, is an ethnically and economically diverse neighborhood, very supportive of small local businesses and alternative eating habits. It has become a hotspot for young adults seeking an edgy, alternative lifestyle, and housing prices there are on the rise. These are only three of Vancouver's many neighborhoods – there are many more. Each neighborhood has a distinct character set apart by its distinct architecture, and overall, the diversity of Vancouver's neighborhoods is a point of pride. According to the city's website, "the City values that diversity as a source of creativity and strength" (City of Vancouver 2014).

Despite this assertion, however, many of my informants felt that Vancouver is fragmented by its separate neighborhoods – that it is difficult to experience Vancouver as a cohesive unit unless you ride your bike or walk everywhere (this was noted by my

informant Sara Bynoe F2012). By walking or biking instead of taking public transit or driving their cars, some of my informants feel that they are able to connect the different neighborhoods of Vancouver with each other – to make a mental map and begin to develop a sense of place. For those who commute by personal vehicle or by public transit, however, the city can feel like a series of pockets.

In 2011, Vancouver Foundation<sup>4</sup> – a community foundation and granting agency which funds hundreds of community-directed projects every year in BC – conducted a poll among various community builders and charitable organizations to try to pin down "a specific, community-identified challenge" to target in the city of Vancouver. "The intent was to help us decide where to focus additional energy and resources to have a greater impact in the community" (Vancouver Foundation June 2012, 3). Vancouver Foundation expected the dominant issue to be homelessness and poverty (3). However, the issue that rose to the surface was "a growing sense of isolation and disconnection...a deepening civic malaise that has resulted in more people retreating from community activities. . . . [Citizens of Vancouver] said this corrosion of caring and social isolation hurts them personally and hurts their community" (3).

Following this discovery, Vancouver Foundation asked for another survey (conducted by Sentis Market Research) which would ask questions about three levels of connection: personal friendships, neighborhoods, and attitudes toward the larger community of Vancouver. The survey also asked questions about community participation and asked what prevents individuals from being more engaged (5). This survey took place in the spring of 2012, and made some interesting discoveries.

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to Vancouver Foundation as it refers to itself, with no preceding definite article.

Although most people reported having at least one close friend (many had four or five, and some reported having over 10), 31% of the 3,841 people surveyed agreed with the statement, "It is difficult to make new friends here." Populations particularly stressed by this problem included people aged 24-34, newcomers to Canada, newcomers to a given neighborhood, and people who live in basement apartments (13). 25% of the total survey sample agreed with the statement, "I find myself alone more often than I would like to be" (14).

The findings on neighborly interaction were also telling. Although 72% of survey respondents reported feeling welcome in their neighborhood (23), only 40% reported having a conversation with a neighbor at least once per week. 15% reported talking to their neighbors once a year, or never. Only 26% had invited their neighbors over for dinner, or been invited to dinner by their neighbors. Only 28% know the location of their neighbors' spare key, and only 41% reported having done their neighbors a favor. When Sentis asked people to identify reasons that they did not know their neighbors, 46% answered "seldom see them," and 32% answered "little interest in knowing each other" (19). Only 52% of respondents believed that most people in their neighborhoods trust each other (23). However, there is a strong correlation in the data between, on the one hand, people doing favors for their neighbors, going over to each others' homes, and having conversations, and on the other hand, this sense of neighborly trust (23). Essentially, it would seem from the data that those who get out and talk to each other have a more positive view of life in their neighborhoods.

When it came to participation in community life, 83% had visited the local library, community center, or recreation center, and 66% claimed to have voted in the last



municipal election (although the actual voter turnout was just under 30%) (28). 44% had signed a petition, 42% had attended a cultural or ethnic event outside of their own culture or ethnicity, and 42% had attended a religious service. Only 26% had attended a neighborhood or community meeting, and only 23% had participated in a neighborhood or community project. Only 13% had attended a city council or school board meeting, and only 12% had attended a political rally or political meeting (28). Reflecting on the previous twelve months, 49% had volunteered at least once (although only 14% volunteered once a week or more), and an equal 49% had not volunteered at all (29).

The numbers were not terrible, but they were certainly not ideal for Vancouver Foundation. Vancouver Foundation was concerned about these numbers, as they seemed to represent a lack of engagement that is fundamental for any kind of community project to take off. When Vancouver Foundation asked what the biggest barrier to community participation was, they were surprised: a staggering 61% reported feeling like they did not have much to offer (32).

In a secondary study published by Vancouver Foundation in September 2012, this finding was aligned with other data from the original survey. It was found that the stronger one's feeling of uselessness was (participants could choose "major obstacle," "minor obstacle," or "no obstacle at all"), the more negatively one responded to questions of neighborhood relations. It would seem (bearing in mind that this is only a correlation) that the more negatively one feels about one's neighbors, the more one begins to feel that one does not have much to offer (Vancouver Foundation September 2012, 2). A second correlation exists between feeling one has nothing to offer and feeling it is difficult to make friends in Vancouver (3). In addition, "People who feel they have little to offer are

also more likely to cite a physical or mental health condition and language issues as barriers to participation" (3).

Since it can be difficult in some urban neighbourhoods to foster a sense of community or belonging – due to mistrust of one's neighbours, for instance (Ross et al. 2001) – there seems to be a need for initiatives that give city residents a sense of empowerment and belonging in their neighbourhoods (Chavis & Wandersman 1990; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Traditionally, spaces such as churches have functioned as safe meeting places for urban communities (Vidal et al. 1999; Ramsay 1998); Rain City aimed to set itself up as a space similar in function to one of these meeting places (Pinchin F2012). Not only would it provide a venue for shared experience, intensified through the sharing of personal stories, but also, through participation in common traditions (such as food and drink at intermission) Rain City would create for its audience a sense of distinctive community. Rain City Chronicles would bring together members of existing but scattered urban groups – such as musicians, writers, parents, and students – and recombine them through storytelling into a community all its own. After all, as Dorothy Noyes points out, a “group” can be “ad hoc or short-lived, and need not be grounded in a historical identity” (Noyes 1995, 453).

Cory Ashworth, now a host of Rain City, is optimistic on the state of Vancouver:

I think Vancouver is beautiful...and I feel like it's so young...and I think that if you put in the time, you can make literally anything happen here. I think that's with anywhere on the planet, but I feel like with Vancouver – no, I don't think that's with anywhere on the planet. I think that Vancouver is a hotspot for innovation, when it comes to community and thought and ideas. . . .But the thing is, people can be really cynical and shitty, too. So you just have to really be strong, and make it happen for yourself. And I think that's what Lizzy (Karp) did, she just really pushed through her idea, and made it happen for herself. But I think Vancouver – there's a

place to make it happen, too. Like I think people are open to ideas, and get excited by things quickly. It's a great place to start an idea. (Ashworth F2013)

When Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp moved to Vancouver, they were less than impressed with the sense of community in their neighborhoods.

Pinchin is a thirty-something journalist from just outside of Toronto. She went to university in Ottawa, and was living in New York before she moved to Vancouver in 2007. When I asked for her first impression of Vancouver, she answered, "I found the first year to be almost impossible." She had only come to Vancouver because her then-boyfriend (now husband) had been transferred to Vancouver for work; she had not realized how much slimmer the job market would be for her. Pinchin explained to me that despite the size of the city, Vancouver's journalism community is very small compared with that of Toronto. Because of this, Pinchin was unable to find a job for several months – not even something she was overqualified for. It got to the point where she was considering going back to Ontario. Indeed, she told me that many of the people she knew who tried living in Vancouver did leave after about a year, for the same reason (Pinchin F2012).

She acknowledged that she had friends – mostly people she had known from Ontario – but she was unsatisfied with the way friendships worked in Vancouver. Pinchin felt that "a lot of the social groups were predicated on who you worked with." This, she felt, was a problem; she wanted more "cross-pollination" between artistic groups. She reflected that people seemed to guard their communities, rather than "creating them and setting them free." One possible reason for this is that for various reasons (housing costs the most common) the population of Vancouver is very transient.

Local Vancouverites grow wary of making deep connections with people who may ultimately move away (Pinchin F2012).

After several months of job-hunting, which hurt her professional self-esteem, Pinchin still did not feel connected to the city. Eventually, she got a job at *Maclean's* magazine via a friend of a friend. She worked at *Maclean's* for about a year, then did some of her own freelance for about a year, and has had a variety of jobs since then. Only after three years did she feel she could say she was "from Vancouver" (Pinchin F2012) – a relatively long time, in Pinchin's experience.

By 2009, Pinchin had accepted that Vancouver was never going to adapt to her, so she would have to adapt to Vancouver. It was at this point that she had a realization: Although Vancouver was not saturated with her preferred type of cultural events, it might be the ideal environment for starting *new* cultural events (Pinchin F2012).

Karp's story is somewhat similar. Karp, also in her early thirties, is from Salt Lake City, Utah, and, because of her upbringing in such a beautiful landscape, had a strong connection to nature. Before moving to Vancouver, she had been living in Toronto, and had found that she was missing the outdoors. She moved to Vancouver with her boyfriend "the day Michael Jackson died": June 25, 2009. Immediately, she went out and tried to figure out where to get a coffee, where to eat: "I dove into the city very quickly" (Karp F2012). In Toronto, she had always been "a part of people doing things," and her desire to be a part of "that scene" came with her to Vancouver (Karp F2012).

It was not long before Karp wanted to start an event of her own. She started reaching out to her friends:

We had this small writers' pitching circle. And Karen is more of a traditional journalist, and I, I've done some writing, but it's more creative writing and stuff, and I was trying to get into story pitches – I've been a fan of "This American Life"<sup>5</sup> for a long time – and I kept pitching stories. So we had these story pitch meetings, and we'd talk a lot about the writing community. 'Cause I was really trying to reach out to my friends, and be really open – and looking for a night like Rain City where I could go meet people and be a part of something, and I couldn't find it, and so the idea was there, but what it looks like now, organically came about because of the lack of those community spaces to connect. So it was kind of a reaction, I guess, to the immediate environment. But instead of going to a bar and complaining about it, I was like, "all right!" And the first Rain City was four months after I lived here. It feels kind of fast, but I needed to feel connected. (Karp F2012)

Pinchin and Karp were introduced by Eliana Lev, a mutual friend who knew they would hit it off. The two got talking about their passions and their struggles, agreeing that they wished there was some kind of event where they could go, hear from interesting people, and meet friends. That very evening, the two women dreamed up Rain City Chronicles as a way to connect people.

Pinchin describes that evening:

We basically had this hours and hours long giggle, talking, sort of life-catching-up conversation where we basically decided that someone – that we needed to introduce all these awesome friends of ours and we needed to bring them all together, and let's have a show, kind of like "This American Life" or "The Moth," where we picked a theme – we didn't know what form it would take, but we were just sort of like: let's do a thing! At a place! And so the three of us basically started planning this event. And so we went through our mental rolodexes of all the most interesting people that we knew in the city, we picked a theme, which was "Firsts," cause it was the first show, and we each would tell a story, and then we got a bunch of other storytellers – we each kind of emailed people to see if they were interested, and then that was basically what originated our first show. (Pinchin F2012)

The initial idea, then, was to bring together "all the interesting people they knew" to meet each other. Pinchin credits Lev with being the gatekeeper to many of the people in

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<sup>5</sup> "This American Life," accessible at [www.thisamericanlife.org](http://www.thisamericanlife.org), is a radio podcast similar in content to Rain City Chronicles. On the podcast, individuals tell personal narratives on a given theme.

Vancouver's creative community which have since been represented at Rain City. They rented a venue (Little Mountain Gallery, an art gallery which was unheated), made a paper pennant for the stage, rented a hundred mugs, made hot apple cider, invited everyone they knew, and sold tickets. On December 1, 2009, Rain City Chronicles had its first event. Little did they expect the outpouring of support that they received – Pinchin reflects on her surprise that by the time that first show started, they were sold out and there was standing room only. "Mostly because it was a small venue, not because it was so popular" (Pinchin F2012). I would add, however, that Rain City likely appealed to a demographic that could afford the time and money to come. As Guntis Šmidchens points out, "extra money and leisure time allow members of the middle class to create new associations based on shared interests and to establish traditions that hold these groups together" (Šmidchens 1997, 819).

Early perceptions of Rain City, as published in online Vancouver-based magazines such as *Sad Mag*, *The Dependent*, and *Straight.com*, include the following:

Rain City Chronicles is an evening of storytelling that could easily be a variation on stand-up comedy, but it is more than an audience passively watching performances. Elianna Lev, Lizzy Karp, and Karen Pinchin have created an inclusive community-building event that blends humour with touching insight. (Slaven 2010)

...a not-for-profit live storytelling event showcasing the ordinary and extraordinary tales of Vancouver's diverse community of artists and creatives. [...] The latest show, held at the Wise Hall on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, confirmed the event's popularity, with a nearly sold out night of 180 attendees, 9 storytellers, 3 musical acts, and sponsorship from Geist Magazine. (Al-Azzeh 2011)

[Rain City] is definitely a grab bag as far as content goes, with some storytellers choosing to bare their soul, others counting on comedy, and some skilfully doing both while dropping a few impeccably placed F-bombs. (Charlesworth 2011)

Al-Azzeh's article goes on to emphasize Rain City's role in giving "creative people" in Vancouver a place to connect with each other. This allusion to Richard Florida's "Creative Class" (Florida 2002) reflects one early perception of Rain City, as a place for young artists, engineers, etc. (the "Creative Class") to gather. Jenny Charlesworth, however, writing for *The Straight*, notes that "though Rain City Chronicles takes on a different vibe depending on where exactly the series pops up, [Karen Pinchin] maintains that you can always count on the audience to be as wildly diverse as the anecdotes rattled off on-stage" (Charlesworth 2011). Early Vancouver perceptions of Rain City, then, centered on the comedic aspect of the stories, as well as a curiosity as to the demographic makeup of the audience. Though the Rain City audience was widely perceived as being "artistic and creative," the hosts of Rain City insisted (both in their interviews with the above magazines, and in their interviews with me) that the event was for anybody and everybody.

### **Structure of a show**

As I mentioned in Chapter One, I attended my first Rain City show ("Family Matters") in March of 2011. On June 29, 2012, I attended my second Rain City Chronicles event. The evening was hosted by Lizzy Karp and Karen Pinchin, and the theme was "Under the Influence" (see Fig. 3 for event poster). I knew from prior telephone conversations with Pinchin that the hosts were hoping for a wide array of stories – not only stories about drunken adventures, but also stories about being influenced by people or career goals. Because I knew that Pinchin and Karp were

actively involved in the story-curating process, I expected an entertaining night with a great deal of variety. I was not disappointed.



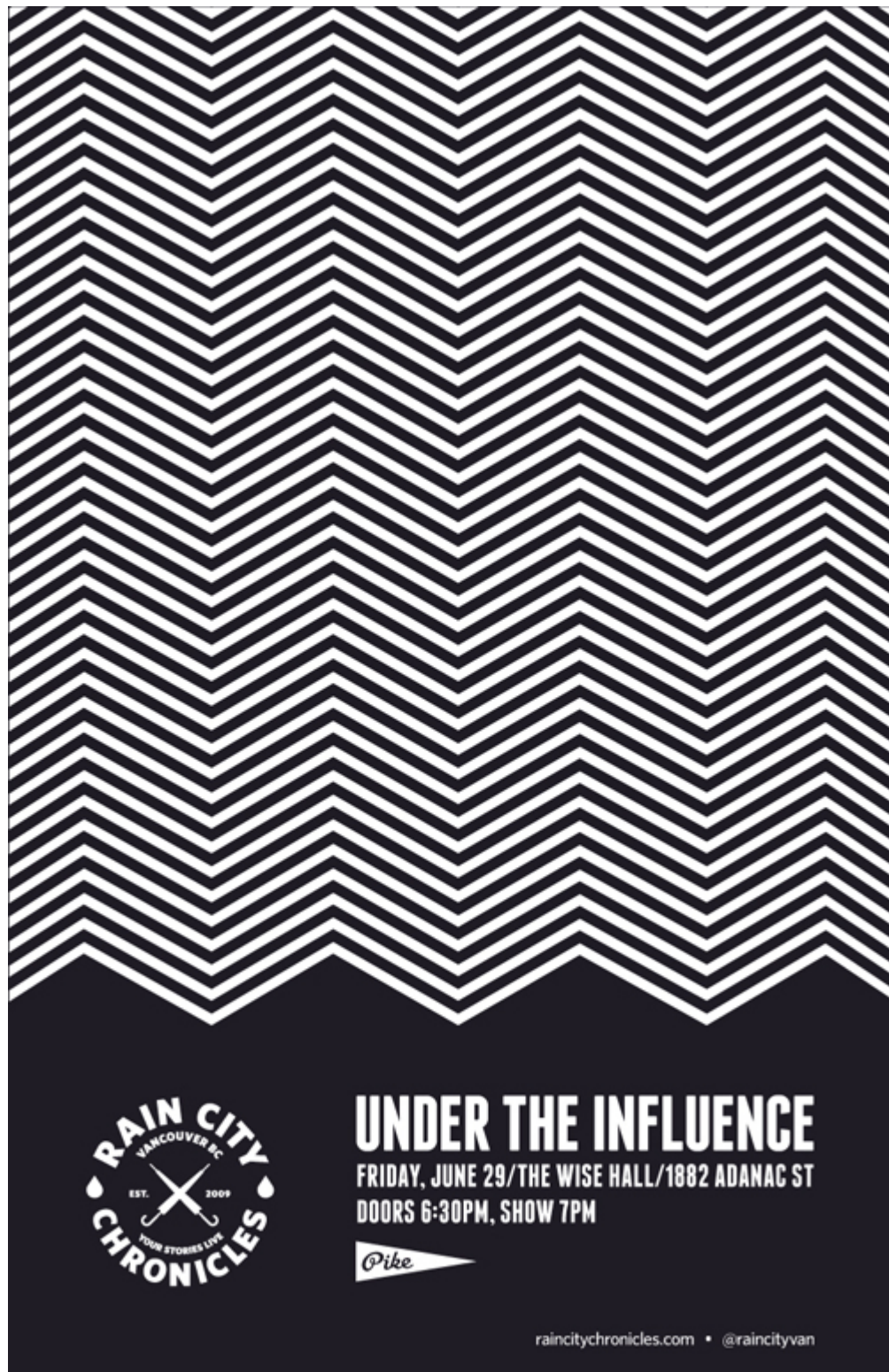


Figure 3: Poster for the "Under the Influence" show

When I entered the venue – The Wise Hall, in East Vancouver – I was immediately struck by the bustling and loud chatter of the people already inside. I gave my previously purchased ticket to the ticket-taker (tickets cost \$15; most people buy them online), took a copy of the bulletin – more of a list of storytellers than anything else (see Figs. 4-5) – then went to find a seat. I noticed several things about the atmosphere of the venue: the chairs were very close together (which I expected after my experience at the “Family Matters” show); strings of holiday lights strung across the high ceiling cast a soft light on the room; the room was *full* of people – I estimated that there were 200 people altogether – some sitting, some standing, and many buying drinks; and there was a single microphone on a stage at the front of the room. I sat and read the list of storytellers, noticing that the biographical details next to each storyteller’s name came across as fun, casual, and totally unrelated to the story they were going to tell. For instance, I read that “Karen Ross is a counsellor who enjoys movies, themed potlucks, and making piñatas” (see Fig. 5). These fun, superficial details about Ross helped set the tone for the evening, as well as making me feel like I knew her a bit. Later, when she told a very personal story about her out-of-body experience during a church service, I felt like I knew her even better.

