

LIKE MOTHS ON A PORCH

The Moth's artistic director, Catherine Burns, who grew up in Alabama, spoke with *The Bitter Southerner* about everything from the power of a well-told story to the time her mother invited Harper Lee over for lunch — she was just “being neighborly.”

Conversation with Catherine Burns | Hosted by Josina Guess

Josina Guess: My name is Josina Guess. I'm the managing editor for *The Bitter Southerner*. And I just had a chance to talk with Catherine Burns. She's the artistic director for The Moth. And it all started out as a tiny little group of friends sitting on a porch in Georgia, and now they've grown to this huge organization with a global reach. And I'm just really excited about the conversation we had, which really boils down to listening to and loving the people right in front of you.

Catherine, I'm so happy that you could take this time to talk with *The Bitter Southerner*.

Catherine Burns: Great. Thank you so much. I should just say I'm a longtime, huge fan of *The Bitter Southerner*, and I could not be more thrilled to be here. So, thank you.

JG: I've been such a fan of The Moth for years, too. And it's just like, I'm like, I can't believe that you're a fan of us, because we're fans of you. And even my children, they don't really care that much about the work I'm doing, but when I told them I was going to speak to someone from The Moth, they were like, 'Oh my goodness! The Moth, really? That's real, Mama.'"

CB: So The Moth history is definitely rooted in the South. Our founder, George Dawes Green, he's a novelist. And he grew up on St. Simons Island, which is a little island off the coast of Georgia. And he and his friends would sit around on their friend Wanda's porch and they would

play poker and drink Jack Daniel's and tell stories deep into the night. And there was actually a hole in the screen and the moths would come fluttering in and they started referring to themselves as the moths, you know, like, the moths will meet tonight. And, um, years later he moves to New York City, becomes a novelist. And he was attending parties — this is, like, the height of the dot-com boom — and he talks about how ... two things: One is that you would run into someone at a party, and he felt like nobody was really listening to each other. You know, that you'd be talking to someone and they were just waiting for you to stop so that they could then start saying their bit. And he kind of longed for there to be a place like Wanda's porch, where somebody could sit and just tell an uninterrupted longer story. And then, also he was going to poetry slams in the East Village. And sometimes the poets would walk out onstage and before they would start their poem, they would tell a little story. And he's like, that's the best part. I want a night of just that. And so in 1997 (we're actually coming up on our 25th anniversary, which is amazing, next year!), he invited, like, a hundred friends to his loft apartment and invited five people to hold the floor and tell a story. And that is how The Moth began, trying to bring that feeling of a Southern porch into theaters and bars and other venues, now around the world.

I was one of the first members of my family to leave the South in, like, you know, hundreds of years, like, by people who were really dug in to the South. And so of course I grew up listening, especially to my paternal

grandmother, tell stories and begging her to like, 'Tell me the one; tell me again,' you know, hearing these stories over and over that I love, which is funny. One of the things people say to me now is, like, "How can you ... do you ever get tired of hearing the same story over and over?" And I'm, like, "Literally, no." And ever since I was 4 and the person telling them was my grandmother and now ... I grew up just trying to find art anywhere I could.

JG: You and I were both born in Alabama. So I was curious if you wanted to talk a little bit about ... what your road from Alex City to New York City was like.

CB: I was born in Birmingham, but then I've mostly lived my life up until I was 18 in a series of small towns. Thinking of Alex City ... my mother, who never knew a stranger ... when I was little, Harper Lee actually came to my hometown to research what was meant to be her next book. And she lived in the cabin on the lake near our town. And when I was little, my mother actually invited Harper Lee over for lunch, and she came. And so when I was a little girl, I had lunch with Harper Lee and I don't remember that much about it. I wish I did. But then years later, you know, it was in junior high, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And I was kind of in that surly teen period with my mom. And it was like, "Mama, you know, you just invited Harper Lee over for lunch ... don't you know she just won the Pulitzer Prize?" I was such a jerk. And my mother was like, "I don't know about that. But, um, she was new in town and I just wanted to be neighborly." ... It was just part of her thing: Get to know your neighbors. So that was kind of a fun thing. But it did tie in to this idea you know, again, to the heart of, like, whether it's Harper Lee or just some random person in line in front of you in the grocery store, you know, open up your mouth, be inviting, ask people for their story, ask people questions, get to know the person standing next to you.

