

You Are Cordially Invited...
by Sarah Stein

"If you could invite three famous people, living or dead, for a dinner conversation, whom would you choose?"

That question has always fascinated me. I finally decided that I had to write a story about it. I knew immediately two of those people would be Oscar Wilde (Irish poet, writer, playwright) and Frida Kahlo (Mexican painter). It was more difficult to choose the third person. I told a simplified version of "The Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe (American poet, short-story writer) at a ghost story concert and was entranced by the power of his words. Based on that experience, I decided Poe would be an intriguing person to add. Next I started by formulating three questions I would ask each of my guests.

1. Can you say a few words concerning how you feel about being invited to this conversation tonight?
2. What is your vision of art?
3. Do you feel that you realized this vision?

I chose these questions because, as a fellow artist, I was interested in what my three guests had to say about the purpose of art. Wilde and Poe had already written several essays on this subject. Because I was limited to twenty minutes, I decided to stay with just three questions.

My first task was to write the story. I began to gather information about these three artists, so as to have them answer my questions authentically. What I did not want were dry, factual answers, but ones which were lively and in keeping with the character of my guests.

Oscar Wilde was famous for his conversational skills, so he was very comfortable answering my questions in his usual loquacious, somewhat boastful manner. Poe was a dreamy and melancholic figure, but nevertheless eloquent. Frida Kahlo's answers were honest, passionate, and humorous. They spoke about the happier moments in their lives as well as the tragic ones. I also created some original conversation and had the three artists interacting with each other while I served as the hostess and facilitator.

My second task was to perform the story/theater piece. I did not want to wear costumes; I wanted to use my voice and gestures to convey each character. To connect with the characters, I felt that I had to use subtle accents, although some storytellers warned me against that. I

rewrote the script many times and of course I practiced with fellow storytellers and friends.

The actual performance went well. The enthusiastic applause felt wonderful as did the comments at intermission. A well-known storyteller said he felt the characters were in the room.

No one complained about the accents and an Englishwoman and a Southerner who were in the audience actually said I did well. Both my friends and I agreed it was the most challenging piece I had ever done.

This is still somewhat a work in progress. I would like to have more opportunities to present the piece to small audiences before I do the final show, which I plan to lengthen to 30 minutes.

It was a challenging task, but I encourage other storytellers to invite three of their favorite characters to dinner, and when dinner is over, by all means, create a performance piece to share the experience with a wider audience.