

What Does Spoken Word Have to Teach a Page Poet?

(Freelance, 2012)

Two Worlds



*Spoken word artists, Shayna Stock and Veracity.
Canadian Festival of Spoken Word, 2012.*

I have just returned from the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word (CFSW) in Saskatoon. This is the second time CFSW has come to the city, bringing with it a large contingent of the best spoken word artists in the country to compete in a week of competition.

As a poet, I straddle two worlds. Part of me belongs to the page. But another part of me belongs to performance. I am a late bloomer who did improvised theatre long before I became a poet, and when I did start to write nothing was more natural than to step into a character's skin and let them speak. They say you can never write the poem that is in your head, but I feel like I am coming close to that when I am performing, especially when I am collaborating with other poets and artists. The whole stage becomes the space for the poem. And yet, many poets are intimidated by the idea of performance, let alone some of the subject matter one hears at poetry slams. I think of Anne Sexton, who was asked if she worried about how people in her life would be affected by her poems. She said, "I don't reveal skeletons that would hurt anyone. They may hurt the *dead*, but the dead belong to me." Thankfully, spoken word and slam is not all about unrelenting darkness.

The Basics

Spoken word and those who write for the page live in two different communities, two different worlds pulled into each other's gravity but still tracking within their own wobbly orbits. It leaves me wondering: what does spoken word have to teach a text-based poet?

Spoken word encompasses many forms including performance poetry, sound poetry, experimental forms, and collective or interdisciplinary work. The public usually encounters spoken word through poetry slams, which is what I mainly want to talk about here. The rules of slam are simple: anyone can participate; they must read or perform a poem with a strict three-minute time limit. There are no costumes or props. There are no animals and no nudity (have fun guessing why this rule is needed). After that, it's open season. The work can be spoken, shouted or sung; its tools are the voice, the mic, the stage, the body, and movement. The judges are picked at random from the audience and the artists pass through a series of knock-out rounds. But these are simply mechanics. Slam is really about inclusion and building a community. It provides a place where people can express themselves, without judgement, before a supporting and responsive community.

As a published poet, I constantly find myself sitting in the spoken word audience and realizing that room is being made at the table for people you don't see at AGMs of most writers' organizations. Young people turn out in numbers, along with members of the LGBT community, First Nations and Métis, immigrants and first generation Canadians, Black Canadians, university students, friends, and random white-haired folks like me. It feels like Canada's internal diaspora.

Sheri-D Wilson is one of Canada's best known performance poets. Sheri-D says slam is not a form, but a movement. She says that its distinguishing feature is that it brings people together to really listen to each other and to create a new way of being as a society. As we talked, I thought of Wednesday afternoon's *Strength in Words Open Mic* at Paved Gallery. It was a space in the program where people could safely present pieces dealing with abuse, racism, and other difficult experiences. The session halted in the middle to talk about how to present this kind of material, but it was also about how to cope with it, and how others can respond in an appropriate and useful way. Active Listeners were provided in evening sessions to help people who were feeling overwhelmed. I arrived late at the Wednesday session, and stepping into the middle of things, I felt like I had come into a very human place. How different it felt from the

awkward silence that has often followed difficult poems at traditional public readings. All this raises the question of what kind of care we provide for each other in the broader writing community.

Is slam a movement as Sheri-D says, and not just a form? Slam poetry is political poetry with a capital *P* as in politicians, governments, melting ice caps, social justice, race, gender identity, the World Bank, and spy copters. Sometimes it is lower case — about families and communities, griefs, grievances, lovers, life's absurdities, and croissants. In his between-song banter, Brendan McLeod, who received a Poet of Honour at CFSW, talked about the progressive politics of the spoken word movement. He said that writing and performing it forced him to grow because of its values. He said he was no longer simply a performer but a community member with a culture of free expression, tolerance, and inclusion.

Stepping Up to the Mic

Last fall, one of Canada's preeminent poets curtly told me that he had no time for spoken word. There is some truth to the stereotype of slam in particular as a seemingly relentless torrent of end rhymes that would make Ezra Pound spin in his grave. There are other criticisms. Even as a narrative poet, I am disengaged from pieces where didacticism overpowers the music, and where the amped-up diction leaves no time to absorb the meaning. In music, audiences know the lyrics before they arrive. They seek out the tunes and repetition isn't a problem. The same thing goes for poetry performance. I am reluctant to read what might be called a page poem in the same venue or even the same city twice. Maybe this is just me, but isn't this just a bit "up tight" as we used to say. Some poems, regardless of the challenge for the audience, and like certain kinds of music, need to be heard again and have earned that right.