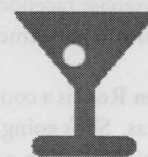
A few minutes after I sat down, Pinchin and Karp took to the stage, beers in hand, to introduce themselves to the audience and the audience to Rain City Chronicles. They then introduced their first storyteller, Jessica O’Neill, with casual details like “Jessica owns eleven beige doily shirts, and that’s her mom, Louise, who brought her daughter a granola bar in case of low blood sugar” (Field Notes, June 29, 2012).

# RAIN CITY CHRONICLES



## Under the Influence

### YOUR STORYTELLERS



**Mark Brand's** life as an entrepreneur began in the summer of 2007 with the opening of Boneta Restaurant at 1 West Cordova. The subject of a docu-series entitled *Gastown Gamble*, Mark is also a founding member of the Hastings Crossing Business Improvement Association and an advocate of food security in the DTES. He's often spotted carrying heavy things from building to building.

**Robert Dall** is a 30-something web designer, coffee connoisseur and former professional photographer. Born and raised in the small seaside village of Sechelt, B.C., Robert's passion for storytelling started with a camera and darkroom in high school. He worked for 10 years as a news photographer, and has travelled to the Canadian Arctic and Greenland.

**Shauna Johannesen** is a writer, actor, and playwright. She's lived and studied under various influences in Edmonton, Nairobi, Michigan, Honduras and Amsterdam. Shauna shares more questionable decisions and embarrassing stories on her blog "Knee Deep in Frog Poop" at [shaunajohannesen.com](http://shaunajohannesen.com).

While under the influence **Steve Mynett** missed a flight home from South America, resulting in a week-long unplanned excursion into the Amazon. He's also rung in the New Year in the streets of Baracoa, Cuba with \$3 bottles of Havana Club. He is a "method presenter" so in a homage to tonight's theme will be presenting while under the influence. He can be found online @stevemynett.

**Jessica O'Neill** is a self-described "local history nerd" who specializes in the dark side of Vancouver's past - crime, vice and riots. A writer, blogger and "Tour Guys" walking tour guide, she is an expert on the city's urban planning and heritage bylaws and knows too much about its dive bars and pho restaurants. She travels extensively and will be moving houses - this time by choice - to live in Kathmandu and work for an NGO this winter.

Nineteen-year-old **Allie Quelch** is a student by winter and a sailing instructor by summer. She enjoys parks, adventures, and poetry. Allie is fascinated by reality and gets along with anyone who can tell a good story.

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JUNE 29, 2012 — WISE HALL

Figure 4: Rain City bulletin (front of page)

**Steven Rathwell**, who also goes by the name evenSteven, is a fugitive of the public education system who retired from teaching high school English to share stories and exercise racehorses at Hastings Park. He has created documentaries for CBC Radio and performed at the Vancouver International Storytelling Festival.

**Karen Ross** is a counsellor who enjoys movies, themed potlucks, and making piñatas. She's going back to school in September because she misses the days when thinking, reading, and writing were her full-time job. She writes reviews of unusual fruits at [fruitsweekly.com](http://fruitsweekly.com).

**Will Woods** is the founder and chief storyteller of Forbidden Vancouver, a walking tour through Vancouver's dirty prohibition history. Will has a passion for Vancouver's history, the good and the bad, and a love of entertaining and engaging with people.

#### YOUR MUSICIANS

**Dominique Fricot**, formerly of The Painted Birds, has toiled in the trenches of Vancouver's music scene for the past decade. After a particularly painful breakup, he channeled his heartbreak and loss into his music, creating the songs that would lay the foundation for his next two EPs.

Vancouver's art-pop, torch-folk songstress **Hilary Grist** embraces the rich details of the heart and paints sparkling vignettes with her poignant musical and visual creations. Inspired by the mysterious, her soothing honey-soaked voice and intimate piano playing soar over driving indie pop, warm tinderbox folk and whimsical jazz.

#### YOUR HOSTS

**Karen Pinchin** is half Polish and half Puritan, which means she has a genetic predisposition to being under the influence of vodka and hard work, in equal parts. She recently finished cooking school, got married, and is heading to the south of France to work as a cook at country inn.

From iced coffee to stiff drinks, **Lizzy Karp** is usually under the influence of something delicious. By day you can find her managing accounts at Village&Co., but by nightfall she is likely indulging in an HBO series, a good book or a long swim. This week marks her 4th year living in Vancouver.

#### CONNECT WITH US

Find us online: [raincitychronicles.com](http://raincitychronicles.com), @raincityvan and on iTunes.

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JUNE 29, 2012 — WISE HALL

Figure 5: Rain City bulletin (back of page)

O'Neill was the first storyteller to take the stage, and judging by audience response, her story was very successful. O'Neill told the story of her stint as a tenant in a crack house (a story later made public via the Rain City podcasts, analyzed in Chapter Three of this thesis, and referenced in Appendix 2 as 7-O'Neill P2012). O'Neill was very funny and encouraged audience response with her sense of humor and use of suspense. At the end of her story, the audience cheered and applauded.

After O'Neill came Robert Dall, who told the story of his experience under the influence of laughing gas, wherein he concluded that all he really needed was someone to say, "Hey, how you doin'?" (Field Notes, June 29, 2012). Dall's story did not have a very strong narrative arc, so it was difficult to keep hold of his theme, but the audience at Rain City is very forgiving, and in the end, he got applause. Later, I spoke with Dall, and he told me that Karen (Pinchin) and Lizzy (Karp) ask you to do three things before the show: 1. Drink beer, 2. Socialize, and 3. Don't tell each other your story. The first two of these commandments are obviously directed towards helping storytellers calm their nerves; the third is an interesting last piece of the curatorial process – a process which I discuss in detail below.

After Dall's story, Karp took the stage and addressed the audience: "So, we've broken you in – we've talked about crack dens and said fuck a lot." It is true that many storytellers at Rain City drop a few "F-bombs" in pursuit of a punch line. The repetition of the word "fuck" at Rain City is significant. As a vernacular term – very of-the-people – it seems to be a signal and a symbol of Rain City's edgy, artsy status as a grassroots event in the city of Vancouver. Susan Seizer points out that only "hacks" (amateurs) use "fuck" to denote copulation (Seizer 2011, 212). In her study of stand-up comedy, she



finds that “fuck” is most frequently used as a general intensifier, as in “it’s fucking hot outside” (Seizer 224). I have found that “fuck” and other foul language is used at Rain City in much the same way – not to denote obscene things but instead to intensify a point. At Rain City, the “fuck” is relatable – it demonstrates to the audience that the storyteller is not above them, but is instead part of the crowd. “Fuck” is a signal that we are all being real with each other – if I would swear in front of my friends, I will swear in front of the audience. In this way, “fuck” is a signifier of intimacy (Seizer 2011, 214).

Nevertheless, there is an awareness in the performance community that saying “fuck” on stage breaks a certain etiquette. For example, during the “Family Matters” show, Cory Ashworth (in the role of storyteller) swears on stage – perhaps as a way of releasing nervous energy (Seizer 228). Ruth Wajnryb describes this use of swearing as “cussing” – the general use of foul language (Wajnryb 2005, 18) – or “cathartic swearing” (Wajnryb 2005, 25). Soon after he lets out the cuss words, Ashworth apologizes to his family for saying “fuck” on stage, at which the audience laughs and any tension is thus relieved (1-Ashworth P2011). The very fact that Karp raised the issue of saying “fuck” at all is a sign that Rain City is self-conscious about the language it uses. “Fuck” is acceptable yet edgy. “Fuck” is also a hallmark of an “authentic,” grassroots event (an aesthetic supported by the bare stage and perceived lack of theatricality; see Seizer 215 for a discussion of cussing as contributing to a grassroots event).

But back to the “Under the Influence” show. After her digression on “fucks,” Karp introduced Steven Rathwell, who told the story of the time he had to use another man’s urine to pass a random drug test on the race track where he worked (7-Rathwell P2012). Many parts of his story sounded practiced and rehearsed – almost literary, despite the

subject matter – but he pulled it off with a comedic flair that kept the audience laughing to the end.

The next storyteller was Allie Quelch, a college-aged girl who told the story of an online predator, and how another online friend convinced her to stop cutting herself. This was a difficult story to hear, as it came from a very raw place. Quelch struggled through the story, at one point realizing she had “forgotten a part.” Here, the Rain City audience was very encouraging. The audience cheered her on, and even called out to her things like “Go back!” and “You can do it!” I was amazed by the power of Quelch’s story – people were talking about it at Intermission and after the show, all very impressed by her courage in getting up on stage to tell her story. The power of the story surprised me because unlike many Rain City stories, this one was not funny, nor quotable, nor a story with a strong narrative arc or moral – rather, it was a scary, stumbling illumination of the dangers of the Internet, especially for the vulnerable.

After Quelch came Steve Mynett, who told the story of how he got access to Bruce Willis’s hotel room by getting drunk with Bruce Willis’s personal assistant. This, of all the stories, seemed to me to be the most unlikely – however, when Mynett pulled out a large stainless steel ball that he claimed to have stolen from Willis’s hotel room, the audience cheered and applauded. Unlikely or not, the theft of a Bruce Willis’s stainless steel ball was completely supported by the Rain City audience.

The last act before the Intermission was a musical number by Hillary Grist, a local songstress and pianist, who told her own story of being under the influence, and involved the audience in her music by having the audience snap their fingers along with her.

Just before the Intermission, Karen Pinchin asked the audience to write down the craziest things they had ever done while under the influence. She pointed out that note cards had been provided in a few locations around the room, and that after audience members wrote their story, they could leave it for people to read. This seemed to me to be an excellent way of involving the audience in the evening – directly engaging them in dialogue with the theme of the evening. After the Intermission, Pinchin read some of the stories aloud, which got lots of laughs from the audience.

After the Intermission, Pinchin introduced Shauna Johannesen to tell the next story. Johannesen – a very skilful storyteller – told the story of the time she ended up in a bedroom in Amsterdam watching porn with her boss (7-Johannesen P2012). Because of her boss’s appalling behavior, she did not use his real name during the story. However, she did reveal all kinds of other details about “Kurt,” in the course of her very well constructed narrative. Especially skilful were Johannesen’s repetitive hand gestures, which she used to wordlessly refer back to prior parts of the story. For example, at one point early on in the story, she listed off five reasons that she felt she could trust Kurt. With her left hand raised and fingers outstretched, as she listed off each reason, she used her right index finger to point to each finger on her left hand. After this, anytime she needed to explain to the audience why she was ignoring Kurt’s increasingly inappropriate behavior, she would use her right hand to circle her raised left hand, and say, “Because of *this* [indicating left hand]. . . I ignored a lot of strange behavior.” The audience enjoyed this use of body language to give meaning, laughing whenever she returned to the raised left hand.



After Johannesen's story, Lizzy Karp took the stage and invited the people standing in the back to come and sit in the front. Audience members had stood up to get drinks, and were standing together at the back, drinks in hand; Karp wanted them to come join the seated audience. This confirms what my informants told me to be true: it is very important at Rain City for the audience to be actively engaged and supportive of the storytellers on stage. The hosts of Rain City are protectors of the healthy storyteller-audience relationship that they have fostered.

The next storyteller was Mark Brand, an advocate of food security in the downtown eastside of Vancouver – in places a very poor area. After Brand, Karen Pinchin took the stage and noted that “It's not a night for performers – showing off – it's a night for getting to know one another.” This comment by Pinchin reflects her original vision of what Rain City should be – a place where people come together, share stories, and get to know one another (Pinchin F2012). Though Rain City attracts well-known Vancouverites like Mark Brand, who are practiced at public speaking, Pinchin was determined from the beginning to keep Rain City personal and relatable. From the beginning, she wanted Rain City to be a place where people could drop the public façade and get to know the person underneath.

The next story was told by Karen Ross, a counsellor, who told the story of her out-of-body experience during a church service under the influence of the Holy Spirit. I spoke with Ross after the show, and she told me that her performance had been a more detailed version of the story than she would usually tell. I found it significant that Ross felt comfortable elaborating on her experience in the Rain City environment – indeed, more comfortable than in day-to-day conversation. Ross added that she had told this

story before, but always as a testimony (a specialized form of personal experience narrative, discussed in detail by Lawless 1988) in church.

When telling personal stories, many tellers qualify embarrassing or strange moments by saying, “I don’t know what I was thinking.” This distances the teller from his or her past and creates the illusion of objectivity. Ross could have done the same; since her religious beliefs have changed since the time of her experience, and given that she was speaking to an audience of strangers, Ross could easily have said “I don’t know what I was thinking back then.” Instead, however, she said, “It still feels very vulnerable to tell this story, ‘cause I *do* know what I was thinking” (Field Notes, June 29, 2012). Despite the vulnerability of sharing a story that could have seemed strange to her audience, something about Rain City made Ross feel comfortable enough to share. The hosts could feel it too: after Ross’s story, Pinchin took the stage and reflected that “there is something sacred about this space.” Perhaps, as noted above, it is the supportive performer-audience relationship that is fostered by the sharing of personal stories.

The next storyteller, Will Woods, came dressed up in his work attire – an early-nineteenth-century gentleman’s outfit that he wears while giving walking tours of historic downtown Vancouver. Although Woods said he was dressed up because he just came from giving a tour, the story he told on stage at Rain City was actually a story straight out of his walking tour. It was a good story – a “warning” that “a group of people can do terrible things under exceptional circumstances” – but it was not a personal story, as I had understood Rain City stories were supposed to be. I felt that Woods was speaking in his professional capacity as tour guide, and not in his personal capacity as a human being. For me, it felt like his performance was a plug for his walking tour, and therefore did not

fit in the flow of Rain City stories I had just experienced. I never did find out how the Rain City hosts felt about Woods' performance.

After Woods, Pinchin took the stage again to announce that storytellers and audience members could head down to the lounge under Wise Hall to share some drinks and stories. She then introduced the second and final musical guest of the evening: a popular Vancouver artist named Dominique Fricot. Fricot was very entertaining, and involved the audience by inviting us to stomp and clap along with him. He made reference to the theme of the evening: "So, 'Under the Influence'. . . are we all under the influence of a magical evening? [cheers from audience]." He also spontaneously told the story of finding the joint that he smoked before writing his hit song, "Haunted by Love." Though it is unnecessary for musical guests to tell personal stories, Fricot chose to add a personal story to his musical act. This was supported by the hosts: below, we will see that for Pinchin and Karp, the spontaneous sharing of personal stories has always been one of the desired outcomes of Rain City.

Lizzy Karp ended the evening by saying, "As a homegrown show, we couldn't do this without you guys!" Karp makes sure to foster a personal, homey atmosphere at Rain City, using specific decorative touches. In my interview with Pinchin, she noted that Rain City was always "very DIY ('do it yourself')" because "that's mostly what's cheapest. And so when you don't have a budget, you know – string and paper." Pinchin credits Karp with the aesthetic of Rain City, saying that "Lizzy is amazing cause she has the world's best aesthetic. So with a lot of this homey, aesthetic stuff, I would give her a lot of credit for that. 'Cause I have a lot of energy, but she has really great ideas. So we're a pretty good team" (Pinchin F2012). Karp adds that

I really pride myself on attention to detail – like in life, not at all, I leave shit open... but it's everything from cookies – I like having a baked good – the sign is hand-painted, Amanda [McCuaig] painted it, it's a real home-made affair. And we don't have that anymore! You know, you go to the movies, and there's nothing personal about it. (Karp F2012)

After leaving the “Under the Influence” show, I noted in my field journal that Pinchin and Karp had not selected stories of “normal” or “everyday” life, but rather stories that are exceptionally “good,” really crazy, really bizarre, or really different.

All in all, it was an enjoyable evening and I was impressed by the courage of the individuals who had got up on stage to tell their stories – some much more personal than others, and from a very vulnerable place.

Shortly after the “Under The Influence” show, Pinchin left Rain City and moved to Fredericton, New Brunswick, where she started a culinary consulting business. Cory Ashworth, a writer for the *Huffington Post* and past storyteller from Rain City has taken her place as co-host. His take on Rain City is that Karp “created her own opportunity”:

People are always looking for stuff to do, and this is what Lizzy [Karp] did so well, is she didn't have a community, so she created one. ...Really, if something doesn't exist in your life, and everyone's like, “oh, I'm just looking for an opportunity” – but often those opportunities will never come, right? So you really just have to create your own opportunity. ... If the opportunity's not there, or if something that you're into doesn't exist, make it, create it, make your own community. And I know that's what Lizzy did, and look at the impact that had. It's probably way bigger and better and more amazing than she could ever have imagined. ... Basically, she's just an American girl from Toronto that came to Vancouver and had no friends. And this is what she's created, and it's really inspiring, I think. (Ashworth F2013)

### **Rain City Chronicles: Highlights and Lowlights**

Pinchin not only outlined what makes a successful Rain City event, but also told me what makes a less successful event. For Pinchin, a successful show has

a magical feeling in the air. The air gets thick with meaning and connection and you can see it on peoples' faces. A successful show is one where it ends up being greater than the sum of its parts. Where Lizzy and I have prepared enough, so that we can give people a really great sense of who the storytellers are. It's where the venue itself doesn't feel too big, but it also doesn't feel too small. Where the storytellers are willing to open themselves up, to be able to relate to both one another, which is important to us – so we try to introduce storytellers to each other before the show – but also to the audience. And where the music in some way is kind of – some musicians are really good at this, where their music is able to hit the exact wavelength of where the stories are. And a lot of that depends on the order that we put the storytellers in. And so we just have to go on instinct for that, in terms of like, we have a funny story, then a sad story, then maybe a really shocking story, and then a story that will hit a melancholy note, before we lead into our more melancholy musical artist. . . . A lot of our most magical stories – I would say almost all of our most magical stories – have come from people who maybe have never been on stage before. And so retaining a sense of "normal" – normal people telling really great stories is what makes a show really great (Pinchin F2012).

The more "normal" and "local" the storyteller, the better. "Normal people" may include my neighbor, the guy I see walking his dog every day, or a local barista: the term "normal people" includes anyone with whom the listener can relate on a personal level. "Normal people" are unpretentious and approachable; they have flaws just like the rest of us. Finding such people involved a certain amount of curating on the part of Pinchin and Karp, since the type of people who jump at the chance to be on stage are often already professional performers or people who want to promote themselves.

