

Have words, will travel

Judith Black's tales take you on a journey

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The American Story Theater will present storytelling performances at *WaterFire*, on September 15 and 29. This Saturday, Mark Binder, Tony Cranston, and Judith Black will be round-robin raconteurs in Memorial Park at 7:30, 8:30 and 9:30 pm, with different tales for each set. Storyteller, author, and Rhode Islander Binder is the founder of the AST; Cranston is based in Europe, has studied in China, and has performed around the world; Black lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts, and has also traveled the globe as a storyteller.

Black has written and performed stories about many unsung heroines, from Lucy Stone to Rosie the Riveter, from her grandmother to her mother-in-law. She has been commissioned to write stories by National Public Radio, the US Department of the Interior, the *USS Constitution*, and Old South Church, among many others. Black, whose college training was in early childhood development and then theater, began her career in a nursery school, moved on to a small Massachusetts theater company, and jumped full-time into storytelling in the early '80s.

"With storytelling, you get to use theatrical skills but you also create your own material," Black reflected during an entertaining conversation at her Marblehead home. "Ultimately, storytelling hinges on your communication with your listeners. If you're not working with them, you're not storytelling. I loved theater, but it was about making something to show. This is just that little notch different."



"YOUR STORIES ARE YOU," Black says.

The breadth and depth of Black's tales is seen in her venues: elementary schools, professional conferences for educators, and health-care providers, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Trust For Historic Preservation and, recently, a St. Louis residential center for people with eating disorders. She currently teaches in the graduate program in education at Lesley University, demonstrating how to use storytelling to achieve social and emotional goals in the classroom.

Yet that outline of gigs doesn't convey the everpresent humor and heartfelt humanity of her stories, especially those drawn from personal experience, be it single-parenting her son, coping with aging parents, helping her mother-in-law through the journey of Alzheimer's disease, or coming to terms with the changing sexuality of a woman over 50.

"Part of shaping your life into story is saying, 'What is this about? What do I include and what do I leave out?,' " Black noted. "What really happened to you doesn't always belong there. You want to keep people identifying with a truth that will resonate with them and still be very specific and take them on a journey."

Black was once asked to attend a Hollywood literary retreat ("an oxymoron," she quipped) at which she heard seasoned screenwriters advise others not to "waste time on a screenplay," but just to submit a good writing sample and make a one-sentence pitch. She told them it takes her three years to create a new story, particularly the ones drawn from her own life.

"The stories grow out of trying to understand the idiosyncrasies of how we behave and treat each other," she elaborated. "So it's not 'high concept.' It's as 'low concept' as you get. It emerges out of the humanity of the characters."

Asked about the impact of live storytelling on her listeners, Black replied: “One of the things about story is that your gates of perception remain wide open — you go on a journey and you can learn anything on that journey.”

She has realized that pulling her listeners into a story can make them the heroes and heroines of their own lives, getting them in touch with their fears, hopes, and dreams. Looking at fairy tales from a feminist perspective, Black finds in them the abuse of children (a “devil” who gains power over them), the feelings of aging women (Snow White’s stepmother), or the ambivalent attitudes of parents (Sleeping Beauty).

Most storytellers carry a huge bag of tales in their head (and bodies), and Black will decide which stories to perform at *WaterFire* by judging the makeup of her audience. No matter what she tells, it’s bound to be imbued with her passion and personality, because, in her words, “your stories are you — you should never tell a story you don’t feel connected to. If you care about something, you can communicate it with so much more depth.”