

Output

■ Programming for public media

Fluttering *Moth* lands in pubradio

Producer Jay Allison describes *The Moth Radio Hour*, a five-episode pilot series offered by Public Radio Exchange, as an arranged marriage between public radio and The Moth, a non-profit that presents storytelling evenings in New York and, increasingly, other cities. The stories, recorded from live, unscripted performances, often deal with transformative events in people's lives.

"To me, The Moth is kind of like public radio without the radio," Allison said. At Moth performances, including story slams and more formal Main Stage events, "there are all kinds of people standing up and telling stories about their lives in a really authentic way."

Allison, an award-winning indie based at Atlantic Public Media in Woods Hole, Mass., worked with the storytelling company to create the pilots. Each hourlong show presents three or four stories that are some of the best from The Moth's extensive archive, Allison said. "They're arranged to make a nice evening of listening, so that you get a range of voices and moods."

Some stories, such as Janice Bartley's "Handicapped Love" and Anthony Griffin's "The Heartbroken Comedian," "will change your day and alter your trajectory," Allison said.

"We're all convinced we're sitting on public radio's next big hit," said Jake Shapiro, executive director of PRX, which is distributing the series.

PRX officially unveiled *The Moth Radio Hour* on July 27, and within a month 165 stations had picked it up for broadcast, including outlets in most of the top 20 markets, according to marketer Israel Smith.

A live Moth performance will entertain station programmers Sept. 16 at the Public Radio Program Directors conference in Cleveland. In conjunction with local broadcasts of the pilot season, public events will be staged in October by The Moth in Boston, Detroit and Chicago.

The Moth had other suitors and an extended courtship with public radio before hooking up with Allison and PRX. As New Yorkers began flocking to Moth performances, hometown station WNYC introduced radio audiences to the company on the now-defunct series *The Next Big Thing* and later Kurt Andersen's *Studio 360*. "*Studio 360* was very supportive," says Catherine Burns, Moth artistic director.

This American Life now has a regular-feature thing going with The Moth. "That was a huge boost for us," Burns says. Web traffic at themoth.org spiked whenever *TAL* aired Moth stories. After an April 2008 broadcast featured Moth storytellers, Burns recalled, "our podcast went to No. 1 in iTunes."

But marriage with *TAL*, if it were allowed in New York state, wasn't in the cards: The producers at *TAL* "have sort of been big brothers to us," Burns said.

It took a different love connection to bring *The Moth Radio Hour* into being. Shapiro ran into an old college friend at the 2007 Nieman Conference on Narrative Journalism, writer Josh Shenk, a member of the Moth's general council. Shenk is now engaged to marry Lea Thau, executive director and creative director of The Moth.

"We had several meetings with them and felt they really got what we were doing and would be the best partner we could have," said Burns, of the PRX match.

With money from its reversioning grant program, which helps producers update, reversion or digitize their work for public radio, PRX backed a one-hour special of Moth stories and offered it for public radio distribution in October 2007.

The pilot season of *Moth Radio Hour*, conceived early this year, is a "proof of concept" for full series production, Allison said. The three partners pooled their resources to get the show out there and gauge response to it. Production seed money that CPB awarded to Allison via Atlantic Public Media was tapped for the pilots, and PRX chipped in some of its discretionary funds.

"We wanted to get started right away for at least a pilot season and pulled together the resources ourselves," Shapiro said. "We can make a stronger case to funders if we can demonstrate that it can be done."

"We just think people ought to fund this," Allison said. "That is our next step."

—Karen Everhart