Some of the original mandates of the show were to be very diverse, to have equal representation of women (Pinchin felt that male performers in particular get most of the attention), and to showcase normal people on stage (not promote businesses). Pinchin also emphasized that she and Karp always wanted this to feel like a "community-owned event" – hence Pinchin's use in our interview of phrases like "Your storytellers. Your musicians. This is your Rain City Chronicles. Our theme is 'Your Stories, Live'" (Pinchin F2012). "Your stories, live" is the tag line on the home page of Rain City's

website ([www.raincitychronicles.com](http://www.raincitychronicles.com)). When I asked Pinchin about the curating process of Rain City, she had this to say:

The process has changed almost completely since we started. Maybe this is one of our advantages, because we had never done this before, and we don't come from a performing arts background. We would finish a show and we'd have a meeting, and we'd be like, "what went well, what went badly, and what can we change?" . . . So we do it like we're building a show. Which neither of us really had experience doing, so we just kind of like – it's almost like writing, where you come up with sentences that flow into other sentences. You have to guess what tone each storyteller is going to take, and try to weave something out of it. And sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. And when it doesn't, it's usually because we were too busy with our day jobs, and didn't prepare enough, or that the person – the storyteller – sort of misrepresented the story that they were going to tell. (Pinchin F2012)

Clearly, at Rain City Chronicles, the hosts have preferred to be very involved in the construction of each show. When I asked for more specifics on the curatorial process, Pinchin outlined a few important things that she and Karp would do in order to ensure a good show. First of all, they would pick a date, a neighborhood (of Vancouver), and a venue different from the last venue:

So I guess from beginning to end, the thing that we need to do first is pick a date and pick a venue. Part of the mandate was that we wouldn't have every show in the same place. That it was a way of bridging what we saw as being this geographical divide between people in neighborhoods. So we'd be able to take people who lived on Main Street to the West End. Or we'd be able to take from Commercial Drive down to Strathcona. Being able to move people around a little bit. (Pinchin F2012)

Next, they would begin to discuss possible themes for the event:

And so then we try to pick a theme that is basically somewhat seasonally determined? Like, a lot of it is trying to be a barometer for where peoples' heads are at. You know, what are people thinking about? Is it a high energy season? Is it a retrospective season? Are people looking to be entertained? Are people looking to think about their families? And so picking the theme is really important and helps set the tone for everything. (Pinchin F2012)

Karp agreed about the importance of a solid theme, adding, "People connect about stories about the same thing" (Karp F2012). Having a theme is one way to draw the audience into dialogue, as the audience may choose to share their own stories on that theme at intermission, or after the show. Next on the list of curatorial tasks was to contact potential storytellers, and to try to give people a chance who for some reason were not able to tell a story in the past.

And so once we have the venue and the theme, then we basically have a meeting and we – usually there's storytellers who've been in touch with us, or people that we've met in the past few weeks, who strike us as being really interesting people, or having really interesting stories. And so the challenge then is to say, "Well, who's been in touch with us so far, and wants to tell a story," and so we then email those people and say "Thanks for being in touch" – thing is, a lot of people are in touch with stories and they just don't fit the theme. It just – and so we try to be really gentle with saying, like – "Everyone has a good story – we know that you have one – this may not be the right time for it." And so getting in touch with those people, and saying, "Well this is our next theme; does anything spring to mind?" Some people – we've reached out to them before, and they just were busy that day, and so it gives them another chance to pitch a story. (Pinchin F2012)

Thus it is often the hosts of Rain City who reach out to people who they hope will tell interesting stories. Once they heard back from their storytellers, Pinchin and Karp would put together a set list of storytellers, putting considerable thought into the overall story arc of the entire night. The order of storytellers at Rain City is not random; Karp and Pinchin were always very deliberate and careful:

Personality matters, right? You can't have two really gregarious 28-year-olds in a row, and the first half of the show, and expect there to be a nice rhythm. You need to – I'm glad that you were at the Family Matters show, cause I think that's the best show we've ever done. And we structured it – that was actually a neat one – because we structured it on this idea of birth to death. Like the beginning of life to end of life. And people may not have noticed it, but then we realized we liked Ian Rowe's story [about his newborn son] so much that we asked him to close the show. I think that was possibly our best show. . . I think that was possibly because people were slightly more clear about the story they wanted to tell. So we were able to put it in order, where like – Just as things were getting really sad or poignant, you had a

really funny, light story. And so we were able to give it a rhythm. And I guess that comes down to – in order to make the magic, you need to do a lot of the grunt work. Which is – emailing people, harassing them, getting them to send you descriptions of their stories. (Pinchin F2012)

According to Pinchin, then, much of a show's success comes down to the ability of the hosts to be able to curate it, especially by putting stories in an appealing order. Lastly, Pinchin and Karp would send their storytellers a list of storytelling tips, to give them a sense of what is expected at Rain City.

We ended up writing – I wrote, like, a list of storytelling tips – tips that the Moth gives out to their storytellers. Just, you know, things like: "Don't rant. The audience is not your therapist. Know how you're gonna start, know how you're gonna end. Practice." You know, things that professional performers may take for granted that if we want regular people to feel comfortable to get on stage, we need to be able to support them. So in that, we're also, like – coaches, as much as we are curators. (Pinchin F2012)

As previously mentioned, this list of storytelling tips can be found in Appendix 3.

When I asked Pinchin what communities were represented by Rain City storytellers, she listed three professions: media people, writers, comedians. She said that probably one or two performers in every show are professional, and are sometimes public figures. Most, however, are friends-of-friends "who at some point would have been accepted into this 'Creative Class'" (Pinchin F2012). My sense, from attending Rain City, is the same: Most Rain City storytellers are part of the artistic community of Vancouver, in a professional capacity (journalists, radio personalities, stand-up comedians, etc.).

However, as mentioned above, Pinchin emphasized that she really wanted “regular people” to feel welcome to tell a story. When she spoke to people about Rain City, and while she was on stage at Rain City, Pinchin would always repeat that “ANYONE can tell



a story. If you have a story, PLEASE get in touch” (Pinchin F2012). Ideally, Pinchin hopes that the community will mature by incorporating new and different members.

On the other hand, Pinchin feels that the audience is already quite diverse, partly because people bring their families when they tell a story, and partly because people find out about Rain City on the Internet. Pinchin told me that people of all ages show up to Rain City, and has especially noticed elderly ladies. I myself did not notice a great deal of diversity in the audience, but again, I only attended two Rain City shows. It is entirely possible that Pinchin has noticed a diversity in audience demographics across shows.

When I asked what makes a show *unsuccessful*, Pinchin had this to say:

The worst shows are the ones where the audience maybe talks through the musical acts, that's always really tough. . . .When people are just too promotional-y, they think it's like a TED talk, that it's a motivational speech. It's none of those things. The more normal people are on stage, the better it ends up being. So in that case it's mostly just up to us to have a good range of personalities and backgrounds. (Pinchin F2012)

As already noted, one storyteller at the “Under the Influence” show, a tour guide in historic downtown Vancouver, came on stage (in turn-of-the-century costume) in his professional capacity as a tour guide. When he took the stage, he delivered a story that he tells as part of his tour – not a personal story, but a historical one. It was an awkward few moments at Rain City, a show where storytellers are expected to tell their own stories on stage.

If a show went poorly, Pinchin and Karp would feel responsible. They took their role as curators very seriously, and blamed themselves for allowing things to happen at Rain City that turned out poorly.

That was the mistake we made with the show we put on with the city. It was a huge success, but it was just such a big venue, and the sound – it's amazing how the

technology can limit – the technical side can limit that [magical] feeling. We had these huge speakers that they rented, and so it meant that people in the front were getting blasted, but people in the back, it was so big they couldn't hear it. So, you know, the atmosphere – we learned that the balance of creating a show where everyone feels comfortable can be very easily thrown off. (Pinchin F2012)

Karp told me that "there are some events that don't respect the guests, and the guests' experience" (Karp F2012). It was very important to both Pinchin and Karp that they not only plan the show well, but also host it well, to make sure that as many people from as many backgrounds as possible could feel comfortable. This is the reason that Rain City hosts have always introduced themselves before a show – it is important that it not be assumed by the audience that everyone knows each other already.

In June 2012, when I interviewed Pinchin, she was looking forward to the upcoming Rain City show, "Extra Ordinary," to be put on by SFU Public Square in partnership with Vancouver Foundation on September 21, 2012. This event was being held in response to the above-mentioned survey put out by the Vancouver Foundation, which had revealed the most wide-reaching issue in Vancouver to be loneliness and isolation. In September 2012, SFU Public Square (an initiative to connect the university with issue of public concern) decided to hold its first "Community Summit" wherein community leaders would get together and discuss the issue of disconnection. Rain City Chronicles, as a thriving cultural event, was asked to partner with SFU Public Square in this effort, by holding a Rain City show that would showcase "community builders." Pinchin told me that she was interested to see how the show would go, given that people would be hyper-aware that the point of the evening was to connect with each other.

As it turned out, Pinchin was away for the event itself, and the hosts of the evening were Karp and Ashworth. The entire show was taped, and the video can be accessed

online (Simon Fraser University 2012). I watched the video, documenting the stories as well as the tone of the show. I compared this with my own experience of attending live Rain City shows, and with the tone of the podcasts, and found that this show was different in tone from other Rain City shows I had experienced – primarily due to its minimalist, professional atmosphere, in contrast to Rain City's regular do-it-yourself homey charm.

The evening opened with an introduction by Karp and Ashworth, who said on behalf of Rain City, "our mandate is to connect the city through storytelling." Their introduction was followed by an introductory welcome speech by Andrew Petter, the president of SFU, who talked about SFU Public Square, and its attempt to break down isolation and disconnection in the community. Petter was followed by Major Gregor Robertson, who thanked Ashworth and Karp, welcomed everyone to the evening, discussed the findings of Vancouver Foundation, and got everyone in the audience to say hello to someone they did not know. After Robertson, Faye Wightman, the CEO of Vancouver Foundation, took the stage. She, too, thanked everyone for coming, and discussed (again) the findings of Vancouver Foundation. With no less than four introductory speeches by various public figures, it was clear from the start that the entire evening would be formal and professional in tone.

Throughout the show, Ashworth and Karp did their best to shift the tone toward informal and natural, as is typical of other Rain City shows. Ashworth thanked Petter for "creating a safe place for us all by telling bad jokes and doing accents" (Simon Fraser University 2012). Ashworth and Karp then took turns introducing storytellers, and were keen to humanize them as much as possible. Various introductions include, "cycling uphill puts him in a meditative, zen state, and he has played air guitar on a tennis racket

with Randy Bachman. Hello Al, come on up! This is your safe place, this is your home!" and "A guy in the Yukon phoned him asking for trikes to transport grizzly bears – alive – and he has been in three unsuccessful high school bands. Please welcome Graham Anderson!" I know from my interview with Ashworth that he briefly interviews each storyteller on the spot, before each show, to procure such personal details (Ashworth F2013).

Yet despite all their best efforts, I found this show to be quite formal. There was nothing wrong with it, per se – everyone spoke well and it was clear that each of them was a dedicated community builder. The event was well-attended. It could be said – and probably was, at follow-up meetings of SFU Public Square – that the evening was a success. However, in terms of what makes Rain City "magical," it seemed to me that the event fell flat. The stage was large, black, and brightly lit; the venue was enormous; there were no whimsical decorations; and many of the storytellers came across more as promoting their projects than as telling personal stories.

### **All of which is to say**

Vancouver is known by popular opinion – as well as through formal surveys conducted by Vancouver Foundation – to be a difficult place to experience connection with the larger community. Pinchin and Karp founded and hosted Rain City Chronicles in order to facilitate connection between people in Vancouver. Their vision was to encourage people from all walks of life to get to know each other through the medium of storytelling, specifically the telling of personal narratives. Pinchin and Karp favor storytellers who are relatable and act natural, though they discourage ranting about

feelings and curate Rain City shows to ensure that each evening will flow as smoothly as possible. Rain City has been very successful in Vancouver, and, as of 2015, sold-out shows are still put on every couple of months. I am sceptical of Pinchin's claim that the audience is very diverse; it seemed to me from the shows I attended that the audience is composed mainly of young professionals such as journalists, comedians, and artists. Ultimately, then, while Rain City may not attract as diverse an audience as originally intended, it does function as an excellent networking venue for young professionals in arts-based careers.

In the following chapters, I explore the way that these young professionals tell personal stories. I am interested particularly in the emic aesthetic that feeds the notion of a "good story." Below, I uncover features of the best Rain City narratives that may help to explain the reason that the SFU Public Square show fell flat.

### Chapter Three: A Good Story: Podcast Analysis

Both this chapter and the next aim to define “a good story” – a concept of interest to anyone reading this thesis, and about which my informants had much to say. We all know a good story when we hear one. As Labov saucily puts it, in *Life and Death*, “The narratives to be presented here are marked by their inherent interest; they do not need any excuse to occupy the reader’s time” (Labov 2013, 11). Nevertheless, certain features arise from my analysis that seem to mark a successful Rain City narrative. In this chapter and the next, I identify specific features of the most successful stories from Rain City.

My informants’ input will be discussed in the next chapter, where I outline the Rain City narrative’s similarity to three different folkloric genres. In this chapter, I go directly to the source by studying the Rain City narratives themselves. Each Rain City show is recorded, and thanks to Emily Elias, a friend of Rain City, a podcast is available that presents stories from each show for public listening. Though spearheaded by Elias, the podcast is (as of 2015) produced by Elaine Chau. At the time of my research, however, all of the podcasts to date had been produced by Elias.

Whenever she got the chance, Elias would put together a podcast by drawing three or four stories out of a live taping of Rain City, and interspersing those stories with music by a local artist (Rain City Chronicles 2014, supplemented by Appendix 2: Podcast materials). The podcast was a volunteer effort on the part of Elias, which is consistent with the rest of the leadership tasks of Rain City: money raised by Rain City ticket sales is used exclusively to pay for future event costs (venue, etc.).

As edited selections, these podcasts obviously do not represent the full breadth of stories told at an Rain City event; nevertheless, they are an interesting avenue of discussion insofar as they are probably not a random selection from each show. The Rain City podcast very likely adheres to a certain aesthetic – an aesthetic which I propose is the ideal Rain City aesthetic. For this reason, I have studied the stories represented by the podcast to look for shared features that set these stories apart from those which were not selected.

Each podcast begins with an introduction by Elias, who primes the listener by introducing the theme of the podcast and each of the storytellers. All of the stories we hear in the podcast are told by comfortable (sometimes professional) storytellers – people who rarely stumble over their words, and have a fairly clear idea of their story arc. From my experience of attending Rain City, this level of storytelling skill is common but not universal – not all storytellers are quite so practiced, nor so comfortable on stage. For various reasons, certain stories have been excluded from the podcast, and even within the podcast, some stories are received better than others by the Rain City audience. For the purpose of this analysis, I measure a story's "success" according to the degree of audience response it receives throughout the telling of the story. For instance, when I hear the audience laughing at a storyteller's joke, or making vocalizations like "oooh" and "awww," I deem that story to be well-received. Uproarious applause and cheering following a story is another indicator of success. On the other hand, I judge a story which receives little verbal feedback from the audience to be less successful. Through analysis of the best-received podcast stories, I hope to paint a clear picture of the ideal Rain City aesthetic.

Although the podcast stories vary considerably in tone and topic matter, it is possible to identify four elements of an ideal Rain City narrative:

5. Use of standardized opening / closing phrases
6. A setting or frame for the story (Labov's "abstract" [see Labov 2013, 27])
7. A moral (or in some cases Labov's "coda" [see Labov 2013, 32])
8. Humor (especially what Oring calls "self-derision," "self-mockery" or "self-ridicule" [see Oring 1992, 123]). In my discussion I refer to the ideal type of humor alternately as "smiling self-derision," "self-awareness," and "self-ridicule."

When a story is lacking one of these elements, the audience is less responsive. For instance, there is more laughter when a storyteller is self-deprecating (e.g. Jessica O'Neill at "Under the Influence") than when a storyteller uses self-aggrandizing techniques (e.g. Aaron Joseph at "Fame and Fortune"). In what follows, I outline the four essential elements of the ideal Rain City narrative.

### **Standardized opening/closing phrases**

Brunvand has pointed out that "most folklore tends to become formularized," eventually making use of anything from "simple set phrases and patterns of repetition to elaborate opening and closing devices or whole passages of traditional verbal stereotypes" (1998, 16). Bascom would add that "in some societies the conventional opening formula which introduces a folktale gives warning to the listener that the narrative which follows is fiction, and that it does not call for belief; and this notice may be repeated in the closing formula" (Bascom 1965, 6). In this passage Bascom is no doubt referring to well-known opening/closing formulas such as the English "Once upon



a time” and “Happily ever after.” Intriguingly, at Rain City— an event where stories are supposed to be non-fictional – opening and closing formulas are equally important. While of course the opening/closing formulas of Rain City narratives do not signal fiction, they perform the same function as they do in folk tales: the function of signalling to the audience that a narrative event is taking place.

The Rain City narrative usually begins quite casually. The typical storyteller does one of several things:

- Thanks the host who introduced him/her and the audience who is applauding as he/she takes the stage
- acknowledges the audience with a hello, hi, how are you, etc.
- begins his/her narrative with the word “So” or “Okay, so...”
- dives straight into the story

Of the fifty-two stories presented on the podcasts, twenty-four open with the word “So.” Six begin with “thank you” (and 31 end with it). Some storytellers do both of these. Of the above thirty storytellers, seventeen also make sure to greet the audience with a hello. Only twenty-two storytellers dive straight into their story without any of these courtesies.

I call “so” a courtesy (following Gillian Bennett’s analysis of “supersentences,” discussed further below; see Bennett 1990, 214), because it seems to function as a helpful verbal landmark for the listener; it gives the audience cues as to how they ought to behave. In the case of an opening “so,” the listener understands that the story is beginning – now is the time to be quiet and pay attention. After a tangent, a good strong “so” can simultaneously refocus the storyteller and signal to the listener that the story is

continuing. This is courteous because it helps the audience to return to the main story arc and not be confused. In some cases, the “so” acts almost as a bullet point, recurring every so often in order to reconnect both storyteller and listener to the main narrative arc. Take for instance Pat Kelly’s story of becoming a children’s television host (I include the entirety of my transcript in order that the reader may get a feel for the bullet-point “so”):

1. **So**, in 1999, I was a regular performer at the Second City in Toronto, which is, for those who don’t know, a pretty reputable improv theater. They have one in Toronto, one in Chicago, and they’re probably most well known for creating one of the biggest influences on my life when I was a kid, SCTV. Have you heard of it? [audience cheers] If you don’t know it, find it, it still holds up, it’s the greatest TV show ever made.
2. **So** one night, I was performing at the Second City, and I was having a particularly good go of it, and after the show I was approached by a television producer who came up to me and he said, ‘Hey, you were great, uh, look, we’re looking for a new host for the after-school program on YTV called “the Zone.”’ [much cheering, whoops, and laughing] And...yeah you know it. And he said, I think you’d be perfect, and lo and behold, I got the job [cheers]. And thus began my career – my stint, let’s call it a stint – as a children’s television host on YTV. The Zone, keep it weird! [much cheering and clapping].
3. **So**, for those of you who don’t know what YTV is, or The Zone, GET OUT [laughter], but it’s one of Canada’s longest-running after-school television programs. And when I was on it, there was literally like a million children watching this show every day, cause TV was different back then, there wasn’t like 300 channels on TV, and Youtube, and these things people have in their pockets, phones, I sounded so old saying that. But it’s true, there wasn’t much television back then. So, YTV’s The Zone was it. That was the only show in town. I sounded like eighty-five there. You had to get up and turn the channel with your hand! Um...
4. **So** my job was to come on every day after school between three o’clock and six o’clock in the afternoon for like five to seven stints in between cartoons and I’ve never admitted this to anybody but the whole time I did that show, I never watched a single one of those cartoons. It was like...Pokémons, your Dragon Ball Zs, your Sailor Moons, like – basically my impression of these TV shows was like some anime characters like – got together and put rings together and were like FRIENDSHIP! FORCE! GO! [laughter]. Like...FEELINGS! WIN! LET’S – FLY! So these were basically the cartoons.

