

TIPS ON GOOD EMCEEING

by Beth Horner

The following information is based on Beth's workshop *KEEPING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE CONSUMMATE EMCEE*. For more information on her workshop, check Beth's website at www.BethHorner.com or contact her at BethHorner@earthlink.net or 888-443-3816.

For additional information on the importance of good emceeing at storytelling events, see Beth's article *THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EMCEE*, excerpted in the September/October issue of *The National Storytelling Magazine* and provided in full on Beth's website. The article also contains a less detailed set of tips on good emceeing.

"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

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Why is your roll as Emcee so Important?

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. No pressure though!!!

Here are a few things I've learned over the years, arranged as follows:

1. Before the Show
2. At the Performance Site
3. During the Program
4. Closing the Program

In a nutshell, be prepared, be warm and succinct, avoid in jokes, be flexible, keep a good read on the time and on the audience's need for a stretch, have a good time. And, remember that the event is not about you -- it is about the stories, the storytellers and the listeners.

1. Before The Show: Prepare Yourself.

- Know what to do and who to contact in case of **emergency**.
- Familiarize yourself with the list of **announcements** so that when you are up on stage, you can quickly reel them off rather than reading them word for word at a ponderous pace.
- Think about how you plan to **open and close** the program.
- Think about your **introductions**. Do not plan to read from the printed program. If you don't know the storytellers' work, read about them or go to their web site to pick out brief gems here and there that you can use.

In planning your introductions, I recommend the following:

- a) Be brief and to the point
- b) Avoid comments on personal appearance. Avoid cultural stereotypes.

- c) Stick to discussing their work rather than telling stories indicating your personal relationship with them (unless appropriate and you have the teller's permission).
- d) Avoid hyperbole. Indicate that the audience is about to hear a special person, without requiring the teller to have to live up to an impossible expectation.
- e) Multi-session events. If you are emceeding at a multi-day event, try to use a different introduction each time you introduce an individual teller. Introductions can get shorter as the event progresses because audience members will have come to know the teller themselves.
- f) "First, Do No Harm". Most important, make sure that your facts are correct and that you know how to pronounce the teller's name. Ask them ahead of time and confirm that pronunciation. If you do nothing else to prepare, make sure that you can pronounce their name.
- g) If there isn't an opportunity to read up ahead of time, here are a few questions that you can ask the performers on site to assist you in putting together your introductions:
 - What are three things that you'd like the audience to know about you and your work?
 - Do you have any projects coming up that you'd like the audience to know about?
 - Do you have any recordings or books that you'd like mentioned?
 - If you know which story you are going to tell, is there anything you'd like me to say, or not say, to most appropriately introduce the story?
 - Connie Regan-Blake suggests: What are some things that would help the audience better understand you and your stories?
 - An Emcee once asked me: "What is a little known fact about you - something the audience would never know?" I replied, "When I was young, I had a pet cow named Birthday Cake." With that brief statement, the audience knew something about my background and sense of humor. Good question, but keep in mind that not all performers will want you to share their little known fact with an audience.

2. At The Performance Site: Get Acquainted

- **Arrive early** and orient yourself. Make sure that every thing is set up and ready to go (water, timepiece, sound, lights, etc.).
 - **Introduce yourself to the staff:** sound technicians, stage managers, tent monitors, etc.
 - **Introduce yourself to the tellers.** Let them know where they can find bathrooms, water, tissues, etc.
- a) Go over the order in which they will perform (if more than one teller).

- b) Confirm their allotted time and ask each how they would like to be notified that they are nearing the end of their allotted time. Point out the location of the clock, if available.
- c) Ask if there are any special needs or special stage set ups.
- d) Ask if there is anything that you can do to make the program successful & comfortable for them.
- e) If there is more than one performer and if an order has not already been established, determine the nature of each story and set an appropriate order.
- f) Test the sound and offer a sound check to each teller if possible.

3. During The Program: Be Gracious and Alert.

- **Welcome the audience.** Jay O'Callahan says, "Make the audience feel that this is an event. Welcome them with a sense of warmth, anticipation, bubble and fun." Introduce yourself and tell them how the session will progress (number of tellers, breaks, etc.) so that they know where they are headed and can feel comfortable. Establish the rules (those introductory announcements regarding cell phones, etc.) Be brief and get the ball rolling.
- After introducing each teller, **stay on stage to assist** them in getting settled with tall stools, mic stands, etc. Then, get off the stage.
- Introduce each storyteller 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. **Listen to each story** (if possible) so that you can clearly bring the audience out of one story and into the next. You are the sherbet between each course, briefly clearing the audience's palate before handing the stage and the audience's energy to the next teller.
- Listen to the audience as well to determine if they need a **break or stretch**. It is your job to keep the energy up for each and every teller.

One quick stretch idea that does not require a long intermission, but gets people up and moving: have the audience members quickly introduce themselves to the person behind or in front of them. This brief break always loosens people up. It also works well as a warm up at the beginning of the program.

- Watch the **time**. Keep the tellers on time and keep yourself on time.
- **Be alert.** If something unexpected comes up, be ready to deal with it. In my workshop on emceeing, I always have each participant write and deliver two introductions to the group. During their second introduction, I hand an index card to another participant with some distraction written on it ("Be a crying child.", "Be a fire alarm", "Be a dog and leap to the stage." "Be a ringing cell phone"). The participant delivering the introduction then must deal with that distraction. It is cause for great fun and is good practice!

So, if there are **distractions**, try to remove them (toddler wandering around in front of the stage). Or, acknowledge them so that the audience won't wonder, worry and therefore, not be

able to concentrate on the stories. (“Just to let you know, you might hear some sound bleed from the other tent from time to time. Just folks having a good time -- almost as good a time as we’ll be having in here.”)

- Have a **short story on the ready** to be told only if necessary. I don’t usually recommend telling a story yourself unless it is a 1 minute warm up tale, it is scheduled into the program, or you need to stall for time (if a teller has not arrived from another venue, if the sound technicians are working out a bug, if you need to clear the palate after a particularly heavy story). It is good to have a short 2-3 minute story in mind if you need to stall, but only use it if absolutely necessary.
- **Emcee as bridge, not focus.** Always remember that you are not the focus of the performance. You are the bridge between event and audience and between tellers and audience.
- Have a **good time.** Remember that your enjoyment of the program reflects on everything you say and do.

4. Closing the Program: Thank Everyone

Briefly thank everyone (performers, producers, sound technicians, etc.) including the audience. Give any brief closing announcements necessary (including the date of next storytelling event at the same site) and wish them well on their way.

Afterward, thank each of the tellers personally as well as the sound technicians and other personnel.

P.S. A Thought on Wanting to Be Perfect

One always wants to be the very cleverest of emcees with lots of inventive warm-ups, witty introductions, etc. However, remember that first and foremost, you are there to guide the tellers and audience through a thoughtful experience. If you do so with a sense of enjoyment and warmth, with a clear explanation of where the session is headed, with a tight reign on the time, with one good stretch, with the correct facts and pronunciations, and with a sense of 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)