

# The Liar's Contest by FUNDA Fest at Mixed Magic Theatre



Photo Credit: Dhana Whiteing of All About the Photos

For the 20<sup>th</sup> year, the RI Black Storytellers hosted and produced a Liar's Competition on January 19 as part of FUNDA Fest, sometimes referred to as RIBS' Fibs. The event was hosted by April Brown and Teju Ologboni, and played to a standing-room-only crowd at the Mixed Magic Theater at 560 Mineral Spring Ave in Pawtucket.

Many of the contestants were returning winners competing to add another trophy to their collection. Some participated in prior years and were still striving for a big win. Four judges (Dhana Whiteing, Raffini, Don Mays and Donna Osborne) were assigned the task of judging each performer by originality, creativity, the relative TALLNESS of their TALL tale, delivery and audience response (which counted for 30% of the score). Half of the judges stated for the record that the scores were very close to one another at the end of the night.

After April Brown and Teju did some housekeeping with endlessly sharp banter, visiting poet Ilene Evans graced the stage, followed by Teju's opening story (was it truth or was it a lie?) about jazz and Fifi La Femme. The rules were explained and the 20<sup>th</sup> Liar's Competition began.

One by one, contestants took command of the room. Many of the lies seemed outrageous and credible at the same time. Each lie was unique and each performer was skilled at delivering a fine lie.

Catalina Martinez began the evening telling about her Grandmother Dulce from Cuba who used to soak her teeth in holy water. Martinez attested that she knew, for a fact, that this was true because it was Martinez, at a young age, who used to go to the church and steal the holy water herself. This wasn't that far-fetched, yet the audience knew that some or all of it was a lie. This first story about Agua de Dulce was so well-received, that one had to wonder if it might have won for best lie if it hadn't gone just a little bit over the 5-minute mark (scores were dropped 5 points for every minute over). Martinez provided a phenomenal jumpstart into a fast-paced evening.

From there, one of the winners from last year, Josh, announced that he was going to tell the truth because lying didn't work for him. His tale of wearing his Batman onesie with a cape to do the polar plunge escalated to the question, "How can I get everything wet without getting everything wet?"

Paul Hossfield, a retired engineer, began his lie by saying that he was God.

April Brown kept the audience on its toes with clever quips. She introduced the next act reading off the card, "He says he is young at heart. Now, see, that's something men say." Mark Binder then shared the very believable story about Old Scratch Nichols and the Bloated Chicken Challenge. This story brought the audience to knee slapping and tambourine playing when they heard about a three-times dead politician who had to be killed by a taxidermist (and others) to enhance his work ethic.

Rusty Monty told a story about gold digging before and after the Civil War.

The youngest liar of the group was 14-year-old Haley Roche. She was overheard telling an audience member that her account of making one friend on the bus and not being weird or awkward in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was true. She held her own on stage and it seemed like a lie that it was her first time on the Liar's Contest stage.

When Marvin Novogrodski took the stage carrying a rolled-up brown paper bag, one of the good-hearted hecklers called out, "He brought dinner!" Little did the audience know, the bag was filled with underwear. His lie involved meeting up with FUNDA Fest creator, Valerie Tutson, sharing coffee and ideas, and ultimately agreeing to sell signed underwear from all of the various and talented RI Black Story Tellers. It didn't seem like a lie that they agreed that the underwear be clean, as he stated. During his brief (as it were) 5 minutes, Novogrodski pulled out allegedly signed tightie whities such as, "Put some Tutson on your butson. Love, Val" and "Put this on your ass. Love, Ramona Bass." All of this lie seemed like a logical way to subsidize FUNDA Fest. Who wouldn't buy a fancy pink undergarment signed, "I like them teeny. Love, Raffini"?

Next on the bill was Ricardo Pitts-Wiley. With his purple voice and his engaging physicality, it was easy to forget this was a contest. Pitts-Wiley is the kind of performer who does not lie on stage. Perhaps he was just telling someone else's truth. He and Bernadet Pitts-Wiley are the founders of Mixed Magic Theatre, a haven of integrity and reliably engaging programming.

Burr Harrison entered the stage in an argyle sweater, taped-up glasses and hiked-up jeans. He delivered his lie in a high-pitched voice. It made one wonder if the words were true, but the delivery was a lie, or if Burr blurred the lies together.

Cassandra Cato-Louis, author of *How to Marry a Black Man*, skillfully tricked the audience in her account about how her mother never met Isaac Hayes.

Then Jim Roche, who may or may not have worked on Wall Street, told a story about his encounter with someone who turned out to be an international spy ... maybe.

Once all of the contestants finished, Masankho Banda performed a bonus story. He is a visiting story teller for the FUNDA Fest, and one of the many talented presenters over the last couple of weeks.

Then there was a raffle. The top three winners were announced. Third place went to Mark Binder, second place to Marvin Novogrodski (who flung his prop underwear to enchanted audience members en route to his prize), and first place was awarded to Burr Harrison.

Audience members chatted enthusiastically afterward. They enjoyed the lovely Mixed Magic Theatre space and discussed their plans for upcoming FUNDA Fest events. One might expect a review to limit

itself to the highlights of an event, but with FUNDA Fest, every single offering is a highlight.