5. **So** I would come on in between these cartoons and basically got to create whatever I wanted. In a sense, I got to create my own SCTV for children. I'd play characters and do all this kind of stuff. And very quickly, I realized that I was becoming famous. For children! Between the ages of about seven and twelve, I was known. And I would start to develop this radar when I was out in public, like – there's kids over there [laughter]. Because with it comes a great deal of responsibility. You can't just – like, imagine if you are a famous adult – like if you're Harrison Ford or something – you can be a dickhead to somebody and the worst that can happen is that person walks around for the rest of their life saying 'I met Harrison Ford once. He's a dickhead.' But for kids, you have to commit, you have to engage, like I spent four years literally like: [mimes how he would talk to children] What grade? What's your favorite sport? Yeah, I like the Leafs too! Go get 'em, champ! Anyway, good luck in Grade Five!
6. **So**, you really did have to commit and engage with children all the time.
7. **So** I would know to avoid places like the zoo, or the – like I have friends who are going to the mall, I'm like, no. Not me. And so my neck was totally in shape then too. Imagine you're a pocket of kids, I would walk around like this [mimes how he would walk] because if they see your face – like the fact that you're on television, to a child, like – their minds are fuckin blown. To see you in real life.
8. **So** this was a responsibility that I didn't take lightly. And actually, the worst part of that kind of element of it was the parents. I had an experience once where I was at West Edmonton Mall, and we had filmed a segment there, and this woman came up to me, and she was like, "Excuse me, you didn't sign an autograph for my daughter." And I said, "oh, I'm so sorry about that!" And I kneeled down and talked to the daughter and signed her schoolbook and stuff, and walking out with the cameraman she was like, "You should probably ride the roller coaster with her." [laughter] And I was like, "No, I don't like roller coasters, we gotta go." And she sort of shielded her daughter and went, "You fuckers are all the same, you know that? Just cause you think you're rich and famous you're better than us?" And I was like, I'm going on the roller coaster. There was also one time where a woman – I was driving – and she pulled me off the road –
9. **so** I pull over and she comes up to my window and she's like, "Could you do me a huge favor? My kids are like, huge fans, could you just come back and meet them?"
10. **So** I'm like, all right, I go back to their minivan. She opens the door, and there's two, like, 3-month-old infants, asleep. And she made me like, pose with them. But it also – it afforded me this great insight into what I viewed as the

world of real celebrity, because in a weird way, I was kind of the front line for the kids of Canada, to like, meet celebrities.

11. So I got to do crazy stuff, like dance and sing with like, Justin Timberlake and N\*SYNC – the other ding dongs from N\*SYNC. He was – I could tell back then, he was the real deal [laughter]. I got to cheer up a really seriously sad, young, overworked, like worst thing you’ve ever seen Britney Spears. If anybody’s ever dreaming of that for their life, like – good luck. It’s crazy, what they do to these people. I got to go over to England to walk around with Daniel Radcliffe, the moment, like a week before Harry Potter was unleashed onto the world, which was a pretty neat experience. But like all good things, they have to kind of come to an end, and I’d realized after doing this for four years that it wasn’t – you know, it was just sort of by accident that I was doing this, and it was kind of getting in the way of other pursuits I had,
12. So I decided I was gonna leave. And you can’t really just quit a show, ‘cause of the kids, right?
13. So you can’t just sort of *not* be on TV one day.
14. So we, uh [laughter] why is that funny, you can’t! You’d break their [more laughter] you would break their precious hearts if you just weren’t there one day.
15. So we built in this narrative that me, the host of this show, was going to be leaving the Zone on YTV, to go to Hollywood to become more famous [laughter]. Like, my time had come, I’m going to go get really famous now.
16. So the weeks leading up to this, you know, we – the kids started participating, giving me like, tips and good luck wishes to like, what I should do, and who I should stay away from in Hollywood, and – the last episode of my time on the Zone was a limousine pulled up, and I got in, and I like, waved goodbye, and I went to Hollywood!
17. So now that I’m not on TV anymore, and I really don’t actually consider myself a famous person, I still have this like, ghost of fame that follows me. Because what happens to all these kids? They grow up and become like, regular fucking adults. They become the guy who works at the Royal Bank who’s selling you mutual funds, only to end the conversation by saying, like, “You were great on YTV by the way.” Or they become flight attendants for WestJet who like, pump you full of drinks and snacks and then when the flight’s over, you’re pretty sure they’re hitting on you, and you’re like, “Okay?” Or they become just people on the Canada Line, like, fuckin’ *staring* at you [much laughter, some applause]. My radar is still like, this is YTV, this is YTV.

18. So I play this little game now, where if they come up to me and they're like, "Hey man, were you on TV?" then I let a little rope out till they figure it out, and they're like, "KNEW IT." But if they come up to me and they're like, "Did you go to – did I go to high school with you? Did you grow up in Fernie?" I don't give em anything. And I just let them swim and tread in this confusion about my face [laughter]. Um...But I'll leave you with one of my favorite stories in this new era. A couple years ago I was in a pub in Banff. And this guy came up to me and he was really pretty drunk. And he was like, "Fuckin Pat Kelly." And I was like, "Yeah" and he was like, "Fuckin YTV, bro!!" and I said, "Yeah, yeah, YTV, you got it." And he was like, "I fuckin watched you every fuckin day, man. You fuckin basically raised me!" And I was like, "Clearly did a good job. And he goes, "Fuck man, remember how you ended the show?" And I was like, "Yeah," and he was like, "Your fuckin limo came up, and you were like, fuckin Hollywood!" And he kind of stepped back and he sized me up and, like, a little bit of sadness came into his eyes, and he goes, "I guess that didn't fuckin happen, eh?" And he walked away. [laughter] Thank you very much. (9-Kelly P2013)

As mentioned above, Gillian Bennett has identified a narrative device that she calls the "supersentence" (Bennett 1990). Supersentences are loosely structured multiple-clause sentences linked together with basic conjunctions, usually the word "and" (Bennett 1990, 209). According to Bennett, supersentences are a basic narrative device to make stories more coherent and successful for an audience (210). They also perform several useful functions, including the prevention of interruption, the building of momentum, the creation of basic narrative building blocks, and control over when the audience can respond (210). In Pat Kelly's story, above, we find three distinct supersentences, in paragraphs 2, 8, and 18. In all three supersentences, Kelly strings his sentences together with the word "and." It is interesting to note that all three supersentences are used to set apart stories-within-the-story: the first (in paragraph 2) tells the story of how Kelly got a job on YTV; the second (in paragraph 8) tells the story of a particularly intense interaction with a parent at the West Edmonton Mall; and the third (in paragraph 18) tells the story of a recent time that Kelly was approached in a pub by a grown man who used

to be a fan of the show, and the conversation that followed. Kelly's supersentences are used to great effect in these instances as they build momentum, create basic narrative building blocks, and control when the audience can respond.

In addition to supersentences, Kelly uses other narrative techniques throughout his story, including dialogue and conventional syntax. As Bennett points out, "the alteration of supersentence, conventional syntax and dialogue organises both the story and its audience" (1990, 213). Further,

by making and breaking blocks of "and"-linked clauses, storytellers establish a fundamental framework for narrative production and comprehension. ... [This] allows them to extend the courtesy of response to their audience while controlling the nature and timing of that response. (214)

Kelly demonstrates his competence as a narrator by showing variety in his narrative technique, and by engaging the audience to great effect (the audience laughs at all the right moments).

In Bennett's analysis, she notes that another narrative technique is to signify the passage of time by "verbal signposts" such as "so," "when," and "then" (214). In the above story by Pat Kelly, we see the verbal signpost "so" eighteen times. The first "so" (in paragraph 1) indicates that the story is beginning. Three times, as Bennett suggests, it signifies the passing of time (in paragraphs 16, 17, and 18). Once, in paragraph 6, the "so" introduces a summary of the preceding paragraph. Three times (in paragraphs 9, 10, and 12) the "so" functions as a basic conjunction. However, Kelly uses the "so" primarily as a way to return to his main narrative arc (see paragraphs 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18).

In other cases, the “so” is an anchor that signals where the real story begins. Take for instance Cory Ashworth’s story, which was included in two separate podcasts (“Family Matters” and “Lessons Learned”). In Ashworth’s narrative, the “so” is used as an anchor point to determine where the tangent stops and the main story begins again. In the “Family Matters” podcast, we hear Ashworth’s entire story from beginning to end, including his opening monologue (transcribed below). However, in the “Lessons Learned” podcast presentation of the same performance,<sup>6</sup> Ashworth’s entire opening monologue up until the “so” is cut out:

Hello. How are you? Everyone expects that because I speak somewhat as a profession, that this is easy. Um [pause] My brothers all helped me out. I am horribly nervous right now. My younger brother said, you know, if you shit the bed, it would have been a better idea for you to taunt me first and then come to your talk. Whatever, see I’m already not making sense. I just shit the bed. [laughs] I’m just gonna stick to what I know. I have four brothers – I grew up in a house of four brothers [someone in the audience – presumably a family member – calls out “three!”] three brothers, I am the fourth brother [laughter]. My mom and dad are here and I swore I wouldn’t say fuck, so it’s all out of the ordinary [sic], I hope I haven’t offended anybody. [laughs] Stupid. Um [pause] I grew up in a house with three brothers, equals four boys. The first thing people often say to me is, “Your poor mother.” And it’s so very true. All my mom – I’m sure – my dad told me a week ago, “you know, you guys always think we were trying for a girl, but we weren’t.” We feel otherwise. But anyways. The story – this isn’t even a story yet. Um. I say my poor mom, because she had to endure things that boys do, with no girl support. Like my older brother Sean, took karate lessons, and he’s like mom, I wanna show you how I can roundhouse. [laughter] And I know in Sean’s head, he was like, “Okay I’m gonna kick with like a good foot [in between me and her]” – but he didn’t. He roundhouse-kicked my mom to the ground. And me, I am like – okay, second story my brother told me is, you’re gonna get up there and cry. Because I’m emotional. **So** [refocus after tangent] I’m sitting there watching my mom on the floor, and I’m like holy shit! He just drop-kicked my mom to the ground! My dad comes in from work and witnesses. This is kind of like – so my story comes from a place of love, that I haven’t gotten to yet – and I’m over shitting

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<sup>6</sup> “Lessons Learned” is the only Rain City podcast that duplicates stories from other podcasts. “Lessons Learned” was not its own Rain City show, but rather a curated collection of stories from other shows that retrospectively fit together under the common theme of “Lessons Learned.”

the bed, I'm very comfortable with you all now. Thank you. [audience cheers] (1-Ashworth P2011)

At this point the Lessons Learned podcast fades in, just in time to hear Ashworth's "So":

**So** my story – I was actually worried, I was like – it's gonna be a downer – but it's not. It's actually a very nice story. I have anecdotes and lovely tales of all my family, as I'm sure everyone in this room does, but I'm gonna focus on my older brother, who for most of my life I thought was an asshole. (4-Ashworth P2011)

Perhaps Ashworth's opening monologue was deleted from "Lessons Learned" because of its rambling nature – Ashworth took a few minutes to settle into his role as storyteller on stage. When deciding where to start Ashworth's story on the "Lessons Learned" podcast, the podcast editors (in this case Karen Pinchin and Lizzy Karp) chose a good strong "So." The "so" is part of the typical opening phrase at Rain City, and so Ashworth's story actually sounds quite natural beginning at that point.

I find it interesting that such a significant portion of the "Family Matters" monologue was deleted – especially since the editors of the Lessons Learned podcast were Lizzy Karp and Karen Pinchin, the founders and hosts of Rain City. Such an obvious case of editing on the part of the podcast creator makes the listener more aware that not every story in the podcasts is necessarily presented in its entirety. Instead, the podcast has been edited – further evidence of the curatorial influence of the Rain City hosts and Elias.

Incidentally, I identified one other example of likely editing in the Rain City podcast. Jordan Potter's story from "Tales from Public Schools" is presented in the podcast as though its last line is the following: "I thought these were freak occurrences where apparently this was hereditary" (5-Potter P2013). There are two reasons that I



doubt this was the last line of the story. The first is that there is no applause, only a rushed transition to the musical interlude. The second is that almost every other Rain City narrative signs off with the same two words: “Thank you.” As a listener, I was left wondering why Potter was cut off – did he end with a ramble? Did he say something rude? What were the criteria that caused his story to be shortened? Unfortunately my questions were left unanswered.

With a few exceptions that I will discuss below, the ideal Rain City storyteller (thirty-one out of fifty-two from the podcast) signs off with a standardized phrase, usually involving some variation of “Thank you.” This serves two purposes that I can identify: firstly, to acknowledge the participation of the audience in supporting the storyteller throughout his/her narration; and secondly, to signal that the story is over, and the audience may applaud. Variations include “Thank you,” “Anyways thanks,” “So thanks,” “Thank you very much,” “So thank you very much,” “Thanks,” and “All right, peace y’all! Bless you.” A second, rarer phrase that fulfills only the second of the above functions is: “That’s the end,” or, “That’s the end of my story. Thank you.”

So when Jordan Potter’s tale fades out after “apparently this was hereditary,” it is unusual, and in my opinion was likely edited to exclude the rest of his performance. As mentioned, however, there are examples of stories which in fact do end without a standardized phrase, some more effectively than others.

Ending with a “moral” (indicated below with M) or summary statement (S) is an effective technique of signalling the end of the story. The following closing lines were easy for audiences to identify as endings – the audience was quickly aware that the story was over and they should be applauding.

Anyways, long story short, I am SO happy that in Vancouver you don't have to serenade women. (2-Hernandez P2011) (M)

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the story of how I got to be the best man after all. (7-Rathwell P2012) (S)

I didn't take a big moral lesson from that whole experience, but I can impart one piece of advice to all of you, from that experience, which is to NEVER TURN YOUR BACK ON A FRIGHTENED BEAR. (8-Buchanan P2012) (M)

So anyway the guests all arrived and the wedding was wonderful, and I haven't felt trapped since. (10-Shumka P2013) (S)

And we enjoyed the best concert ever. That's my brush with fame and fortune. I'm Aaron Joseph. (9-Joseph P2013) (S)

So anyway, Rodney and I have this theory that Robert Redford is breeding a feral colony of blind people in the forests of Utah because it's that weird of a, you know, a word that rhymes with gurney [journey]. (9-Knighton P2013) (S)

But you know what they say, you know, shit washes off [laughter]. (11-O'Neill P2013) (M)

Other closing lines, however, were more awkward, and were followed by silence

until the audience slowly realized that the story must be over:

And then that's it, it's over, I go home. (3-Keller P2011)

And that, my friends, would have been a good story. (5-Alley P2013)

But every once in a while, I swear I see a kid that looks just like Jeremy, and I think, 10, 20, 30 years from now, he could get parole. And maybe I haven't seen the last of him. (5-Gest P2013)

And I realized: I had forgotten to ask for his name. (11-Tatham P2013)

One closing line was not verbal at all – it seems that one storyteller produced a bottle of a certain plum brandy on stage in honor of her grandmother, and drank a toast! This was met with approval from the audience, who cheered and applauded.

So I'll end the story with something she would have approved of. [laughter] Same bottle – a toast!" (10-McLellan P2013).

Overall, judging by swift and positive audience response, the standard “Thank you” is the ideal way of ending a story. Not only does it signal to the audience that the story is over – eliminating the awkward silence as the storyteller places the microphone back in its stand – but it also cements the relationship that has formed between storyteller and audience. “Thank you” is both a cue and a courtesy.

This courtesy is only right considering the importance of audience participation in oral storytelling. “While relating a memorable personal experience or recounting an oft-told tale, one expects and needs some perceptible evidence that the auditors are really listening and that the effort is indeed worthwhile” (Georges 1979, 104). According to Michael McCarthy, all it takes for a speaker to know the audience is listening is a “nonword vocalization” such as “hmm” or “hunh” from the audience (McCarthy 2003, 39). These nonword vocalizations let the speaker know that he or she is being listened to, without infringing on the speaker’s turn to speak. McCarthy calls these “response moves” in discourse (as opposed to “initiation moves,” which are statements that do not respond to or rely on previous statements). McCarthy also discusses “lexical tokens” such as “yeah” and “right” – however, these are less relevant for our discussion of Rain City performances, since they pertain more to small-group conversation and less to a formalized performer-audience relationship. At Rain City, there are other ways to tell that the audience is engaged – at the shows I attended, I noted the way that the audience listens with rapt attention, emitting “oohs” and “awwws” at all the right places, and calling out encouragements like “You can do it!” and “Go back and try again!” to storytellers who have lost their place. At Rain City, the audience validates its storytellers.

It makes sense, therefore, that Rain City storytellers would want to say “thank you” to their audience before leaving the stage.

### **Setting or Framing the story**

After their standard openings, and sometimes a bit of chatting to get comfortable on stage, most storytellers on the podcast frame their stories with constructions such as “this is about the time that I...” or “this is a story about...” These constructions are helpful insofar as they lay out a narrative arc for the audience to hold onto. William Labov calls this the “abstract” of the narrative, which “may be simply a description of the most reportable event” (Labov 2013, 27). Labov adds that while the abstract tells you what the story is about, it “contains no information about the sequence of events that led to this event” (Labov 2013, 27). Framing the story is especially helpful at Rain City, where storytellers are encouraged not to memorize a written story, but rather simply to know their beginning, middle, and end – a style that allows tangential departures from the main story arc. Because of this potential for tangents in the middle of the story, it is helpful to the audience for the storyteller to begin with a quick statement of the “most reportable event” (Labov’s term; see Labov 2013, 23 and 27).