JG: That's awesome. I wonder, yeah, it does seem like that skill of just making nobody a stranger is something that can put people at ease for being able to tell their story in a room full of people they don't know. 'Cause that's, that's the sense; there's just such an intimacy that y'all create that must come from that.

CB: I feel like we grow as a society through individuals and their stories, right? Almost like any crisis or tragedy or problem at any point in time. It all really comes down to the experience of individual people. I'm thinking of one of our storytellers, Trina [Robinson], who told a gorgeous story, you know, that was tough, but beautiful. She grew up in Chicago, but at some point essentially discovered that her relatives had been slaves in Kentucky.

Trina Robinson [from recording]: Now I know my descendants, I'm a descendant of slaves. I mean, that's

obvious. It's just, when you see that word next to your family members' names ... I mean, that was really intense.

CB: And she went back and ended up finding — I think it was more of a farm, a plantation where they worked — and finding their graves, working to get actual graves put there for them. And she ended up saving up her money and buying up their slave papers because she wanted to own that. And, like, sort of honor her history.

TR: Because I knew I would never get this opportunity again. To get an original slave document is next to impossible. But documents related to your actual family. That's unheard of. So I said yes.

CB: And you know, she told this story in a sold-out show at Lincoln Center [for the Performing Arts]. And ... I don't know what all 1,200 people there were thinking, but I'm assuming there'd be people in the audience who would feel very disconnected from, they might not think they were disconnected, but I think they might see something like slavery in a very theoretical way. And then you're standing listening to Trina and it's just very direct, it's, like, right now.

TR: I'm actually currently working with that historical society that took me to that cemetery. And we are working to put together a plaque listing all the names of the slaves in that cemetery. And one of them actually recently said to me, you know, "Why are we doing this, because no one's going to know about this except for us?" And I said, "Oh no, we are doing this. I want their names recorded, cast in bronze, and said out loud: David, Martha, Martin, and Anna. These mothers, daughters, sons, and fathers are loved." Thank you.

CB: There's something about personal storytelling that can show you a path where if everybody gets out of bed and tries to take a path, to move the world into a kinder, safer, more equitable place, that we will slowly get there. At least, I want to believe that.

JG: That leads me to the question I was going to ask you. I found this interview that you'd done in 2017 where you'd said, "I think it's no coincidence — even as we're typing into our little devices, as people are trying to learn how to adjust in this digital world, which has so many wonderful things to offer — that there's this desire to get back to one person at a time. To interact in a meaningful way with another human being." And you know, when I read that, I thought, well, of course that's about in-person things. And of course this past year, we've had to not do in-person things, but you can still get that sense that everyone's holding hands underneath the table. And I guess I'm just curious how that has felt in this past year with events or things that you all have done recently.

CB: Yeah. Well, it's obviously been an intense time to be producing what's normally a live storytelling show. We pivoted to Zoom pretty quickly. And at first I think it felt a little stiff. And then over time, we figured out the tech a little bit, we figured out how to light it, you know, where the person should stand. I feel like our real break was, there was a show that we did in June that just suddenly felt like it blew out and it, while it didn't feel like we were back in the theater live, you really could feel the energy of the crowd. ... In the beginning, we didn't want the chat turned on Zoom because we felt like it had the feeling that people were talking over the stories. But then you've just felt so disconnected from the audience. So the thing we came up with, I feel like has helped a lot, is we turn the chat on during intermission. So people come on and they're pouring out their hearts. Then the host takes a break and we hear a little musical interlude and during that, we turn to the chat and the audio. It's just like, boom: "Oh my God, love these, love the stories." It's just usually just so much love, it comes in faster than you can even read it, to the point that we usually send the chat transcript to the storytellers afterwards so they can read all the love they got.

The most, we've had a show, we had almost 3,000 people, and you feel it. And there's also someone coming in from Hong Kong, someone's coming in from Nairobi, and that's something we could have never done. So that's one of the things we've been asking ourselves is, what can we do now that we couldn't do before? You know, that somebody in a small town, you know, being a small-town girl, it's important to us to reach people who aren't in just the major cities.

