

WHAT'S ON

■ Mark Grist in Rogue Teacher.
Picture: STEVE ULLATHORNE



STORYTELLING

Sitting comfortably? Let me tell you a tale

The debut Tellit Festival of true storytelling boasts a lineup that will evoke both joy and tears, Michael Kossew tells **BRIDGET GALTON**

From a married couple discussing their relationship, to survivors' poetic accounts of childhood sexual abuse, the UK's first festival of true-life storytelling is set to both enlighten and move audiences.

The six day Tellit Festival at venues including Hoxton Hall, Richmix and Exmouth Market Theatre is about "sharing truths through different art forms" including poetry, theatre, spoken word, movement, mime and clowning.

According to Festival Director Michael Kossew whether epic or intimate, all the shows draw on our primal urge to share stories: "We are hard wired for stories, whether we are telling or listening, they light up the same part of the brain. We have a human need for connection to get transported into another world and to reflect that back on our personal experience. Listeners learn from sharing experiences."

Shows at the Canal Cafe include Holli Dillon's Appetite which uses clowning to talk about her eating disorder, Paul Cree's Tales From a Bedsit where he invites audiences to share how he left a small town for the bright lights of Brighton, and Toby Peach's tale of facing cancer at 19.

At Exmouth Market Theatre, Mark Grist's Rogue Teacher tells how a student v teacher rap battle turned him into an unlikely Youtube grime star.

"Mark's amazing story about trying to help a group of students struggling in English, how he managed to inspire them and in turn be inspired by them is told in such a natural style it's probably the funniest in the festival," says Kossew, who lives in Kilburn.

"But sharing true stories is different from, say, comedy where the main reaction the performer is looking for is laughter and things are often exaggerated for comic effect.

"To be a successful story there's a whole range of emotional responses you can create in your audience. There's more time for listening and for words to sit. As a listener you go in with less judgement and different expectations. The storyteller can be more vulnerable letting the audience



■ The Eulogy of Toby Peach.

Picture: RICHARD DAVENPORT

in. It could be a funny story but instead of laughing at a joke you may be laughing with the storyteller."

The Survivor's Collective based at the Canvas Café in Bethnal Green are a prime example of how storytelling gives a voice to the unheard.

"It's a very sensitive topic. I wasn't sure the survivors would want to be part of the festival but they jumped at the chance to own their experience and have a platform. There are many other areas where people would benefit from owning their story and experience."

Unlike newspaper reports or documentaries, a storytellers' account "passes through less filters before it reaches the audience."

And in an age where social media users often tell less than truthful stories about themselves, it's a return to something authentic and raw.

"We wanted the festival to focus on truths rather than the form. It feels as though people are seeking this out and feeling more comfortable with sharing deep emotional truths. We are

nothing without other people's stories of us."

Kossew says there's a growth in truth storytelling nights which have "a wonderful atmosphere".

"It's a very connective experience. Everyone feels they are going on a journey with the storyteller. It triggers people's own stories. At the end everyone hangs around and shares with each other."

Tellit is inviting people with untold stories to join an open mic session at the festival, which Kossew hopes becomes an annual event.

"It's year one, we want it to go further to find the best stories from around the world and give them a stage. To galvanise people to get up and tell their stories in a safe supportive space. It's not to pick a winner - it's not X factor - but to celebrate and represent parts diverse of the community."

Tellit runs from October 16 to 22 at various venues including Exmouth Market Theatre, The Camden Head, Hoxton Hall, Canal Café Theatre, and Richmix. tellitfestival.com

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