The following are examples of the way in which Rain City storytellers frame their narratives:

So my story – I was actually worried, I was like – it’s gonna be a downer – but it’s not. It’s actually a very nice story. I have anecdotes and lovely tales of all my family, as I’m sure everyone in this room does, but I’m gonna focus on my older brother, who for most of my life I thought was an asshole. (1-Ashworth P2011)

This is the story of the weekend of my operation. (1-Sherlock P2011)

So, 30 days ago, I had a baby, I became a dad! [audience applauds] Yep, cheap applause break. . . So this is the story of that night more or less. (1-Rowe P2011)

Good evening, everybody. I'm going to tell you a really long story that I've cut down to be a really short, true story, I hope. (2-Kramps P2011)

So this story is a cautionary tale about what happens to the poor soul who challenges me in my one area of exception. (2-Ghulam P2011)

So the story that I want to tell tonight is about how I got backstage at the Flaming Lips concert last year." (3-Taylor P2011)

When you're on the road a lot, you pick up stories. And some of them are pretty ordinary and some are wonderful. And this one I think is a wonderful story. (4-Duncan P2011)

This story has to do with perception. And that is often the key to survival. (5-Alley P2013)

It was an adrenaline rush, really. But it wasn't always a good adrenaline rush, so this is what my story's about. (6-Lee P2012)

Hi! I'm Brendan. I'm gonna take it back and do a literal border crossing story, I guess, and we'll come around. So this is about being stopped at the Gatwick airport in London and put in a detention center. For going into England to play folk music. (6-McLeod P2012)

Hello, everybody! I'm here to tell you – once I get this mic out of the stand – I'm here to tell you my most exciting bear story. (8-Buchanan P2012)

Hi. So this is a story about how a newly single, thirty-year-old student ended up living in a crack house, and having to move out three weeks later with a police escort. (7-O'Neill P2012)

You can make poor decisions under all kinds of influences. You could be under traveler brain. Where maybe you're far away from home, and you meet people and you do things that you probably wouldn't do if you were at home. Or you might be under the influence of empathy, or a really disarming, engaging person. Or you might be under the influence of wanting a job in TV and film really, really, really badly. All I am saying is that there are reasons why a person might find herself in a bedroom in Amsterdam watching porn with her boss. (7-Johannesen P2012)

## A Moral

Many of the podcast stories end with either an explicit or an implicit moral. It is unclear whether the storytellers originally set out to tell moral stories, but in the end, many (if not most) stories end with a lesson learned or advice for the audience. This type of education is typical of folk tales (see Brunvand 1998, 229), and is one of Bascom's four functions of folklore (see Bascom 1954, 344). The following are examples of morals – some explicit, some implied – drawn from Rain City tales:

But that's not the point of the story. It wasn't coming out so much as what my brother *instantly* said to me that made me realize how much family matters. And that was – he said – 'I cannot believe that I love you more *now* than just before you told me that.' [people start to cheer] So that's my wicked family and my family matters story. Thank you. (1-Ashworth P2011)

In the end, sometimes your friends are just there for a day or two when you have surgery, and other times they're there for all of it – the blood, and the crying, and the puke and the shit and they tell you you're beautiful. And THAT'S unconditional love, *that* is family. And I just want you guys to appreciate the families that you have. Thank you. (1-Sherlock P2011)

ANYways. Long story short. I am SO happy that in Vancouver you don't have to serenade women. (2-Hernandez P2011)

Sometimes you just have to believe that something good is going to happen. Thank you. (3-Taylor P2011)

So sometimes we're so under the influence about what we tell ourselves and a perfect apartment, or a situation and what we think it's gonna say about who we are, that we're willing to ignore some pretty big red flags. And so my next apartment, the one I live in now, [is] in the most characterless building possible, and up on the third floor. Thank you. (7-O'Neill P2012)

I do know that empathy and traveler relationships are not bad things. And that ambition is not a bad thing. But these things can cloud your judgment. And I also know that now I have a bigger heart for other people who have found themselves in very stupid situations. Because I know that an otherwise smart, intelligent, intuitive and aware person can go very, very far down a horrible path if she wants to believe something else really badly. Thank you. (7-Johannesen P2012)

And even though I was in a wheelchair for about three weeks after that, and crutches for seven weeks, that was the night that I learned that I could compete with the party animals of Whistler, so long as I severely crippled myself. Thank you. (8-Lawrence P2012)

There was no second date. But I did learn a very valuable lesson! And that is to always, always make sure you know how your date's getting home. Because you do not want your dad getting involved. (12-Judy P2014)

It's okay, folks. I'm still positive. And rest assured, the phone isn't gonna ring anymore. I decided to change my number. Thanks. (12-Hensler P2014)

I'm thinking to myself, [sigh] like so many hangovers, I will never ever do that again. And I don't know if this girl meant to hurt me that way, I can't blame her if she did, and I just promised myself at that moment that I would never treat somebody like that again, and like I said, I had it coming. Thank you. (12-Ramsey P2014)

It is worth noting at this point that some Rain City stories have no explicit moral, as exemplified by Amy Bell's story of an embarrassing moment at age 11:

There was no great lesson from it, it was just a really embarrassing time. (5-Bell P2013)

Bell's concluding sentence is an example of William Labov's "coda" (Labov 2013, 32). In Labov's analysis, the coda is a "clause that effectively brings the time of reference back to the present time of narration, precluding any [further questions of 'what happened next?']" (Labov 2013, 32). The coda is a device for signalling to the audience that the narrative has come to an end. Further examples of Labov's coda can be found at the end of Melanie Ray's story of a ghost who had frightened her daughter, and Lima Al-Azzeh's story of fleeing Jordan after her father's funeral:

Many years later, I asked my daughter if she remembered that night, that person. "Oh yes," she said. "It was a young man. He was standing just inside the door." (13-Ray P2014)

Many many years later, we're living happily in Vancouver, and my mom couldn't quite bring herself to make this dish for us. It was this beloved dish, and it

reminded us of our dad, but the memory of it had kind of been tarnished a little bit, and every time we would ask her to make it, she would say the same thing: “well, who would I make it for? Who would eat it with us now? It’s not the same.” But finally one day, she finally relented. And she gathered up all the ingredients, and she served it to us. And she served it with a side of salad. [laughter] Thank you. (13-Al-Azzeh P2014)

In both cases, the audience understands from reference to prior details in the story that this is the end of the narrative. Labov’s coda is an effective way of ending a Rain City story that has no explicit moral.

### **Smiling self-ridicule/humility**

In my interview with Ashworth, he talked about the importance of humor:

For me, I don’t know if it’s a coping mechanism, but humor is key to a good story, too, I find. It doesn’t always need to be funny, but...even in the worst of stories, if you can find some sort of angle that kind of...allows people to accept the story, but also know that it’s *okay*. You know? (Ashworth F2013)

The importance of humor at Rain City will be addressed in the section of Chapter Four entitled “Story as Stand-up Comedy,” but for now, suffice it to say that humor is important. From the podcast stories, I noticed that some storytellers rely on jokes about drugs and alcohol, which are received only to a limited degree. If these types of jokes continue, the audience grows less responsive. Other storytellers use self-ridiculing humor (according to Oring [1992, 123], “self-ridicule,” “self-mockery” and “self-derision” are synonymous), which is received very well.

“Self-ridicule” is distinct from “self-criticism,” “self-degradation,” “self-deprecation,” and “self-hatred” in that the speaker using self-ridicule is not judgmental of or angry at him or herself (Oring 1992, 123). The self-ridiculing speaker has simply learned to accept him or herself and to laugh at his or her mistakes.



Ashworth, who in his own story at the Family Matters show revealed some unflattering things about his personality, has this to say about self-derision in storytelling:

It's almost like if you say the worst thing possible about yourself, it allows people [in the audience] to share that part of themselves too [with each other]. ...So they know that no one's gonna be judged, and it's a safe place. (Ashworth F2013)

The best-received stories at Rain City are those which involve smiling self-awareness and, if not self-abasement, a healthy dose of humility. Judging by their responsiveness as heard in the recordings (“oooohs,” “awwwws,” laughter, encouraging cheers or applause), the Rain City audience prefers storytellers who point out their own weaknesses. The best Rain City storytellers are able to laugh at themselves.

Jessica O'Neill tells a story about moving into a crack house that had at one time been a beautiful heritage building (7-O'Neill P2012). Her dreams of restoring the building blinded her to the reality of her unsafe and unsanitary surroundings. Throughout her story of hopeful naivety, the audience is engaged, laughing and clapping as though in dialogue with her. O'Neill's smiling self-awareness is encouraged and rewarded by an applauding audience.

Aaron Joseph, on the other hand, tells a story about getting backstage at a Snoop Dogg concert after being mistaken for one of Akon's friends (Akon is an American hip hop songwriter, recording artist, and record producer) (9-Joseph P2013). Though the audience is initially engaged, they eventually stop responding to Joseph's self-aggrandizing techniques and jokes about marijuana. O'Neill's story is more successful at Rain City because she points out her weaknesses and laughs at her own mistakes.

Neal Norrick, in a study of stories told by his graduate students, has found that “most storytellers . . . avoid manifestly boastful stories about their own victorious exploits” (Norrick 2000, 136). Norrick reflects that his students are

much more likely to tell humorous stories about embarrassing events, often from their fairly distant past. Still, a kind of covert prestige attaches to having overcome foolish mistakes in the past. In addition, the ability to laugh at one’s own foibles and errors demonstrates a sense of humor, which also counts as a virtue. Far from resulting in a loss of face, the telling of stories about personally embarrassing moments actually ends up working as covert self-aggrandizement. Furthermore, this sort of self-aggrandizement is unassailable, since it poses as self-deprecation. (Norrick 2000, 142-143)

O’Neill laughs at her own naivety (7-O’Neill 2012); Shauna Johannesen laughs at her mistakes (7-Johannesen P2012); Grant Lawrence jokes that he could always get the attention of the ladies so long as he crippled himself (8-Lawrence P2012). The best-received storytellers are able to laugh at themselves – a trait which makes the audience comfortable laughing along.

By studying the podcasts – the *crème de la crème* of Rain City stories – and by noting audience responsiveness as heard in the recordings, I have shown that at Rain City, “good stories” have several things in common. A good storyteller begins by greeting the audience, and signs off by thanking them for listening. A good storyteller gives a setting or frame for their story, and often leaves the listener with a moral to consider. In addition, the best storytellers are able to laugh at their weaknesses and smile in the face of life’s embarrassments and difficulties.

The stories themselves have revealed much about the ideal Rain City narrative. In the next chapter, I turn to my informants - the storytellers themselves – to ask what *they* think makes a story great.

## Chapter Four: A Good Story: The Folk Aesthetic

“Aesthetics” has been broadly defined as “the study of the creation and appreciation of beauty” (DuBois 1997, 13). Thomas DuBois reminds us that “beauty is a central and profoundly meaningful concept [in the artistry of human communication] rather than a marginal or superfluous one. Aesthetics can therefore provide insight into deep philosophical questions of native metaphysics and worldview” (DuBois 1997, 17). Aesthetics is the link between the performer and the community – the personal and the communal (DuBois 1997, 17).

Folklore research in aesthetics contributes vitally to theoretical understandings of cultural relativism and the importance of communal tastes in the creation of art. [...] The aesthetic merit of a given product resides not in its uniqueness, but in the artist’s ability to realize and execute communal norms, confining individual variation to small details of ornamentation or style. (DuBois 1997, 13-14)

As we will see below, most storytellers at Rain City agree upon the standard of storytelling that they expect to see at Rain City. They share ideas about what makes a “good” story, especially the idea that Rain City stories should be “true.” On the topic of “truth,” I keep the following consideration of Richard Bauman in mind throughout my discussion:

The aesthetic considerations of artistic performance may demand the embellishment or manipulation – if not the sacrifice – of the literal truth in the interests of greater dynamic tension, formal elegance, surprise value, contrast, or other elements that contribute to excellence in performance in this subculture. ‘Stretching the truth,’ which chiefly exaggerates and selects, is not exactly the same as the outright lying of the tall tale. (Bauman 1986, 21)

At Rain City, there are stories that seem to stretch the truth, but which nevertheless their performers insist to be true. Bauman puts this down to a storyteller’s aesthetic

considerations – each storyteller is concerned to a certain degree with making sure his or her “true story” is also funny, suspenseful, and well-told. In his analysis, Bauman is discussing Texan tall tales, which are of course distinct from the personal experience narrative. However, his observation rings true: as we shall see, even Rain City performers are concerned with maintaining a certain aesthetic in constructing a “good story.”

Like Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth Goldstein, and Jack Santino, I follow the lead of my informants in identifying the elements of Rain City stories which are important and meaningful. Ben-Amos argues for the importance of the “indigenous taxonomy of oral tradition” (Ben-Amos 1971, 4). Santino notes that “Each medium or genre has an audience that can and does make evaluations according to aesthetic criteria,” and “it is the task of the researcher to identify them through ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation, as well as humanities techniques such as textual analysis” (Santino 1997, 652). What interests me, here, is therefore not what the scholar thinks is beautiful, but rather what is considered beautiful or “good” by members of the Rain City community; the research techniques listed by Santino are the same techniques that I have used in my research of Rain City.

Goldstein makes the following admonition to folklorists:

Interviewing should be concerned with native concepts, interpretations, criticism, and descriptions *for their own ethnographic value*, rather than as information intended mainly to reinforce and corroborate findings obtained through observation and other field methods and techniques. In any partnership negotiated with informants they should be given full credit for their intelligence and for their contributions to our understanding of folklore, folklore processes, and folkloric behaviors. (Goldstein 1991, 166)

Goldstein places immense value on the emic analysis of folklore materials. In the following pages, I analyze the Rain City narratives according to criteria that my own informants imposed upon Rain City narratives. My informants' careful and thoughtful analysis of Rain City narratives has been invaluable to me.

At some point in each of the interviews I conducted, I asked my informants to tell me what makes a "good story." I was careful to use air quotes and to make clear that I was not looking for an objective definition, but rather for their own preferences and opinions. Many of my informants drew a distinction between stories in general and the type of stories told at Rain City. They pointed out, for instance, that written stories – such as some of my informants, who are journalists, have been trained to write – are told differently than oral stories. To be sure, what makes a good written story may help to make a good oral story; your audience will certainly be drawn in if you use "the elements of fiction: suspense, setting, character, plot moving forward" (Millar F2012). However, something extra is required in order to tell a story well on stage. Reflecting on Rain City performances they had witnessed, my informants universally preferred performances that incorporated the element of surprise, and certainly some humor. Lizzy Karp, one of the founders and ongoing organizers of Rain City, says that two defining elements of an Rain City story are humor and surprise, "because you can hide behind a joke, and because surprise always works" (Karp F2012).

In addition, my informants agreed that Rain City stories must be "true." The audience wants to trust that the extraordinary events related by the storyteller actually happened. Indeed, much of the enjoyment of these stories comes from the shock and surprise the audience experiences as they repeat to themselves, "I can't believe that

actually happened." According to Karp, "It's the funny and the true that resonate with people. Those are always the stories that people walk away from Rain City and they talk about" (Karp F2012).

### **A word on genre classification**

Is there a unique Rain City narrative genre? That is to say, "what (overt, formal) characteristic or set of characteristics will unambiguously differentiate this class of discourses from some other?" (Scott 1976, 79). According to Dan Ben-Amos, genres are

classificatory categories that involve not one but several distinctive features, and it is the task of researchers to determine the relations between the category and the texts that people narrate, sing, or utter in society. A failure to establish such a relation may be indicative of the formation of a new genre. (1997, 411)

On the surface, Rain City narratives are personal experience narratives. In folklore studies, personal experience narratives are defined as prose narratives recounting the narrator's personal, lived experience (Allison 1997, 635; Dolby 1996, 556). Such narratives are consciously constructed, and while the subject matter is unique and non-traditional, the form, function, and style of these narratives "follows accepted norms for traditional performance" (Allison 1997, 635; see also Dolby 1996, 557). Sandra Dolby argues that this consistency in form is what makes personal experience narratives traditional and therefore a subject for folklore research (1996, 557). Bauman would add that the performative nature of Rain City narratives qualifies them as verbal art, and therefore as a topic worthy of folklore research (Bauman 1975, 291).

Randal Allison argues that because personal experience narratives are the most personal and revealing of all folklore performances, such narratives are the ideal genre for discovering "what is important to the group in terms of performance style, narrative

content, and social concerns and norms” (Allison 1997, 636). Because these stories “arise out of the experiences of their individual performers – and out of a felt need to relate those experiences” (1997, 636), by studying personal experience narratives, we gain a window into the lived experience of our informants. Further, the sharing of personal experience narratives functions to increase group solidarity: Dolby points out that “perhaps the most telling function [of personal experience stories] is that they invite intimacy, a chance for the teller and the listener to know each other better” (1996, 558). For Dolby and Allison, then, the value of a folkloric approach to personal experience narratives is inherent and obvious.

My colleagues have asked me whether there are certain topics that Rain City narratives tend to explore. I went through the podcasts and my field notes of Rain City shows that I attended, and I found that the topics of Rain City narratives are actually quite varied. It seems to me that the subject matter of Rain City narratives does not stand alone in making them either individually compelling, or coherent with other Rain City narratives. In addition to compelling subject matter, my informants identify several features of the Rain City narrative which set it apart. The “best” stories told at Rain City share the element of (re)tellability (“You can tell it’s a good story because you want to retell it” [Karp F2012]), as well as other elements like surprise, humor, and a sense that the storyteller is telling the truth.

In this research, I have noticed strong similarities between the personal narratives told at Rain City and a few other genres (contemporary legend, folktale, and stand-up comedy). Before delving into these similarities, it is helpful to outline what Rain City narratives are not. Rain City narratives are many things, but they are not just any truth-

telling (or truth-asserting) narrative. Rain City narratives are not historical legends, certainly not “urban legends,” nor are they recitations, oral histories, folk drama, or even, usually, memorates.

A historical legend is a highly localized and historicized narrative told as true, sometimes concerning an individual (e.g. King Arthur). Such legends often answer existential questions that are of particular concern to the culture that circulates them, and tell of amazing things that happen to ordinary people (Dégh 1997, 487-488). These stories are not told by bystanders to the original events, as the events are said to have occurred in the fairly distant past. Though Rain City narratives are told as true, they are not historical legends, because they occurred in the very recent past and were directly experienced by their narrators.

Another variety of narrative told as true is the “urban legend.” Bill Ellis sees this term as problematic, since it has been used as “a popular term for a narrative concerning some aspect of modern life that is believed by its teller but is actually untrue” (Ellis 1997, 495). The term “urban legend” is problematic chiefly because of this scholarly bias. To describe it as “actually untrue” robs this genre of the active negotiation of truth that takes place between the teller and his/her audience. Most scholars prefer Paul Smith’s use of the term “contemporary legend,” a genre which provides an opportunity for a narrator to introduce a statement of belief, “out of which arise dialogue and debate” on the subject of truth (Smith 1997, 494). In what follows, I will discuss the strong similarities between the Rain City personal narratives and the genre of contemporary legend; for now, suffice it to say that Rain City narratives are not “urban legends” because they are believed by their tellers, audiences, and by this scholar, to be absolutely true.



One of the traditional genres studied by folklorists is the recitation. Recitations are “folk verse, rhymed popular poetry and prose either specifically intended in composition for recitation delivery or subsequently lending itself to it” (Bethke 1997, 695). Bethke adds that recitations are usually memorized (695). Rain City narratives are not recitations because they are not rhymed, nor memorized, nor “composed” in the strict sense of pen-on-paper story creation: instead, personal narratives arise organically out of lived experience and are refined through repeated performance. If you are a storyteller at Rain City, the organizers suggest that you “know how you’re gonna start, know how you’re gonna end” (Pinchin F2012), and even that you practice; however, they discourage you from memorizing your stories word for word. A memorized story comes across as too literary, and not natural or “authentic” enough. Rain City narratives are not recitations.

An oral history is a “spoken narrative recounting and commenting upon significant past events...within the informant’s lifetime” (Saltzman 1997, 452). Rain City narratives are not quite like oral histories. While both Rain City narratives and oral histories may “record the psychological truth about a community’s past and its beliefs about the present” (Saltzman 454), oral history does so by illuminating “what scholars or other recognized authorities determine to be important to the society at large” (Saltzman 452). Rain City, on the other hand, is interested in whichever stories are important to its participants. Rain City builds a show around the stories it receives.

Rain City narratives are performed orally and on stage. Another folkloric genre performed on stage is folk drama. Folk drama is “a theatrical performance given for a specific and cohesive group of people, wherein the actors and the audience are conscious both of their roles in the performance and of their shared identity as group members”

(Taft 1996, 208). The same definition could be applied to Rain City. However, one thing that all folk dramas have in common is that their performers are role-playing (Taft 1996, 208) – that is, they are not presenting themselves on stage, but are representing someone else (e.g. Santa Claus). Thomas Green calls this “mimesis,” noting that “the mimesis of the folk theatre deals in representation as opposed to the presentational qualities of other genres of verbal art” (Green 1978, 847). This is certainly not the case at Rain City, where performers are meant to be telling true stories from their own lived experience, and thus authentically representing themselves.

