

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EMCEE

Note: The following article on the importance of good emceeing at storytelling events was written by request of Ellen Munds, guest editor of the September/October 2004 issue of *The National Storytelling Magazine*. This particular issue of the magazine contains wonderful information for those producing and organizing storytelling festivals and other events. The magazine includes excerpts from the article. Below is the full article.

“The Emcee is one of the most important roles at an event.”

David Holt, Storyteller, Musician, Producer, Emcee

“The Emcee is the glue that holds a storytelling evening together.”

Susan Klein, Storyteller, Producer, Emcee

“It’s a tough job . . . it’s an honor and a responsibility to share the work of others with an audience.”

Dovie Thomason, Storyteller, Emcee

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EMCEE:

An Article for Producers and Organizers of Storytelling Events

by Beth Horner

The Importance of a Good Emcee

Three years ago, I interviewed 28 storytellers and storytelling event producers about the role of the emcee at storytelling programs. The same point was made again and again: a good emcee is vital to the success of any storytelling event.

The emcee is the storytelling event's representative, is the bridge between producers and tellers and audience, sets the tone for a particular concert or festival set, determines the energy level throughout, is responsible for keeping on schedule and establishes the kind of community feeling the event will have.

Depending on the situation, the emcee often wears many hats: artistic director of a set, venue coordinator, stage manager, stagehand, sound and lighting consultant, intro/outro writer, community builder, pitch person, clock watcher, trouble shooter, energy gatherer, care taker, point person of one-on-one audience feedback (both positive and negative), first aid expert, nerve calmer, cheer leader and dog catcher! And, the emcee must wear each hat with grace and charm!

It is an important, demanding job requiring energy and skill. A good emcee can take a lot of pressure off of the producer. A bad emcee can throw an event off kilter. After all of the work that goes into producing a storytelling event, you definitely want to put that event into capable hands!

I write this article as a storyteller, producer, audience member and emcee.

What To Look For In An Emcee

There are many different styles of emceeing. The Storycrafters (Jeri Burns and Barry Marshall) often prepare introductions written in rhythm and rhyme. Willy Claflin once introduced me with "The Ballad of Beth Horner". Susan O'Halloran carefully prepares a structure around an evening olio, for example, opening and closing with an Irish Blessing. Ed Stivender "dances" with the audience in his own unique style. Others simply introduce each storyteller and make announcements in a pleasant, warm, welcoming manner. All are equally effective.

When you select an emcee, look for a person who has a pleasant stage presence, who is gracious, personable and flexible, who can think on their feet, keep many balls in the air at the same time, not get easily flustered, and calmly handle the unexpected. Look for a person who knows how to set the appropriate tone for the specific session, carefully manage the time while maintaining a positive energy flow throughout the entire session, and who can create a community in which both tellers and listeners feel welcomed, special, comfortable and respected.

Further, you need an emcee who is willing to put the time and effort into preparing succinct, appropriate introductions rather than read aloud from the program book and who is willing to arrive early to greet tellers and prepare the venue if necessary. And vital to a successful event, you need an emcee who understands that although their role is essential, the focus is not on them -- rather on the tellers, the audience and the stories.

While considering all of this, keep in mind that you are looking for a person who can relate to your particular audience and to your tellers. You are also looking for someone who is willing to take instruction from you and with whom you as a producer can easily communicate.

Because the emcee plays such a crucial role and because it can be such a delicate job, many storytelling festivals pay their emcees an honorarium. Depending upon the budget, it is definitely an idea to consider. It confirms that you are expecting dedication to a job well done, that it is a job to be taken seriously and that you respect the emcee's time and effort.

How Producers Can Support Their Emcees So That The Event Runs Smoothly

The best support for an emcee: clear policies, support personnel and clear communication.

Your planning will vary slightly depending upon whether you are working with experienced paid/volunteer emcees already familiar with the situation, inexperienced emcees or local dignitaries unfamiliar with storytelling events. However, regardless of experience level, the following is important.

1. Communicate with your emcees prior to your event.

- a) Inform them of their emcee schedule, check-in site, orientation meeting site and time, sound check schedule.
- b) Inform them of any storytellers who have special needs or who require special stage set-ups.
- c) Spell out their responsibilities and the scope of their role:
 1. Will they be determining the order and flow of an olio or will that already be set?
 2. Will there be a venue assistant or house manager who will be dealing with crying babies stray dogs and medical emergencies or will they as emcees be completely responsible?
 3. Will there be sound technicians, stagehands or stage managers there to set up microphones who do not want the emcees to interfere? Or, are the emcees to handle sound and stage set-up for each storyteller?
 4. Will there be separate timekeepers or are the emcees to keep time?
 5. Are the emcees to tell a short story or definitely NOT to do so?
 6. Are there specific venues not open to children? What is the policy for communicating that to children and parents who arrive for the program? Will that be the emcee's responsibility?

