

Sweeps Festival. Then they pulled the plug on it because the venue we used did not have disabled access and there was nowhere else suitable. Surely that is not fair to the vast majority of people (including many disabled people) who could access that building?

Let's really stir up the hornet's nest! Susie Quatro was on the radio recently saying how much she disapproved of all the young girl pop singers who blatantly flaunt their bodies and don't wear clothes in order to sell their music. I bet you agree, but on the storytelling scene we do the same thing to some extent—look through the publicity blurbs for quite a few female tellers and words like 'sexy' and 'provocative' come up; and their sets are themed on 'lust' and 'sensuality'. If any male teller marketed himself in the equivalent way he'd be called a chauvinist or a 'dirty old man'! The very description 'storytelling for men' suggests it will be 'blue' even more so than 'storytelling for adults' sometimes does. (And I'm always hesitant about putting 'English storytelling' or 'English folk songs' in case I suddenly find I've got an audience of BNP supporters!)

There, that's put the cat amongst the pigeons—or several cats perhaps! Let's have your responses. What do you think about segregated events—segregated in any way—are there good reasons for having them? What about marketing the sex-appeal of the teller rather than the skill? Go on, let yourself go and tell me what you think!

Meanwhile here is Vanessa's piece:

STORYTELLING - AN EXCLUSIVE ART?

*On a 'women only' storytelling event
by Vanessa Woolf*

You can swim on Hampstead Heath. The three ponds are beautiful, secluded and natural. Swimming in them is a great experience so long as you don't mind a bit of mud, some cold and the possibility of attack by the resident savage pike. Ever since Victorian times

the three ponds have been separated into "Men's", "Ladies" and "Mixed".

I thought the Ladies Pond enclosure would be an awesome venue for my true storytelling night as it has a magical secret-forest quality. Only problem is that men are strictly forbidden in there. So I decided to make the event women-only.

However, it turned out that storytellers were also forbidden in the pond. I contacted their Society and they told me in no uncertain terms that they didn't



Walking on Hampstead Heath by Stephen McKay

want any arts events in their enclosure thank you. Never mind, I thought. I mean, my own true story involved breaking into the pond at night. We'd hold the event in the forest near the pond and then...well, if people decided to break the rules and go for a midnight swim...

I'd already arranged for 'Storm In A Teacup' to host the event. They are a friendly, inclusive, feminist arts collective, my husband has performed at a number of their events. Seeing as we weren't going in the pond, we could have altered the gender-policy at this point but I decided not to and continued to promote the event as women only. We did almost no publicity and the weather was catastrophic but the event was extremely well attended. I'm not sure why it was so popular. Was it the lure of a midnight swim? The idea of having to bring torches and candles and be led through the darkness? Or was it because there were going to be no men?

We had about four people contact us to ask if men could come as guests. Our reply was, 'regretfully no, but we will do a mixed event soon'. No one seemed aggrieved though who knows how they felt inside? (Actually we'd privately agreed that if a man turned up on the day, we wouldn't turn him away.) So was it the right thing to do?

I already target my storytelling. For example I might run a toddler session on Friday mornings or tell stories for university students on a particular course. Not only that but I'm sometimes paid to tell in spaces that are inaccessible to wheelchair users. Is that exclusive?

Of course there's a huge difference between having an audience in mind and officially shutting the door on people who don't fit the criteria. So, where do I draw the line?

I believe that storytelling can break down barriers, demolish stereotypes, and help people to understand someone else from the inside. However an audience is many-faceted. It's not simply split into men and women. Sometimes it's nice to shake things up, to draw different perspectives together while also having common ground. The wonderful women who shared their secrets on the Heath were very diverse and yet they could all feel included. It was a safe, supportive environment. Some of them might have kept their mouths shut if there had been men present.

So, yes, it was fine in this case. I'll go further and say it's fine, on occasion, to exclude a variety of people. It could be simply novelty value (eg no one let in without a fancy dress), it could be a gift or treat for a specific group (eg Carers only), or to create a safe place to speak and listen without fear. (eg A session for people who have experience of mental distress.)

Although the principle of specific audiences is okay, there are a few things I'd never do. I don't want to exacerbate social divisions or cause resentment. Therefore I'd never knowingly exclude people on account of their race or religion. For the same reason I'd never shut-out LGBT friends or those with a disability - they are excluded from enough already.

However, storytelling is one of the most universal and powerful arts we have. It's also the most fun*. For these reasons, any kind of exclusivity should be used sparingly. Anyone who's not let in might feel unloved and no one wants that. Therefore, I'm not planning any more women-only storytelling events.

But if you've got one coming up, make sure I'm on the list.

*Or am I just biased?

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