

Listen to a good tale this weekend at Livonia story fest

BY ALEX LUNDBERG
STAFF WRITER

Throughout Europe, they were called *gleemen*. In Africa, the term was *griot*. They did the same job -- they visited communities to entertain and educate primarily by telling stories.

The tradition lives on. The Detroit Story League will bring three acclaimed professional storytellers to the Livonia Civic Center Library Friday-Saturday, Sept. 27-28 as part of its annual storytelling festival. There will be workshops as well as performances both days.

Ann Bonelli, one of the co-organizers of the festival, said the Detroit Story League was formed in 1912 by Mary Conover, the first children's librarian in the city. Since its creation, members of the league have traveled to schools, homes and even shopping centers through their motto of "Service Through Storytelling."

"They get together on a regular basis to meet and perfect the art of storytelling," Bonelli said. Originally, it was almost a social organization run by volunteers. Now, professionals like librarians and teachers fill those ranks.

There is some help from outside too. The National Storytelling Network (formerly the Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling) sends storytellers out around the country to meet with local groups, host workshops and work on helping them refine their storytelling powers.

The form, she said, is old as the hills. "It's part of the oral tradition, oral histories," Bonelli said. "It is a facet of learning and entertainment that tells stories by painting word pictures. Before radio and television, this was the entertainment people had. Some were stories about things that happened, others were personal anecdotes."

Barbara McBride-Smith is a librarian from Tulsa, Okla. She said that putting a definitive tag on what storytelling is easier said than done.

"We've been trying to define storytelling for the last 10 years," she said. "Nobody can come up with a definition everyone can agree on."

It is an art form, a type of performance art that can teach as well as entertain. It's not to be confused with story time, as schoolchildren might know it.

"There's nothing between the storyteller and the audience," McBride-Smith said. "There's no book, no script, the words come from the heart and mind of the storyteller. It's like theater but the fourth wall doesn't exist."

Storytelling, she said, is direct communication between the teller and the audience. The storyteller doesn't know exactly what will happen beforehand, everything depends on the audience. Unlike theater, the story line of an oral tale very likely will change from performance to performance.

McBride-Smith's work covers a range of different genres, but



Antonio Rocha

she said she is best known for her interpretations of classical Greek mythology. She's had a love of the material that stretches back to her own days in school.

"I love it, it really hits home with me," she said. "It's full of adventure and debauchery, blood and guts and love and war."

In an art form that's entirely



Barbara McBride-Smith will entertain at Storytelling 2002 in Livonia.

performer-driven, naturally she takes license with the material. McBride-Smith said all of the characters -- gods and mortals alike -- are people she grew up around in Waco, Texas.

"When characters speak," she said, "they'll sound like a Texan. Fandom looks at the look on the

box like you would the tag on a pillow, no one is going to tell her that she can't open it up."

By the same token, she portrays Zeus, the king of the gods, as a gun-toting mayor who gets what he wants more through sweet talk than by hurling thunderbolts.

STORYTELLING 2002

What: Adult storytelling concert with Jim May, Barbara McBride-Smith and Antonio Rocha; family storytelling concert; storytelling workshops

When: Adult concert, 7:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 27; family concert, 1:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 28; workshops, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 28

Where: Livonia Civic Center Library, 32777 Five Mile, Livonia

Admission: \$12 for adults, \$8 for senior citizens and students on Friday, Sept. 28; \$2 per person for Saturday, Sept. 29 concert; \$40 for workshops. Admission to all events is \$45 per person. More information: (734) 761-5118 or (313) 824-6368

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