The last folklore genre which resembles the Rain City narrative is the memorate: “a personal experience narrative about an encounter with the supranormal” (Sweterlitsch 1996, 472). I had the fortune to hear a memorate performed at the “Under the Influence” show – a woman described an out-of-body experience that she had had during a church service during her teenage years. Melanie Ray also performed a memorate during the “Das Lexikon” show – one of the podcasts that I analyzed as part of this research. Ray told a story about the time when her young daughter was regularly seeing a ghost (13-Ray P2014). However, these are the only two stories I have heard at Rain City that deal with the supranormal. The vast majority of Rain City narratives are secular. Thus, although Rain City narratives may resemble memorates, most Rain City narratives are not memorates.

In what follows, I outline the Rain City narrative’s similarity to three previously acknowledged folkloric genres (folk tale, stand-up comedy, and contemporary legend). Classifying Rain City narratives is useful insofar as genre “pertains crucially to negotiations of identity and power – by invoking a particular genre, producers of

discourse assert (tacitly or explicitly) that they possess the authority needed . . . to recontextualize [their discourse] in the current discursive setting” (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 226). In other words, it is interesting to note the ways in which Rain City storytellers use certain genres to settle into their role as storyteller, and to signal to the audience that a performance is taking place. Ultimately, whatever else it may be, the Rain City narrative is unquestionably a form of “verbal art,” as distinguished by its performative nature and defined by Bauman:

Performance, as we conceive of it . . . is a unifying thread tying together the marked, segregated [aesthetic] genres and other spheres of verbal behavior into a general unified conception of verbal art as a way of speaking. Verbal art may comprehend both myth narration and the speech expected of certain members of society whenever they open their mouths, and it is performance that brings them together in culture-specific and variable ways, ways that are to be discovered ethnographically within each culture and community. (Bauman 1975, 291)

### **Story as Tale: The importance of structure and traditionality**

One of my informants, journalist Erin Millar, told me that “a story always has to be about someTHING happening to someONE. Sometimes you get mixed up between a topic and a story” (Millar F2012). Another definition of “story” is presented by Amy Shuman:

Stories, experiences, and events are different entities. Roughly, experiences are the stream of overlapping activities that make up everyday life. Events, unlike experiences, have potentially identifiable beginnings and endings. Events are a category of experience; stories are one of the forms that transform experiences into bounded units with beginnings, endings, and foci, and events are one kind of bounded unit. A story is the representation of an event segmented into sequentially arranged units. (Shuman 1986, 20)

Shuman adds that “narratives impose order and causality upon reality” (Shuman 1986, 21). Without such order and causality, the recounting of one’s experiences would be endless and meaningless – it could go on forever without making a point.

Pinchin and Karp would agree with this assessment, having witnessed firsthand the flop of a performance that came across more like a rant than a story:

We've only had to cut off one storyteller, who talked for twenty minutes! It was the worst! That's – speaking of the worst story, that was the worst story – long, and it was kind of racist, and it had no – it was like a big, long ramble. Like...no effort to connect to the audience. It was the worst, and I was standing at the side of the stage going \*CUT, CUT, CUT\* and she just didn't notice me. Yeah. It went down in infamy. [. . .] We've developed a better instinct for people who will just get up on stage and rant. People who want to talk about their feelings – that's actually something that we have to be aware of. Some people think that it's a platform for them to just get up on stage and talk about how they feel? Instead of providing a narrative, something that actually happened to them. (Pinchin F2012)

Again, Shuman would emphasize that “not all accounts of experience are stories, and not all stories recount personal experiences; personal experience stories elaborate events without stretching them beyond the limits of credibility” (Shuman 1986, 22). It is important to note that when telling a story, one should not be merely recounting experiences: one should be imposing meaning on a select, bounded set of one's own experiences. “Narratives do not recapitulate experiences; they convert experiences into a story” (Shuman 1986, 157).

How can storytellers avoid a story flop? As mentioned already, Karen Pinchin wrote a list of storytelling tips for new storytellers, based on tips that the New York based radio show, “The Moth,” gives out to its storytellers. “Things like: Don't rant. The audience is not your therapist. Know how you're gonna start, know how you're gonna end. That kind of thing. Practice!” (Pinchin F2012). According to Kaitlin Fontana, “a good story uses the fiction toolkit to interpret non-fiction” (Fontana F2012). Another storyteller, Erin Millar, also feels that “the elements of fiction” are necessary. What is it

about the elements of fiction that make a non-fiction story more engaging? Perhaps these are not the "elements of fiction" but the "elements of a good story."

Shuman describes the relationship between personal experience narratives and fiction:

Personal experience narratives present a problem for the categorization of fiction....The personal narrative may be considered the least standardizable type of text in terms of authenticity (the text demands uniqueness), and yet may be formulaic in terms of following a familiar scenario for the presentation of similar stories. (192)

Thus the personal narrative requires both a recognizable structure, and a certain uniqueness. As discussed in Chapter Three, opening and closing formulas – very important in signalling that a folktale is taking place – are equally important at Rain City. Opening and closing formulas signal to the audience that a narrative event is taking place, and therefore function as cues for audience behavior. According to Gail de Vos and Anna Altmann,

Folktales, as distinct from myths, legends, and fables, are stories that are intended to entertain. They ... are regarded as fiction and often flagged as such by opening formulas like 'Once upon a time' and closing formulas like 'and they lived happily ever after.' These opening and closing formulas separate the story from the lived experience of the teller and audience." (De Vos and Altmann 1999, 7)

At Rain City, opening formulas like "Okay, so..." signal to the audience that the preamble is over and the story is beginning – it is time to really pay attention. Closing formulas such as "Thank you" signal to the audience that the narrative event has concluded, and it is time to applaud. Although these opening and closing formulas differ from those of folktales – especially insofar as Rain City narratives are not supposed to take the listener to a new storytelling space, but are instead supposed to arise from the

lived experience and shared worldview of the teller and audience – they are equally important in signifying that a narrative event is taking place.

When I asked the question, “What makes a good story?” several of my informants immediately responded that it has a “beginning, middle, and end” (McCuaig F2012, Hamburg F2012, Bynoe F2012). In other words, it needs some kind of narrative arc. Kevin Cherney indicated that a good story needs what he called a good narrative: it needs to be framed in such a way that the listener can experience highs and lows throughout the story (Cherney F2012). Pinchin felt that it should be “short and interesting,” to keep the pace of the evening going, and to keep the audience comfortable (Pinchin F2012).

Most of my informants also said that a good story has a surprise twist, or turning point. Colleen Kimmett emphasized that “in every good story, at some point, there’s this turning point where there’s a surprise or a shift, or something unexpected” (Kimmett F2012). In William Labov’s analysis, this is called the “most reportable event” (Labov 2013, 23). According to Labov, “the most reportable event may be defined as the one that is least likely to have occurred and has the greatest effect on the lives and life chances of the participants. It is what the narrative is about” (Labov 2013, 23). Veda Hille supports this analysis: “A good story has to have some surprises – you have to think it’s going one way and then something else happens” (Hille F2012). Marianela Ramos-Capelo agrees that a good story needs an interesting motivation, some kind of hook: “there’s this problem – how is it going to be resolved at the end?” (Ramos-Capelo F2012). Hille adds that “there has to be some recognition of something totally foreign or super-familiar – someone has to go through a lot of change” (Hille F2012). While this pattern may sound similar to the pattern of a folktale (and in part, it is), it also betrays one of the

main differences between a Rain City story and a folktale: “Folktale characters, whether human or supernatural, are without depth. They have no inner struggles, no emotional ambiguities” (De Vos and Altmann, 12). Further, “Because the folktale avoids psychological exploration, the quest and its trials are always externalized into the physical world. The heroes never struggle with their own dark sides, acquire self-knowledge, or change in any interior way” (De Vos and Altmann, 19). This of course is a major difference between the folktale hero and the Rain City narrator: most Rain City narratives are specifically designed to be a chronicle of the narrator’s personal development and interior change.

In the separate genre of autobiography, L. L. Langness and Gelya Frank note that the process of telling one’s own story is “a creative act, rich with symbolic possibilities and full of potential for self-discovery and transformation” (Langness and Frank 1981, 95). When telling a story about one’s own experience, one is chronicling inner development as well as outer change.

Another significant difference between a Rain City narrative and a folktale is that a folktale has “no identifiable author,” so “the narrative voice within the story is without individual personality, never self-conscious” (De Vos and Altmann, 8). At Rain City, the narrator is not only intrinsically involved in the story – the story being autobiographical – but is also very self-conscious, often reflecting on his or her own inner struggles throughout the narrative and relating them to his or her life in the present. Elizabeth Elizabeth Tonkin notes that “storytellers structure their stories to convey a particular self at a particular moment to particular listeners” (Tonkin 1990, 34).

Structure is important at Rain City, and in this sense, Rain City narratives are similar to folktales. However, it is important at Rain City that storytellers not structure their narratives too heavily. Sara Bynoe thinks it is possible for oral storytelling to sound too scripted, and suggests that when telling a personal story on stage, you should “know the beginning of your story, know the plot points and how to get there, and if you forget things, they weren’t important. And have a good strong ending” (Bynoe F2012).

### **Story as Stand-up Comedy: The importance of humor, relatability, and audience connection**

Storytelling is joke telling. It’s knowing your punchline. Your ending. Knowing that everything you’re saying, from the first sentence to the last, is leading to a singular goal. And ideally, confirming some truth that deepens our understanding of who we are as human beings. (Stanton 2012)

During our interviews, many of my informants mentioned the comedic element of Rain City narratives. My informants seemed to feel that humor – especially the ability to laugh at oneself – was an important part of the Rain City experience. As mentioned in Chapter Two, early critical receptions of Rain City compared it to stand-up comedy (Slaven 2010; Charlesworth 2011). In Chapter Three, I argued that if audience response is anything to go by, self-deprecating humor is a successful storytelling strategy at Rain City. Overall, my informants felt that humor is integral to a successful Rain City story:

For me, I don’t know if it’s a coping mechanism, but humor is key to a good story, too, I find. It doesn’t always need to be funny, but...even in the worst of stories, if you can find some sort of angle that kind of...allows people to accept the story, but also know that it’s okay. You know? (Ashworth F2013)

Lizzy Karp and various other informants agreed that the element of humor can be a compelling addition to a story (Karp F2012, McCuaig F2012, Cherney F2012, Ramos-



Capelo F2012). Karp says, “it is the funny and the true that resonate with people. Those are always the stories that people walk away from Rain City and they talk about” (Karp F2012). On the topic of “the true,” Melanie Ray finds it distracting when she listens to storytellers who are not being honest – it “breaks the magic” (Ray F2012). Karen Pinchin agrees that “you can tell when someone is being inauthentic on stage” (Pinchin F2012).

Pinchin’s use of the word “inauthentic” opens the door to a problematic term that was nevertheless important to my informants: “authenticity.” Wendy Welch notes that there is “power to authenticity, and therefore a desire for it amongst the general public” (Welch 2007, 80). According to Welch, “like ‘tradition,’ ‘authenticity’ sets apart a distinct group that operates in a certain way. Who sets the boundaries of the group so defined and where those boundaries are set may be decided by the people themselves in what they choose to display” (Welch 2007, 73). Pinchin’s use of the word “inauthentic” does not stand alone among in my interviews – my other informants, in particular Cory Ashworth, were very concerned with authenticity.

Welch has explored various understandings of “authenticity” in a professional storytelling context. She notes that authenticity may be on the one hand a context-specific negotiation between storyteller and observer (Welch 2007, 77) – a quality that the audience either assigns to a performer or allows that performer to claim – or, on the other hand, something that follows from an intrinsic and authoritative part of the performer’s identity. Welch notes that, for example, “[a]n authority exists in being an identified member of an ethnicity, an authority that transcends scholarly or artistic research. Authority is intrinsically bound up with authenticity” (Welch 2007, 80).

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of a storyteller's authenticity in the context of Rain City is what Welch calls "emotional authenticity" (Welch 2007, 68) or "emotional honesty" (Welch 2007, 69). According to Welch, "Art that is emotionally honest, or sincere, is authentic. Emotional honesty, or sincerity, is individualistic, yet seeks to touch a responsive place in a wide human audience. . . . Art . . . offers glimpses into human experience that spark recognition from its audience" (Welch 2007, 71).

Authenticity is an important term – an important feeling – for both storyteller and audience at Rain City. Like the stand-up comic, the Rain City storyteller aims to present him or herself as authentic.

### **Authentic stories vs. authentic stand-up**

Kevin Cherney has never told a story at Rain City, but has attended every show from the beginning. I was interested in his observations and opinions about the stories told at Rain City, since he has experienced all of them from the same standpoint as an audience member, and continues to come back for more. Although Cherney feels that there is more diversity in "just storytelling" than in "stand-up comedy plus storytelling," and although he would therefore like to see a few more serious stories at Rain City, he noted that "people are far more likely to tell a wacky, hilarious story – they're fun to tell, and people will always respond positively" (Cherney F2012). In Cherney's opinion, the more people tell funny stories at Rain City, the more they reinforce the "funny story trend" (Cherney F2012). Ultimately, however, Cherney reflects that the most valuable part of storytelling is the relatability of the story. He adds that the more an audience can relate to the stories, the more valuable those stories are to that audience (Cherney F2012).

From there, the storyteller has more freedom to tell embarrassing or humbling details, since the audience will be more forgiving. Ian Brodie confirms that the same is true in stand-up comedy: the more an audience can relate to a stand-up comedian, the more freedom the comedian will have:

Like conversation, or legendry, or any interpersonal exchange, a second related factor in stand-up comedy is the establishment of some form of relationship between teller and listener. The comedian needs to provide credentials which the audience will accept so that he or she may speak to this group on this subject...the audience accepts the performer as an intimate and, as we do among friends, we permit them a certain latitude in their opinions and the freedom to express them for we know that they mean well. (264)

Comedy may in fact be the ideal way to test the waters for like-minded audience members: the ability to laugh at one another's jokes can be a marker of existing community, or what Elliott Oring calls a "community of knowledge." Oring states that "The sharing of jokes presumes a community of knowledge that can be readily accessed through mere hints and allusions" (Oring 1992, 8). In other words, the fact that the Rain City audience is so entertained by the jokes of its storytellers indicates an existing understanding between them. For an example of this phenomenon, I turn to Jessica O'Neill's story from "Under the Influence":

Hi. So this is a story about how a newly single, thirty-year-old student ended up living in a crack house. And having to move out three weeks later with a police escort. Now when I say crack house, I don't mean like a cracky-looking house, I mean actually a rooming house where people actively smoked crack. Um, so how did this seemingly responsible, normally cautious girl standing before you end up living in an SRO (Single Room Occupancy building – a house wherein individual tenants rent individual rooms)? Well, I had just ended a five-year relationship, and for those of you who have ended long relationships, you're really eager to be your own person, and I really wanted my new living space to say something about me. And uh...[audience laughter] And I wanted to live in a heritage building. Now, I am a heritage nerd. I am a walking tour guide for a living, I do archival research for fun, in my free time, and I actually have tattoos of the marine building and the Ovaltine Café sign on my body. So it's a big deal for me, and I wanted to live in a

character house. But on a student's budget, it just didn't seem possible. Until I saw the Craigslist ad. Now, one bedroom in a character home near city hall – large one bedroom – 825 a month. Now you guys know I had found the Vancouver equivalent of a unicorn [audience laughter]. (7-O'Neill P2012)

O'Neill mentions the marine building and the Ovaltine Café – both distinctive Vancouver heritage buildings, but not famous among outsiders. These allusions indicate that O'Neill expects her audience not only to be comprised of locals, but also to be familiar with local downtown heritage buildings. O'Neill is looking for members of her subculture – or perhaps she already expects to find them in the audience. When O'Neill jokes about “finding the Vancouver equivalent of a unicorn” (7-O'Neill P2012), the entire audience laughs because most Vancouverites understand the difficulty of finding affordable housing in Vancouver. O'Neill has tested the waters with references to local Vancouverite concerns, and has found that she and her audience are part of the same community of knowledge. For O'Neill, as the storyteller, this means that she can make local jokes and references without having to explain them. For local storytellers who are part of the same community of knowledge, Rain City is an easy place to tell jokes and have them well-received.

Melanie Ray, a professional storyteller, told me that storytelling is "all about community – there's no fourth wall. It's you and me and the story, and the less it's like a play, the better" (Ray F2012). Ray emphasized the responsibility of the storyteller to "do your job right" – a good storyteller must speak loud enough, be honest, and tell stories that he/she loves (Ray F2012).

As Cherney points out, "a good story is part content and part delivery" (Cherney F2012). Kaitlin Fontana agrees. Fontana, a writer and improv comedian who once told a

story at Rain City, emphasized the importance of providing a good experience for the audience. She practiced her story beforehand, was careful to keep it to seven minutes, and "watched what else was happening over the course of the evening to try to provide the best possible experience for the audience" (Fontana F2012). As Fontana is a professional improv comedian, she is trained to react to minute cues from the audience, and to alter her performance accordingly. However, there are some basic performance strategies that help the audience to engage with the storyteller. Rain City narratives are inherently a verbal storytelling genre, but the voice is not the only performer: body language is also important. For instance, in the "Under the Influence" show, Shauna Johannesen captured the audience with her repetitive body language, each movement corresponding to different elements of the story. Bynoe points out that it is important to have stage presence ("plant your feet, don't fiddle with the mic"), enthusiasm, repetition, and to be able to laugh at yourself. "A lot of it's in the telling" (Bynoe F2012).

Ian Brodie has completed a study on stand-up comedy as a folkloric genre (Brodie 2009). Intriguingly, the genre of stand-up comedy has much in common with legend-telling. Brodie explains: "In the flow of talk that comprises the stand-up comedy routine, there are times when the talk is an incontestable truth, times when it is an occasion for questioning and engaging with the truth proposition, and times when it is not true, but in the sense of 'fiction' not 'falsehood' (241). Similarities between Rain City narratives and legend-telling will be explored in the next section. Brodie continues:

"'Verisimilitude' is the order of the day: the account is expressly subjective but implies a recognizable truthfulness therein. The comedian is judged relevant by the accuracy of the worldview presented: it needs to be credible" (266). In other words, the task of a stand-

up comedian is not to relate experiences exactly as they happened, but rather to narrate events and experiences in such a way that they seem true.

Brodie's analysis is reminiscent of Erving Goffman's point in *The presentation of self in everyday life*:

[The audience is] asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (Goffman 1959, 17)

As I discuss throughout this thesis, the same verisimilitude is required of Rain City storytellers. The audience wants to believe that Rain City stories are “authentic” and “real” – ultimately, the audience wants to believe that they are being told a “true story.” Amanda McCuaig, a visual artist who currently works at the Museum of Vancouver, describes Rain City as something “very sincere, that’s about people sharing themselves” (McCuaig F2012).

### **Story as Contemporary Legend: The Importance of Truth**

When describing the stories told at Rain City, my informants unanimously agreed that a “good story” must also be “true.” Kaitlin Fontana emphasized that Rain City storytellers should “tell the truth and tell it well” (Fontana 2012). When I heard my informants repeatedly describing Rain City narratives as “true stories,” and when I explored the possibility that some of the stories may simply be “stories told as truth,” I began to suspect that Rain City narratives were not just funny stories with a beginning, middle, and end. Thus far I have explored the similarities between Rain City narratives and, on the one hand, folktale, and the other hand, stand-up comedy. In the following

discussion, I show that Rain City narratives have even more in common with another folkloric genre: the contemporary legend.

