

## **SHEPHERD EXPRESS DECEMBER 31, 2013**

### **Milwaukee's Grassroots Storytellers Ex Fabula's community-building 'Close Encounters'**

By Marie Kohler



Not so long ago in a restaurant not so far away, five inspired young men and women dined together on Indian food—and something extraordinary happened. Over Maharaja's curries and masalas, they pledged to create an evening of storytelling, a form they loved. Six weeks later, they made it happen: a modest event at Art Bar in Riverwest. Then they had another. And another. As crowds grew, so did their local fame. Five years later, they're a treasured, evolving local institution. They call themselves Ex Fabula.

Milwaukee's only grassroots storytelling organization, Ex Fabula (Latin for "from stories") was founded by Megan McGee, Leah Delaney, Matt Sabljak, Adam Weise and Amy Schleicher in 2009. Today the company hosts six monthly slams and two special events a season—each a beehive of community stories and wonder, drawing audiences up to 200.

What exactly happens at Ex Fabula? People who want to tell stories find out the event's theme in advance—for example, "Close Encounters," "Bonus," "Off the Hook," "Fool Proof" or "Mother Load." Then they loosely prepare a true story from their lives on that theme. (Basic guidelines: know your first and last lines, talk for five minutes, no notes and tell the truth.) At the event, they put their names in a hat; if picked, they take the stage. Nine stories and two "beer breaks" later, audiences vote on their favorite story and the evening is complete—not counting the powerful communal alchemy created along the way.

The atmosphere is warm, festive, filled with anticipation. Both sides—audience and storytellers—share in a trusting magic as strangers' life stories unfold. The results are a mix of funny, poignant or awkward—but it's friendly, like the fun family gatherings you've always wished were yours.

Amie Losi, corporate office coordinator and sometime actor, describes performing at Ex Fabula as "So personal—more like sharing than acting. I told a story about telling white lies to my mother about my boyfriend...I would never have told any one person that story. It's funny and painful—way easier in front of a lot of people. Afterwards out in the real world, four people recognized me! They said, 'Oh, you're the relationship lady!'" An Audience Favorite winner, Losi says, "I felt pretty darn good. A little icing on the cake."

Loyal audience member Carri Dahl, scenic artist at the Skylight Music Theatre, delights in witnessing Ex Fabula. "I've heard many great storytellers and some not so great—some are terrified. It's about people given the chance to overcome their fears and the rest of us encouraging them."

Co-Founder Megan McGee says, "When people are being vulnerable on stage, you might hear a story that makes you think of your own life and you feel connected." This can also be true, she believes, with neighborhoods. At their 2012 artist-in-residence program at Sheboygan's John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Latino, Hmong and English-speaking locals successfully shared stories with live interpreters. In their remarkable "Terminal Milwaukee" season (2011-2012), a series of evenings led audiences through five Milwaukee neighborhoods. Historian John Gurda and Tom Crawford, station manager of WMSE, contributed at each locale, sharing local history and personal memories. This kind of programming uniquely grounds Ex Fabula in the community.

There's a lot on Ex Fabula's horizon. This year they'll go from "all volunteer" to "mostly volunteer" status, when they salary their Executive Director Megan McGee. They'll also be adding visiting storytellers, creating more podcasts, unfurling a new website and partnering with Art Institute of Wisconsin students to create videos. Most of all, they'll be zealously pursuing their storytelling mission "straight from Milwaukee" at intriguing venues like Hot Water, The Times Cinema, Lucille's Piano Bar and Turner Hall (for their annual Spectacular and ALL STARS events).

Storytelling is as ancient as humankind. And today, it's hot—witness the renaissance on radio with Ira Glass, David Sedaris and "The Moth Radio Hour" (now also in Milwaukee). Leah Delaney, the company's media chair, believes it's her generation's reaction to technology-saturated culture—an effort to cultivate the personal and generate the real. Whatever the explanation, Ex Fabula's magic is powerful, and the company is proving to be, as Delaney calls it, a "wheel on fire."

Ex Fabula's "Close Encounters" takes place at Hot Water, 818 S. Water St. For more information, visit [exfabula.wordpress.com](http://exfabula.wordpress.com).

*Photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express*

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