JG: I think there's often, like, this unnecessary tension around technology of, like, "Well, if you, if you start recording it and put it on the radio, it's going to change. You know, if we do it on Zoom, it's not. ... " And I think you've been able to prove that actually, it's about people, it's about connecting people. And as long as there's a person on the other end of that, then it's real and it matters. And I think I can say as someone who, you know, used to live in a city, but now I live in a small town, being able to listen to them off on the radio is such a gift, you know? ... 'Cause the idea of trying to drive to Atlanta to go to a show seems a lot harder than just being able to tune in. And I think it's really valuable work that y'all are doing, you know, to connect to people.

CB: We love being on the radio. And a lot of, like, the radio expansion in the last five years has been into the South, you know, getting on all those Southern stations. Birmingham was a huge thing for me ... and they're now our partners in the slams, too, WBHM, which is great. And I think we're on all of the Alabama stations

now. And, of course, Georgia Public Radio. They're amazing. And yeah, it's just been, it's great. It feels like a natural fit. The Moth in the South.

JG: That's so cool. Have you guys ever actually, have you ever done a show from a porch?

CB: No, but that's such a good idea. We've talked about it.

JG: OK, 'cause I have a porch.

CB: Oh my God, you have a beautiful farm! I'm obsessed. I'm sorry, I stalked you on Instagram. I hope that's OK. So cool. I desperately want a farm. I love Georgia. I want chickens. I'm just ... I was in awe.

JG: Yeah, so, no, seriously. We have this huge porch. And one of the last things that I did, kind of before lockdown, was, I was hosting these little, we called them porch church, just, like, getting some friends together on our porch.

CB: Oh, porch church. I love that.

JG: I mean, it was just so, so special and I just miss it so much. And I was like, "Ooh, can The Moth come to my porch?" We can have, like, five people. But it would be so fun to do that. We should do that.

CB: That would be so cool.

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The Moth has grown a lot over the last many years, and ... what used to be one program is now three programs. We have a community program, where we do workshops around the country. We do a lot of work with the Innocence Project. We also have a high school program, which is mostly in New York City, but one of the few silver linings of the pandemic is, we've been doing them more over Zoom, and so it can be kids around the country. And then, of course, we have our global program for the [Bill & Melinda] Gates Foundation. They don't normally fund the arts, but they do fund people who are, like, the heads of NGOs. Many times, these NGO heads, who are founders, have a personal story as to why they wanted to do this work.

And so we have been brought in to help them tell their personal story as well as possible, because then that allows them to go out in the world and speak and connect with people who might be able to help them and help their cause in some way and help them move things forward. And then, of course, the more we did that work, the more we discovered how incredible so many of these stories are, and then we wanted to feature them on our own radio show. And you know, every, just about every

year, we'd do, like, a women-and-girls episode, where it's all stories from women and girls around the world. And it's always, like, several years in a row. It was our most downloaded podcast episode, which made us so happy that people really want to hear these stories.

JG: You still sound like you really love your job, you sound happy, and that's a really good thing. And I'm, like, can you tell me, like, how did you grow and still be sort of true to the core of what you're doing while also expanding?

CB: Sure. I mean, there's definitely been stumbles, but we try very hard to remember who we are at our heart. We have an amazing board, and they're very supportive of us. We've also grown the staff in a way that just feels like it just keeps expanding and expanding what's possible, and also what it means to be The Moth. You know, we started out this organization that was very kind of grounded in the very sort of white male literary world in New York. And now that's just expanded out in such a fresh way. And for me, I feel like, because we're always trying to take on new things. ... First of all, every story, we're always out there trying to find fresh stories and, like, stories that ... either we have never heard before, or there's, like, a lot of common themes, but, like, where it's just told in a totally fresh way. Every time we do something new, we try to say, "What's the Mothiest way to do this? What is the way to do this that feels most true to our values?"

JG: Thank you, Catherine Burns; thank you to The Moth for what you've started and keep doing. Thank you all for listening to The Bitter Southerner, and for reading The Bitter Southerner. Until next time, I'm Josina Guess.