Wilhelm Nicolaisen once asserted that we would understand legends better if we looked at them as personal experience narratives rather than “deliberate, artful, traditionally sanctioned fabulation” (1985, 218). I would explore the reverse possibility and make the opposite point: it seems to me that the study of personal narrative would benefit from looking at Rain City personal narratives through the framework of legends. My springboard for this belief is that at Rain City, a good story is (in Bascom’s words [1965]) a story told as truth.

In framing Rain City narratives as contemporary legends, I have found several congruities, and at least one incongruity. The congruities between legend and Rain City narrative include the following:

- Both contemporary legends and Rain City narratives are stories told as truth
- Both contemporary legend truth and Rain City narrative truth are actively negotiated by teller and listeners (“No way! I can’t believe that actually happened!”)
- The story has a moral (e.g. O’Neill’s story from “Under the Influence”).

One incongruity between Rain City narratives and contemporary legends is that legends “happened to a friend of a friend” whereas Rain City narratives almost universally “happened to me.” The rest of this section, however, will be devoted to the congruities listed above.

Other legend-like factors that arose from my interviews include the following: A true story is believable – the listener believes it actually happened – and a true story is relatable – the listener can identify with the storyteller, and can insert him or herself into

the events she describes. In order for a story to be believable, however, it is unclear how factual it must be. Although a well-told (yet non-factual) contemporary legend may be believable, my informants feel that the believability of Rain City narratives comes from their tellers' personal, lived experience of those narratives.

Timothy Tangherlini notes that “much of the believability of the legend resides in the close link between the daily reality of the tradition participants and that found in the legend” (1996, 437). Thus stories set in familiar Vancouver locales or stories describing typical Vancouver situations (odd housing dilemmas, for instance) appeal to the Rain City audience. Jessica O'Neill's story at “Under the Influence” is one example of such a story. As we saw above, O'Neill story details her experience of living in a Vancouver crack house.

O'Neill's story addresses some common Vancouverite concerns, chief among them affordable housing. Vancouver is a very expensive city to live in. Many twenty-somethings move elsewhere after a few years in Vancouver, seeking a more accessible housing market. In fact, Karen Pinchin and her husband moved to New Brunswick in 2013, in order to enter the much more affordable housing market on the East Coast. It was at this point that Cory Ashworth took over as co-host of Rain City Chronicles.

So when O'Neill says of her affordable heritage house, “Now you guys know I had found the Vancouver equivalent of a unicorn,” the audience laughs because everyone in Vancouver – especially twenty-somethings straight out of university – struggles with the same inaccessible housing market. Tangherlini notes that another function of the legend is to



organize complex environmental and cultural forces, tap beliefs, and express fears and values common to tradition participants. Telling legends allows people an opportunity to explore their outer reality through the symbolically constructed inner reality of the legend as well as the opportunity to express both anxieties and aspirations. (1996, 439)

O'Neill's story clearly expresses fears and values common to her peers in the Rain City audience. But does her story have the "symbolically constructed inner reality" that Tangherlini mentions? Legends, according to Tangherlini, have at least three structural components: Firstly, the Orientation, which sets the stage for the action; secondly, the Complicating Action, which describes the event itself; and thirdly, the Result, which relates what happened as a result of the Complicating Action. O'Neill's story has all three of these elements. The Orientation of her story is the context that she provides for her story: The fact that she had just broken up with her partner, a renewed desire to be her own person, details about her love for heritage buildings, the fact that she was on a student's budget, and the Craigslist ad which led her to an affordable (though slightly dilapidated) heritage home. The Complicating Action of her story begins when she moves into the house and ends two weeks later when she discovers that not only were the previous residents of her room "meth-heads" (7-O'Neill P2012), but that the other residents of the house are all actively smoking crack, and that one particularly violent resident is determined to get rid of her. The Result of O'Neill's story is that she calls the police, who arrest the violent housemate and escort O'Neill off the premises. Ultimately, O'Neill learns that sometimes believing what we want to believe can get us into some scary situations.

Is it necessary for the events described in O'Neill's story to have taken place, in order for us to believe that they did? Is it necessary that O'Neill lived the experiences she

describes in order for us to relate to those experiences? According to participants in Rain City, it is crucial that O'Neill (and all other storytellers) be describing their own lived experience. However, there are no fact-checkers at Rain City – no truth police. What is important to the Rain City audience is that they feel they can trust the narrator, and that they can believe what the narrator tells them to be true. What really makes one Rain City story stand out from the rest begins with the believability and suspense that Brunvand identified as typical of legends. Rain City narratives are fundamentally, at their core, stories told as truth. The most successful stories are also received as truth by the supportive Rain City audience, whose expectation is to be told the truth.

Reflecting on the difference between what she called “real” and “not real” stories, Veda Hille told me that “as a new mother, any story about kids being injured or killed is horrifying in a whole new way, regardless of how true it is” (Hille F2012). She went on to say that “I think, really, we just want good stories. ‘Cause if we think they’re real, it’s the same” (Hille F2012). For Hille, a fictional story told as truth – like a legend – can carry the same emotional impact as a true story.

Following in this vein, Pocius argues that “the fake and the real exist simultaneously, and people finally pay little attention to whether they are witnessing something that is genuine or spurious. The two exist simultaneously, and often judgments about a cultural expression come from how well the two blend together” (Pocius 2005, 344). Wendy Welch agrees that “It is only social scientists who have an interest in genuine versus fake” (Welch 2007, 74). Elliott Oring adds that “the participants in legend communication must *entertain* the truth of the account. This is not to say that all must believe the account to be true, but only to admit that the issue of belief

is central to the communication between the parties” (Oring 1996, 326). Nicolaisen chimes in that “it does not perhaps matter whether such stories are true or not, neither to the storyteller nor the listener, so long as they satisfy the criteria for believability” (Nicolaisen 1985, 218). Further, according to Amy Shuman, “Stories that purport to report actual experiences represent a negotiable reality. Reports of past events may appear to convey information, but at the same time, they also demonstrate relationships between tellers, hearers, characters, and others” (Shuman 1986, 20-21). Again, Shuman reflects that

Stories categorize experience. The relationship between stories and experience is always problematic and can be stated in many ways. Most generally, it is a relationship between reality and the representation or appearance of reality, or between signifier and signified, or between language and action, or between art and life. (20)

While all of this makes sense from an academic standpoint, most of my informants would balk at how casually the issue of truth is treated here. As it turns out, it is not enough for an Rain City narrative to be merely told as truth; one of my informants’ strictest requirements for a good Rain City story is that it actually happened – and happened to the teller. Cory Ashworth insists:

It has to be first-person and completely truthful. Honest, authentic, true, and always in first-person. ...For me a good story is 100% truth, and it comes from in you, and it’s not a brain story, but it’s actually a story lived. And not a story that you think people will want to hear, or “this story will teach a really great lesson” – it’s gotta be a story that literally is in you to tell, and you’ve lived it. ...If you’ve lived the story, tell it. But if you haven’t, unless there’s a higher purpose or reason for you to tell the story, there’s no point in it. (Ashworth F2013)

Melanie Ray agrees that no matter what story you are telling, that story has to come from inside of you. She emphasizes that in her experience, as part of the professional storytelling world, “you need to really understand your story before you can tell it” (Ray

F2012). Indeed, Bennett notes that “in our culture, truthfulness is considered a *sine qua non* of meaningful communication” (Bennett 1996, 35). But how can we tell that someone is telling the truth (or believes they are telling the truth)?

In Bennett’s analysis of different contemporary legend performances, she notes several features of performance that are characteristic of a narrative believed by its teller to be false. A sceptical narrator will use a formulaic opening that distances him or her from the story, such as “Have you heard the one about...” (Bennett 1996, 29). The narrator will be vague about persons, places, and time (Bennett 1996, 29). The story will lack a proper narrative arc, omit the orientation and coda completely, and focus on the complicating action (Bennett 1996, 29). The ending of the story will sound a lot like the punch line of a joke – brief, pithy, and anticlimactic (Bennett 1996, 29). Overall, a sceptical narrator will distance him- or herself from the narrative he or she is telling.

When the narrator believes their story to be true, however, he or she will often make a direct statement to that effect, such as “this may sound funny, but it is totally true” (Bennett 1996, 28). The narrator will be very specific about people, places, and times, often pausing in the narrative to describe or elaborate on specific details (Bennett 1996, 28-29; see also Fine 1992 on the importance of detail in contemporary legend). The narrator will also present his or her story in deliberate oral paragraphs (such as we saw in Chapter Three of this thesis, throughout Pat Kelly’s story) and will speak with conviction and energy (Bennett 1996, 29). Rain City storytellers use all of these truth-telling techniques. It is evident that whether or not the stories told at Rain City are factually accurate, their tellers believe them to be absolutely true. It is this sense of truthfulness

that has an impact on the audience – and which makes me feel that Rain City narratives most closely resemble contemporary legends.

Hille later explained that she often retells stories from her friends' lives, and that, in order for those stories to have impact, it is essential that those stories are real. "There's something about saying 'Wait'll you hear what happened to my friend this time'[that has an impact]" (Hille F2012). Ultimately, then, Hille agrees that at least where retellability is concerned, reality and actuality of an experience are important. Ashworth reflects:

There's always gonna be one story that just blows my mind. And it's either the person telling it, or the way they surprise you, or if they're just being real and truthful and authentic...like, I always learn something about myself or about other people, at every Rain City, and that's what I love about it. I just love that I can go [to Rain City] and not know, and it's always so unpolished and so raw. And that's what I'm always on a hunt for, and I've found it at Rain City. (Ashworth F2013)

It is not even enough for the story to be authentic – the storyteller must be authentic as well. Amanda McCuaig, a Vancouver-based visual artist, feels that Rain City is inviting precisely because people are exposing themselves in a particular way – in total honesty and sincerity. For McCuaig, storytelling is "the difference between people giving information and giving themselves" (McCuaig F2012). Pinchin agrees: "People need to be willing to share parts of themselves that are special – whether that's funny or sad or touching or angry or stupid or...whatever. They need to be willing to become intimate on stage. And that's far more easily said than done" (Pinchin F2012). Monica Hamburg likes hearing peoples' stories at Rain City because "it makes you realize you're not alone. It's not just you" (Hamburg F2012). Hamburg especially likes stories "when people are not trying to be super cool" – when they are more concerned with telling their story in an open, honest way, and they reveal the dark side of themselves (Hamburg F2012).

McCuaig, Pinchin, and Hamburg are all hinting at the emotional authenticity discussed in Chapter One. Emotional authenticity, for them, is what makes a story compelling.

In this chapter, I discussed my informants' response to the question "what makes a good story?" I found that based on the elements they describe, the Rain City personal narrative is best contrasted with the contemporary legend, stand-up comedy, and the folktale. I also found that one of my informants' primary concerns in assessing Rain City narratives was how "authentic" each narrative was – in other words, how "real" or "genuine" the storyteller appeared to be on stage. In what follows, I analyze this concern with authenticity.

It is tempting to try to pinpoint and describe the authenticity that my informants experienced at Rain City shows. However, as demonstrated in Chapter One, the scholarship is riddled with conflicting ideas about authenticity. In fact, the question "what is authenticity?" may be missing the point entirely. Therefore, in the next chapter, I follow Bendix in shifting my attention slightly:

Rather than giving in to the temptation of constructing new, elusive authenticities, cultural scholarship aware of the deceptive nature of authenticity concepts may turn its attention toward learning to tell the story of why humans search for authenticity and why this search is fraught with such agony. (Bendix 227-228)

Going forward, I am interested in questions like: "What is the big deal about authenticity? Why do we crave authenticity so deeply?" This, I believe, is the thread that connects Rain City's beginnings to its present success and future goals. This is the thread that makes Rain City so compelling, especially in the community of Vancouver. If we can get a good grip on why Rain City attendees value and seek out authenticity, the secrets of Rain City's success will unravel before us.

### **Chapter Five: Personal voice, constructed identity, and being heard.**

So far I have described Rain City as an event, and I have argued that the stories told at Rain City are akin to contemporary legends (though Rain City narratives also draw on techniques from stand-up comedy and the telling of folktales). The connection I have drawn between Rain City narratives and contemporary legends will be helpful in the following discussion, as I may now draw upon contemporary legend research to determine the function of Rain City narratives. In the following, I argue that the stories told at Rain City serve many functions, but function primarily to foster a sense of identity and belonging. Further, I argue, using Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, that authenticity (or honesty, openness, and lack of pretentiousness) is crucial to fostering this sense of belonging.

According to Mark Glazer, following Bronislaw Malinowski, "all folklore materials are a function of a human need, a social and structural necessity, or a device for social cohesion" (Glazer 1997, 388; Malinowski 1939, 963-964). Contemporary legends serve multiple functions, including the delivery of moral messages. In Chapter Three, I showed that many Rain City stories end with a moral or a warning. This is a typical feature of contemporary legends, and is very common at Rain City (For instance, as Sarah Buchanan taught us, "Never turn your back on a frightened bear!" [8-Buchanan P2012]). Contemporary legends also aim to justify "why we behave in particular ways in certain situations" (Smith 1997, 494). Shauna Johannesen's story of watching porn with her boss is a good example of a story that justifies why we behave the way we do. Finally, contemporary legends "allow us to express our fears, provide commentary and

explanations of abnormal situations or strange behavior, or warn against involvement in particular types of situations” (Smith 1997, 494). Jessica O’Neill’s story is an excellent example: O’Neill comments on her extreme living situation in a crack house, expresses her fears about her cocaine-addicted roommates, and warns the audience not to be as naïve as she was in pursuing a character home in Vancouver. All of the above functions of the contemporary legend can be applied to other Rain City narratives.

However, Rain City narratives serve another function beyond those of the contemporary legend. This function can be described as “spontaneous communitas,” – or direct, face-to-face connection – a term coined by Victor Turner and discussed in his *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play* (1982, 48). When a group is interested in spontaneous communitas, that group will “place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness. [Individuals will] feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now...” (48). Indeed, these are exactly the concerns addressed by my informants when discussing “good stories.” At Rain City, the best-received stories are those which are perceived as honest and unpretentious – natural, relatable, etc. When they discuss how “real” or “authentic” a storyteller has been, my informants are really measuring how effectively that storyteller has contributed to the general mood of spontaneous communitas.

Many of my informants, when discussing Rain City, described “sharing” their story at Rain City as opposed to “telling” it. Although many of my informants for this research used the terms “sharing” and “telling” interchangeably to describe the act of presenting one’s story (on stage at Rain City), this terminology difference may be important to pay



attention to. From what I can understand from my informants, “telling” a story is unidirectional – it’s me telling you something, projecting something towards you.

“Sharing” a story feels more like a dialogue or exchange. Karen Pinchin reflects:

"Sharing" seems like more of an exchange – it’s more like there are two parties involved. The thing that is so magical – and this probably comes from my background in myth and symbol – but stories are universal. The reason why people are able to relate to each other when someone is up on stage telling a story – the reason why they’re so captivated – is 50% that it’s a good story, and the person is interesting and they’re telling it well, but it’s also that while the person is telling the story up there on the stage, they’re seeing themselves reflected back in the story. They’re thinking of things that happened to themselves in their own life. They’re relating. The audience is engaging in an action simultaneously as the storyteller is telling the story. And in that way I think “sharing” is more accurate. . . People can’t relate to performed stories. They can be entertained by them, but you can’t relate to them in the same way. I can’t. (Pinchin F2012)

Essentially, then, the emic term "sharing" functions in exactly the same way as the etic term "telling," except the term "sharing stories" involves the connotation of dialogue with the audience. In some cases, that dialogue is overt and spoken aloud, as during "Under the Influence" when Allie Quelch lost her place and the audience actually called out encouragements to her ("Try again! Go back!"). Some storytellers even ask for audience participation, as did Wong Wing Su during "Das Lexikon:" "Now this is an audience participation story. I hope you'll participate. When I say, 'big red truck,' I'd like you to make the sound of a truck, like 'vroom vroom vroom.' Can you do that for me? Let's try that. Big red truck. [audience: 'Vroom vroom vroom'] Thank you" (13-Su P2014). In other cases, the dialogue is silent and implied, as during a sad story when audience members begin to cry (for me, this happened during Cory Ashworth's story at "Family Matters"). When the audience feels involved, a mood of spontaneous

communitas is achieved, and the atmosphere in the room begins to foster a sense of belonging.

Related to the concept of "telling" versus "sharing" is the concept of a "performance space" versus a "storytelling space." Pinchin used the terms "performance space" and "storytelling space" during our interview, and went on to describe their meaning. She identified a difference between a "performance space" and a "storytelling space" by describing for me various venue concerns that she and Karp took into consideration when creating their storytelling space. They wanted their storytelling space to feel like a safe place, and so they decided to avoid venues where the stage was elevated too high, or where there was a lot of bleacher-style seating. The size of the venue was important: it should not be able to hold more than 300 people. It should feel cozy. The lighting should be bright enough for the audience to see the storyteller and the storyteller to see the audience, but there should definitely not be bright spotlights on the storytellers (Pinchin F2012). All of these considerations reflect the hosts' care not to let the storyteller feel alienated. It is essential, at Rain City, for the storytellers and audience to feel comfortable together.

Although Pinchin did not mention the importance of the microphone, Ian Brodie has written on the importance of the microphone for fostering an intimate connection with the audience (Brodie 2008, 158-159). The microphone allows storytellers to use their regular speaking voices, rather than shouting to address the crowd. When addressing a room of 200 people, the difference in tone, volume, etc. is substantial. A storyteller with a microphone can use the full dynamic range of his or her voice, from a whisper to a shout (though he or she will usually use a natural speaking tone). This creates the

“illusion of intimacy” required to convey certain types of personal information (Brodie 2008, 158) and ultimately to foster spontaneous *communitas*.

There are also interpersonal concerns involved in creating a storytelling space fit for *communitas*. Pinchin and Karp took it upon themselves to introduce storytellers to one another before each show – to say to them, “both of you are about to have this shared experience” (Pinchin F2012). They would remind people to be normal on stage – to be their real, “authentic” selves, not their public selves – and as hosts, they would attempt to present themselves in as welcoming a way as possible. Here again is Turner’s spontaneous *communitas*: Rain City hosts and storytellers seek an honest, open experience through which they can come face-to-face with other people in direct connection.

Pinchin and Karp tried to appear warm, welcoming, and casual on stage, introducing themselves at each show so that Rain City would not begin to feel like a clique (Pinchin F2012). Brodie notes that stand-up comedians use similar techniques to avoid alienating their audience: “Microphones alone cannot bring intimacy between performer and audience. The audience must know something about the performer, locating her within their own framework” (Brodie 2008, 170). Brodie reflects that comedians often relate to the audience by sharing personal experience narratives (170).

I have mentioned the “intimacy” between storyteller and audience, but the word “intimacy” does not quite describe the feeling in the room during a Rain City show. Pinchin describes it as a “magical feeling” in the air. I contend that ultimately, at Rain City, the storyteller and the audience are trying to grasp “authenticity.” Further, I contend that this authenticity can most accurately be felt as a sense of “belonging.”

