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SMARTEN UP  
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

### **BY ANY NAME, 'LIKELY STORIES' IS A HOT TICKET**

What's in a name? "Recognition and meaning," says Emily Zacharias of Maplewood, veteran Broadway/Off-Broadway, regional theater actor, and trustee of the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School.

Never mind Shakespeare's promise that *a rose by any name would smell as sweet*. After 10 years as Director of the Adult School's popular *Celebrity Readings*, Emily is reintroducing the evening on Monday, March 28, under a new name, *Likely Stories*.

Why the change-over? "Celebrities are famous for being famous," the Director explains.

By contrast, "Our on-stage readers are theater professionals who spend their careers crafting characters invented by playwrights," Emily said. "Actors are interpretive artists, and *Likely Stories* is an evening spent with literature, not just stories."

In academia, it's called oral interpretation, the study of literature through performance, Emily said. She cited the abundance of story-telling available to listeners today, highly personal stories told live, from "The Moth" to "This American Life."

"*Likely Stories* is not that," Emily emphasized. "We share the written word, crafted with complexity and contradiction by some of the greatest short-story writers in the English language.

"Literature is brought alive by actors," she continued. "We lift the writer's world off the page and, somehow, this intensifies the experience: reader, writer, and listener suspend time together and reach another destination."

Exactly what the destination will be for *Likely Stories* on March 28 is still unfolding. The search for story possibilities goes on until about two weeks before performance, Emily related. "Partnering story to actor is a dance. Our actors frequently bring along a fantastic favorite story with them. I try to create a gentle arc within the three stories we present. Fitting writers to actors is an event!"

Next month's *Likely Stories* will welcome theater and TV actor Charlie Pollock ("The Good Wife," "Elmer Gantry," "Carnival"), who lives in South Orange and just closed in "Lazarus," the David Bowie musical at the New York Theatre Work Shop. He is also a founder of the Midtown Director Repertory Theater Company, headquartered at SOPAC.

Emily herself will be reading for the fourth time at the Adult School's event. ("Amazing that such a thing existed in the community I landed in!") A 20-year veteran of Broadway (directed by luminaries Mike Nichols and Joe Mantello) and of regional theater (including the Papermill), Emily is also a founding member of The Workshop Theatre in New York, a Drama Desk-nominated Off-Off company.

The third *Likely Stories* actor/reader is awaiting confirmation in the wings. The event is always held on a Monday night -- that's when the New York theaters are dark -- and during Emily's decade as director, performers have included such renowned actors as Christine Ebersole, Andre Braugher, the late James Rebhorn, Norbert Leo Butz, Michelle Pawk, and Faith Prince.

Then there was the late and very great Isaiah Sheffer, co-founder and artistic director of Symphony Space in New York City. Isaiah helped model the Adult School's literary reading event on his renowned creation, "Selected Shorts: A Celebration of the Short Story," heard on WNYC radio and NPR, nationwide.

"Isaiah understood that we share the experience of living through story-telling," Emily said. "He was a master story-teller. He had exquisite literary taste, the instincts of a performer, a voice like a cello...(and) he dutifully caught the Midtown Direct for six years to be with us...to show up with his yellowing paperback of a great story."

Great stories are increasingly important in our increasingly complicated world, Emily believes.

"We are told that internet use is rewiring our brains and impairing our ability to think deeply and creatively....that we are a culture addicted to speed, drowning in data, and over-stimulated to the point where only sensationalism and willful hyperbole get our attention."

*Likely Stories* will offer an antidote," she promises. "Gathering together to listen intently, engage the imagination, and go off-line -- it's all very good for body and soul."

For details, see Maplewood artist Felix Sockwell's whimsical illustration on the inside cover of the Adult School's spring catalog. Or, click on [somadultschool.com](http://somadultschool.com) to reserve tickets at \$25 each.

As Adult School Executive Director Judith James observes, "Seeing this caliber of actor at an affordable price right here in our backyard: it's a real luxury!"

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