2. Biographical information - in advance.

Provide information on the storytellers in the form of biographies and articles or web sites. Many emcees like to have this biographical information in advance of the event. If you are inviting local dignitaries to emcee, I've noticed that having teller introductions written out for them (different for each set and different from the printed program) makes a huge difference in the quality of their emceeing.

3. List of announcements and crucial information - before the event or upon arrival.

Susan O'Connor, Director of the National Storytelling Festival, sends a mailing prior to the festival containing vital information, time parameters for each session and specific announcements to be made at specific sessions. Having such a list upon arrival (in a welcome packet) and on-site as well is essential. This list can include:

- a) Who to contact in case of emergency and how to do so.
- b) Support personnel available, or not, at the venue (stage managers, tent monitors, etc.).
- c) Again, whether or not you want the emcee to tell a short story.
- d) Perhaps a brief synopsis of items mentioned above in number 1.
- e) A few tips on emceeing.
- f) Announcements to be made:
 1. sponsors and others to be thanked
 2. festival policies (no cell phones, recording, photography, smoking, entering or leaving venues between stories, etc.)
 3. locations for bathrooms, food, resource sales, parking, exits, etc.
 4. upcoming events of interest

4. Orientation/Welcome meeting, letter or e-mail.

An orientation meeting (or letter/e-mail) is extremely helpful. If possible, welcome your emcees, introduce them to the storytellers, briefly go over policies and announcements. Definitely go over emergency plans and give a few tips on emceeing if appropriate.

If your event is a large festival requiring many emcees who are not particularly experienced, I HIGHLY recommend an orientation meeting that includes tips or a workshop on emceeing. At the very least, written tips are essential.

5. Venue set up.

If possible, set up each venue in advance so that when the emcee arrives, they can do their job well.

- a) Seating, stage, lights and sound ready to go
- b) Water, tissues and seating for the storytellers available
- c) A time piece (preferably a large clock) easily visible to the storytellers when on stage
- d) Sound check time clearly stated ahead of time to sound technicians, tellers and emcee

e) Personnel (tent monitors, sound technicians, etc.) there and ready to go

- 6. Support Personnel.** If possible, it is helpful to have someone there to help with the behind-the-scene situation or handle distractions so that the emcee can keep things going on stage.

A Few Tips on Emceeing

Some producers are wonderful emcees and enjoy it. Others are more comfortable running the show behind the scenes, are uncomfortable up on stage or are simply too busy. For the later group, if you suddenly find yourself needing to emcee, here are a few tips. These would also be helpful for emcee orientation or for placement in emcee packets.

For a more detailed list of emcee tips, see the article EMCEE TIPS.

In a nutshell, here are a few of those tips:

- 1. Be prepared.** Before the event, write your introductions and familiarize yourself with procedures, policies and the list of announcements.
- 2. Arrive early.** Familiarize yourself with your venue and set it up for the tellers. Check out the sound.
- 3. Greet all involved.** Greet the sound and stage crew. Greet the tellers, inform them of time limits and ask them if there is anything they'd like you to say or not say to introduce them and their stories. Confirm pronunciation of names.
- 4. Welcome the audience.** As Jay O'Callahan says, "Make the audience feel that this is an event. Welcome them with a sense of warmth, anticipation, bubble and fun."
- 5. Keep each introduction brief and to the point.** Generally, avoid hyperbole, cultural stereotypes and comments on personal relationships and personal appearance. Do not read from the printed program. Let the audience know what is special about the teller's work.
- 6. Introduce each teller with equal enthusiasm.** Donald Davis has written: "The role of the emcee is to gather together all of the energy in the audience and hand it to the storyteller." This is important between stories as well.
- 7. Give the audience a break** if needed so that the energy level remains high for each teller.
- 8. During multi-day events,** use a different introduction each time you introduce a teller. As the event progresses, introductions can be more and more brief.
- 9. Keep yourself and the tellers on time.**
- 10. Be alert to distractions that must be dealt with.**
- 11. Do not tell a story unless requested** or if you need to stall for time. Keep it to 1-3 minutes. Remember, this is not about you.

12. Have fun! We all want to be witty, clever, perfect emcees. However, remember that first and foremost, you are there to guide the tellers and audience through a delightful, thoughtful experience. If you do so with a sense of warmth and enjoyment and a respect for and focus on the tellers and listeners, your love of story will come through. And, that's why everyone is there.

Further Reading on Emceeing

"And Now, Would You Please Welcome ...": A Guide For Emceeing Storytelling Events by Susan Klein (Ruby Window Productions, 2000, www.SusanKlein.net)

The Storyteller's Guide by David Holt and Bill Mooney, pages 72-76. (August House Publishers, www.augusthouse.com)