## Identity and Belonging

According to Gerald Pocius, “community existence is not just residing in a place, it is belonging” (Pocius 2000, 25). Andrew Stanton, creator of such popular Pixar movies as *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo* – movies that have connected with a wide swathe of the public – has this to say about stories:

Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmations that our lives have meaning. And nothing does a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories. It can cross the barriers of time, past, present, and future, and allow us to experience the similarities between ourselves and others, real and imagined. (Stanton 2012)

Elliott Oring wrote in 1994 that “personal identity and its articulation with folklore forms and processes should merit increasing attention” (Oring 1994, 226). For a few of the storytellers I interviewed, telling a story at Rain City brought up questions of collective identity – aspects of their personal identity derived from experiences and expressions common to a group (for more on collective identity see Oring 1994, 212). McCuaig appreciates stories that have “something you’ve figured out about yourself as a result of what’s happened” (McCuaig F2012). For Ashworth, telling his story at Rain City represented a major turning point in his life. He explains that although he had already come out as a gay man, telling his story at Rain City “closed a chapter” of his life which had been marked by darkness, and allowed him to move on. In the following, he describes how telling a story at Rain City “changed his life”:

When I got off the stage, I thought: “I did well. I succeeded, I got laughs, that was a good story.” ... That story, it was important to me to have my family there. It was almost like a declaration of – even though I’d been out – a declaration, a public declaration of like, I am gay, I am proud of who I am, and I was doing it for me, but also – it had a lot to do with my dad, too, of him kind of seeing like – okay – he was always kind of worried that I would be lonely. Not that he doesn’t agree with a gay lifestyle, but he just worries about my happiness, and it was almost like a declaration, too, of “I’m happy, I’m gay, and I’m okay.” And it felt like such a

chapter was closed after I told that story. And my life literally – it changed. Like the next day, I think I got a promotion....it was just weird! All this stuff changed for me, and I really believe in that whole statement that when you let go of something in your life, you really make room for new things to come into your life. And letting go ...just sharing or letting go of that story really closed a part of my life and allowed me to move on. I really feel like that was a huge life moment for me. And I think people connected to that story, but also connected to the moment that was created there, whether they knew what it was or not. You know? I don't want it to sound like, "This story was so grand and it changed peoples' lives" – all I know is that it changed my life. (Ashworth F2013)

Karp says that a good story needs "human elements that are novel" (Karp F2012).

If human elements make a good story, and a good story feels real, perhaps "the human element" Karp mentions is anything that comes across as "real." There may be an element of the real in simply articulating our experiences out loud; Karp muses that "half of this stuff floats around in my brain all day, but once I say it out loud, it makes it real, and it means something" (Karp F2012).

In Robert Cantwell's "Feasts of Unnaming" (2011), he addresses issues of voice and reality in the "information age." Here, he is speaking of the folklife festival as a site of community formation; however, what he says holds true in the context of Rain City:

The "incorporation" of America suggests of course a new unity and integrity, a transcontinental nation-state tied together by rails and wires, ever hungry for news of itself, as any community must be. But in linking us to one another technologically, such systems, we need to be reminded, also break us apart, transforming the individual into a tiny island of invisibility and powerlessness who can ratify his or her personal existence only by coupling it to massive collective projects and movements, or by somehow magnifying the personal – as a voice, as an image, as an action – until it has the visibility of "news," which is our name for the information that establishes and defines our connectedness to others. It is *voice*, literally and figuratively, the ability to exteriorize consciousness and win the attention of others to it, that secures our reality as social beings, without which we are scarcely human at all: Society is, after all, a field of conscious awareness differentiated by cultural codes that provide for the articulations of individual personality. (Cantwell 276)

William Labov notes that the “fundamental task” of a narrative is to “transfer experience” onto the audience “in a way that serves the interest of the narrator” (Labov 2013, 38). Similarly, “as readers and listeners, our interest is to accept that transfer in a way that maximizes the emotional content of the experience” (Labov 2013, 38).

Marianela Ramos-Capelo and Cory Ashworth agree, pinpointing the desire to be recognized as the most relatable element of personal storytelling.

Ramos-Capelo is a twenty-something college student from Mexico, living in Canada. She has experienced some freedoms in Vancouver, but wishes she could be more engaged in the Vancouver community, for instance by attending protests when she believes in a cause. However, she is afraid to join protests because she is not technically permitted to do so. As an international student, if she were to be seen joining in a protest movement, she could be deported. This unfortunate truth has caused her to feel like her voice has been silenced. When I asked her about storytelling, and her experience of telling a story at Rain City, she reflected that:

The act of storytelling creates a presence – “I am here, I exist.” And when that presence is being blocked by a group of people, be it government or whoever’s in power, then the whole act of storytelling becomes a tool...of change. ...A statement of freedom. ...It would be really cool if my grandchildren knew that I existed. (Ramos-Capelo F2012)

Ashworth adds:

I just think that everyone wants to be heard, but it’s not even an ego thing. Like I just think people want their experience to be witnessed in some sort of way or another. You know, like – just to say “I’m here.” ...I think it’s so basic – that the connection is so basic...I don’t even think it’s about being heard, I think it’s just about the recognition of their presence. And I don’t know if that’s too deep or too weird, I don’t know. I feel like it’s just: “I’m here.” (Ashworth F2013)

When a storyteller gets up on the Rain City stage, his or her personal story is magnified to the status of news. It becomes real. Perhaps what makes a story “true” or “real” or “authentic” is that moment when the storyteller finds his or her voice; that moment when the private story becomes Robert Cantwell’s “exteriorized consciousness,” then real, and the storyteller is carried along with it; that glorious, reciprocal moment when both story and storyteller come into reality.

The city is an especially good context for sharing personal stories. Guntis Šmidchens writes:

The personal revelation, an expression of individual experience, philosophy, and worldview, gains importance in the egalitarian urban context. In everyday conversations, persons set themselves apart from the faceless, anonymous millions by telling autobiographical stories (personal narratives). Folklore characteristics of these seemingly non-traditional narratives appear in the commonly held themes, beliefs, and fears that they contain. (Šmidchens 1997, 820)

To this end, Pinchin feels that Rain City, as well as The Moth and other personal narrative nights are a backlash against the

distance that technology has wedged in between people. I think people are really hungry for face-to-face contact, but they are increasingly not sure how to do it. It’s like a muscle. Everyone’s becoming shut-ins. The parts of our brains that want information are satisfied. But the parts of ourselves that need to be surrounded by like-minded people and feel supported by community – that part of ourselves is NOT satisfied. Before, to get information, we used to have to talk to people. Now to get information, you have to log onto Facebook, or Twitter, or read online news. ...the muscle of social engagement is getting weaker. (Pinchin F2012).

In my interview with Colleen Kimmitt, a thirty-something citizen of Vancouver, she made the interesting point that "it takes a good audience to make the story go over well" (Kimmitt F2012). Thankfully, at Rain City, the audience is on the storyteller’s side. Before she got onstage to tell her story at Rain City, Kimmitt was encouraged by

other Rain City storytellers that "you know, the thing to realize is that everyone out there just wants you to do well" (Kimmet F2012). As Karp points out, "the live element of storytelling is that the audience is actually such a huge participant" (Karp F2012). Karp's favorite moment of the "Under the Influence" show was during a very painful recollection when one storyteller lost her place, and the entire audience started cheering her on and encouraging her. She was seen; she was heard; she was validated.

Ultimately, we all want connection. Vancouver Foundation's survey of big issues in Vancouver found that loneliness and isolation was one of the biggest problems facing the city. Karp told me that her "entire experience of Vancouver has changed by investing in it in a real way, by investing in it, and being a part of it" (Karp F2012). Ron Kuban's study of Edmonton's urban villages showed that two of the strongest values of Edmonton's community league movement are a "sense of community and belonging" and "sense of place" (Kuban 2005, 175). In other words, members of the Edmonton community want to know where they belong and how they belong.

Author, social worker and research professor Brene Brown says that "connection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about" (Brown 2010). And what makes that connection happen? "In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen. Really seen" (Brown 2010). Brown continues that to be "really seen" requires vulnerability, and adds that "to be this vulnerable means I'm alive" (2010). Here again we return to Turner's concept of spontaneous communitas – a mood which can only be achieved through honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions.



Karen Pinchin told me that it is the connection at Rain City that sets it apart from other storytelling nights in Vancouver:

It's really different. When people are actually willing to be real on stage, as opposed to this kind of constructed version of themselves. That's why I think we see what we're doing as being slightly different from other storytelling nights in town. [...] We'd like to think of ourselves as a place where people can connect with one another as opposed to communicate information to one another. (Pinchin F2012)

Of all my informants, Cory Ashworth seemed to feel this connection most strongly.

As humans, you try to find a way to relate to everything. And like I said, here's a blind guy who's talking about being in America in the south with snakes. And that is so far from my life, but for whatever reason, he's touched my life. That story has touched me, and you feel compassion and love, and maybe it comes down to love, too. And that person sharing of themselves and being open, and you just receiving their openness and it just having that kind of effect. You see yourself in every single storyteller. . . . This event has got me most excited about Vancouver because I'm getting exposed to these amazing brains and these amazing ideas. And seeing that . . . all these people that are telling stories are in Vancouver. They might not be from Vancouver, they might not be born here, but they're bringing their talents and their passion and doing [exciting things] here. So [Rain City] is almost like this platform of exposing really amazing things that are going on. Or – it doesn't even necessarily need to be “going on,” but just amazing people that are here, and inspiring people, too. (Ashworth P2013)

Ultimately, then, Rain City is about the people who attend it, both as storytellers and as audience members. The goal of Rain City was always to connect members of the Vancouver community, and sure enough, for certain members of the Rain City community (especially the hosts), meaningful connections have been established. How widely this sense of connection is felt I cannot say for certain; however, from my interviews, it does seem that Rain City storytellers feel supported by each other, the hosts, and the audience. I would argue that the vulnerability of the storytellers combined with a strong sense of support results, if only for one night, in a sense of spontaneous *communitas* at Rain City.

In the preceding pages I have shown that not only does Rain City provide a venue for networking with members of a similar community, but it also reinforces, through personal storytelling, a sense of personal and communal identity. By supporting authenticity in storytelling, and encouraging audience members to relate to the storytellers, Rain City has emerged as a place to belong – a place to show your dark side, and still to be seen, understood and accepted.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

In this thesis, I have shown that the city of Vancouver is a community that many feel lacks a sense of community. I have examined Rain City Chronicles as one group's solution to the problem of loneliness, and have explored the stories told there in detail. I have argued that Rain City narratives are best understood as a subset of the contemporary legend genre, insofar as they are stories told as truth, and stories which allow a group to articulate its interests, fears and concerns. Finally, I have examined my informants' sense of the impact of Rain City on their own lives.

When I first attended Rain City Chronicles, I felt a profound sense of connection with my fellow audience members and with the storytellers on stage. When I began my research, in June 2012, I assumed that other attendees of Rain City would feel the same way that I did. Some, in particular the three past and present hosts of Rain City, expressed a similarly intense feeling of connection. The rest of my informants, while cognizant of a sense of support or belonging at Rain City, and while certainly appreciative of their Rain City experience, seemed to view Rain City primarily as one of many cultural events in the city where members of the "Creative Class" could mingle. Thus while Rain City was intended as community-building event, it does not seem to strike everyone with the profound connection that I originally felt upon attending. Instead, it is a place to belong for a night – to be seen, known, supported, and understood.

Additionally, Rain City Chronicles is an excellent study in storytelling. Over the course of my research I had many conversations on the topic of what makes a "good

story.” These assessments are interesting insofar as they reflect the local Vancouverite folk aesthetic.

The Vancouverites I spoke to prize authenticity, truth, and the ability to skilfully tell a story while appearing natural on stage. Many of the traits my informants appreciated about a good Rain City narrative are also criteria for contemporary legend, stand-up comedy, and folktale. Rain City narratives are primarily stories told as truth, often with a healthy dose of humor, and ideally with a clear narrative structure.

I have learned a great deal from my informants and from the published literature I have studied. As I conclude, however, I am left with more questions than when I began. When it is all said and done, does it matter if a story is true if it impacts you as a member of the audience? Does it matter if it is "authentic" so long as it gives you a sense of identity? Does it matter if it is "traditional" so long as it creates a sense of self within a community?

Ultimately, does it matter how we define authenticity if we know what we mean when we say we've experienced it? In my own life, and through my research at Rain City, I have found that meaning is ultimately derived from relationship, identity, and meaning something to somebody else. Is that not what folklore has always done for people? Has the purpose of folklore not always been to give people a sense of who they are within a group? Rain City stories – and arguably all personal experience narratives – function like folklore because they make meaning of individual experience. The audience can relate; they feel known and understood. They know they have just experienced something authentic, and it means something. Humans are not robots, after all. Defining

authenticity will never be as important as experiencing it. And that is the power of Rain City.

### **Appendix One: Fieldwork material**

Ashworth, Cory. F2013. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC, and St. John's, NL (via Skype). February 27.

Bynoe, Sara. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 19.

Cherney, Kevin. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. July 5.

Fontana, Kaitlin. F2012. Interview with author. New York, NY, and Cranbrook, BC (via Skype). June 11.

Hamburg, Monica. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 5.

Hille, Veda. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. July 25.

Karp, Lizzy. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. July 11.

Karp, Lizzy. F2013. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC, and St. John's, NL (via Skype). January 31.

Kimmett, Colleen. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 19.

McCuaig, Amanda. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 5.

Millar, Erin. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 4.

Pinchin, Karen. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 20.

Ramos-Capelo, Marianela. F2012. Interview with author. Vancouver, BC. June 19.

Ray, Melanie. F2012. Interview with author. June 20.

## Appendix Two: Podcast material

From Rain City Chronicles. 2014. Podcasts. <http://www.raincitychronicles.libsyn.com>.

The podcasts are numbered in order of original live show dates, and the storytellers are listed in the order they appear in the podcast. Next to each storyteller's name I have shown the way that his/her citation appears in-text.

	<b>Podcast Title</b> Date of live show	Featured Storytellers	Cited as
1.	<b>Family Matters</b> March 30, 2011	Adam Reid Cory Ashworth Stacy Sherlock Ian Rowe	(1-Reid P2011) (1-Ashworth P2011) (1-Sherlock P2011) (1-Rowe P2011)
2.	<b>Harder. Better. Faster. Stronger.</b> July 15, 2011	Shane Kramps  Elen Ghulam Alfredo Garza Hernandez Darren Barefoot	(2-Kramps P2011)  (2-Ghulam P2011) (2-Hernandez P2011) (2-Barefoot P2011)
3.	<b>Behind the Scenes</b> September 24, 2011	James Keller Heather Deal Mikayla Taylor Chris Kelly	(3-Keller P2011) (3-Deal P2011) (3-Taylor P2011) (3-Kelly P2011)
4.	<b>Lessons Learned</b> Special podcast Posted September 26, 2011	Ian Rowe Cory Ashworth Bob Duncan	(4-Rowe P2011) (4-Ashworth P2011) (4-Duncan P2011)
5.	<b>Tales from Public Schools</b> November 21 and 22, 2013	Amy Bell Fran Alley Jordan Potter Kyle Gest Caitlin Howden	(5-Bell P2013) (5-Alley P2013) (5-Potter P2013) (5-Gest P2013) (5-Howden P2013)
6.	<b>Crossing Borders</b> March 29, 2012	Andrew Lee Fiona Scott Stacey McLachlan	(6-Lee P2012) (6-Scott P2012) (6-McLachlan P2012)

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|-----|--|--|--|
|     |  | Brendan McLeod   | (6-McLeod P2012)   |
| 7.  | <b>Under the Influence</b><br>June 29, 2012  | Jessica O'Neill<br>Steven Rathwell<br>Shauna Johannesen<br>Steve Mynett      | (7-O'Neill P2012)<br>(7-Rathwell P2012)<br>(7-Johannesen P2012)<br>(7-Mynett P2012)            |
| 8.  | <b>Animal Instincts</b><br>November 16, 2012 | Kevin Quinlan<br>Alicia Tobin<br>Sarah Buchanan<br>Grant Lawrence            | (8-Quinlan P2012)<br>(8-Tobin P2012)<br>(8-Buchanan P2012)<br>(8-Lawrence P2012)               |
| 9.  | <b>Fame and Fortune</b><br>March 8, 2013     | Pat Kelly<br>Aaron Joseph<br>Michelle Reid<br>Jeff Lynch<br>Ryan Knighton    | (9-Kelly P2013)<br>(9-Joseph P2013)<br>(9-Reid P2013)<br>(9-Lynch P2013)<br>(9-Knighton P2013) |
| 10. | <b>Marry and Bury</b><br>May 2, 2013         | Dave Shumka<br>Alicia Tobin<br>Kristine Sostar<br>McLellan<br>Devon Lougheed | (10-Shumka P2013)<br>(10-Tobin P2013)<br>(10-McLellan P2013)<br><br>(10-Lougheed P2013)        |
| 11. | <b>Hotel Stories</b><br>July 26, 2013        | Jon Woodward<br>Ken Hegan<br>Kelly Tatham<br>Jessica O'Neill                 | (11-Woodward P2013)<br>(11-Hegan P2013)<br>(11-Tatham P2013)<br>(11-O'Neill P2013)             |
| 12. | <b>Love Hangover</b><br>February 15, 2014    | Cail Judy<br>Beth Hensler<br>Matthew Ramsey<br>Nina Paula Morenas            | (12-Judy P2014)<br>(12-Hensler P2014)<br>(12-Ramsey P2014)<br>(12-Morenas P2014)               |
| 13. | <b>Das Lexikon</b><br>March 22, 2014         | Melanie Ray<br>Wong Wing Su<br>Paul Bae<br>Lima Al-Azzeh<br>Dara Parker      | (13-Ray P2014)<br>(13-Su P2014)<br>(13-Bae P2014)<br>(13-Al-Azzeh P2014)<br>(13-Parker P2014)  |



### Appendix Three: Storytelling Tips by Karen Pinchin

## Storytelling Tips

### **So, you want to tell a story.**

We're excited to have you onstage! Based on experience from past shows, we have a few bits of helpful advice (and some mandatory stuff like length) to help make your Rain City experience a fun and exhilarating one:

### **Basics**

Stories are approximately five minutes long, and no longer than seven minutes. (We WILL pull you offstage, and you don't want that kind of ignominious exit, do you?) Time passes quickly onstage, so make sure to practice your story, either to a friend, a cat or a houseplant, at least twice before the night of the show. No notes or cheat sheets, as they tend to spoil the magic.

### **Where's your arc?**

All great stories have a narrative arc. They hook you from the get-go (our friends at The Moth call these the "stakes") and pull you along for the ride. Pretend you've suddenly caught the attention of friends and strangers around the table at a dinner party: you want a bit of drama, a splash of humour, and a healthy dose of insight doesn't hurt. Action verbs and colour are key.

### **Interpreting the theme**

We've asked you to be a storyteller because you have something interesting to say, and equally importantly, your own perspective on the theme. Please remember that your story should somehow be tied back to the theme while retaining your story's integrity. If you'd like advice on how to do this, please feel free to contact us for advice.

### **Save the ranting for your therapist**

No stream-of-consciousness rambles, please. Having a few bullet points memorized should help you relax and enjoy your time onstage. As a great storyteller once told us, make sure you know how you're going to end your story before you take the stage. And practice, practice, practice!

### **Any other questions?**

Please, please email us at [karen.pinchin@gmail.com](mailto:karen.pinchin@gmail.com) and [thelizzypearl@gmail.com](mailto:thelizzypearl@gmail.com) with any questions, concerns or otherwise. We strongly suggest you email family and friends with a link to buy tickets now, as our shows tend to be sold out.

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