One of the great freeing aspects of spoken word is the permission to do just about anything. I feel the constraint of the page and how things I would like to say directly that would never make it into a literary journal. When I am performing, I feel like I come closer to living up to the ideal of writing as service. Stepping up to the mic is not just about protest. It's about poetry as a

living, breathing thing in the presence of a community. In a world where meaning, speech, and creative thought are under assault, performance and spoken word are a conscious and very public raging against the dying of the light. This just as true whether my subject is prairie landscape, fixing my 100 year old house, or some social issue.

Annemarie Pegg, has worked Doctors Without Borders in Haiti. Writing in the *Globe and Mail*, she says she is sometimes asked why she and others return to war zones and disaster areas. Her response is simple, "In Africa, in Asia or in Canada, good that is put into the world is good that is put into the world. Period."

Whatever the criticisms, spoken word poets seem to see putting good into the world as their main task. It is a form that presumes to speak for the culture. The poet is called to her courage. A huge core is dedicated to assuming the voice and validating the lives and voices that have been silenced. Just saying this on the page sounds like a polemic. However, I prefer to believe that poetry can be art and have force in the world at the same time. When I perform I feel like writing is the best and the strongest part of me. Performance in front of an audience is the "acid test" for a poem; you can feel the slightest wobble in its language, its perception, and its veracity. When a poem goes out into the air so publicly there is no going back. At that moment, what I write is who I am.

When I consider my own rambling path as a writer, I have to respect what spoken word artists would call their creative practice, and how far it extends beyond the 20 minutes or so of a performance. It involves writing, teaching, workshops, collaborations, and building their art in Canada. They make me ask what my intention as an artist is. I am constantly caught between writing and my obligation to my community. The creative practice that I see in the spoken word community combines the two. It is not a dichotomy. It makes me realize that I have only a vague idea of what my creative practice is. Maybe I should stop compartmentalizing my writing as "art", and devaluing what I do in my writing community as an "activity" I carry out at the expense of my real vocation.

Voice and Craft

In the body poetic, persona is the muscle but voice is the nerve that carries the message. “Of all the intangibles of good writing, voice is probably the most transcendental.”¹ Voice is not simply the language — it is also the subtext of everything the poet or character knows or does not know, her emotional intelligence, perceptions, and the back-story of all the experience that brought her to this point. As humans we share a deep, phenomenological knowledge of our interior lives that allows us to imagine the experience of others, no matter how remote it may be from our own, precisely because we *are* human. This is where empathy comes from; it’s also the source of our ability to recognize the truth in a poem or character. If spoken word is about anything, it’s about voice.

If I had one wish, it would be that more people would get to see first-rate spoken word artists in full flow at one of Canada’s many spoken word festivals. This is not an uncritical endorsement, but there is simply no doubt about the quality and power of the art at these kinds of events. A few years ago, the spoken word artists I know in Regina were just starting on their path. They were struggling with the same issues of form, craft and finding their voice that all poets must come to terms with. They worked to get better and eventually succeeded in pushing through personal expression into art. Still, the whole ethic of the slam movement says that personal expression is essential and gives it a place on-stage. Despite this open door approach, or maybe because of it, the venues in Regina have given rise to at least a dozen bona fide spoken word artists I can think of. They are teaching themselves in exactly the same way the rest of the Saskatchewan writing community has – by bringing in some of the best spoken word artists in the country to teach and perform.

Remi Kanazi, a Palestinian-American poet and activist based in New York, says that his poetry has to work on the page as well as in performance. Some poets, like Edmonton’s outgoing poet laureate, Mary Pinkoski move from spoken word to the page. Halifax, Calgary, Edmonton,

¹ Louis Menand, *Best American Essays 2004*, Introduction, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, USA, 2004.

Victoria have all had spoken word artists as poets laureate. I could add Toronto's George Elliot Clarke whose performances are well-known.

What I love most about spoken word is the virtuosity of the very best performances, the place it makes for courage, and the taste for justice. Sometimes it seeks a gentler motion. I may be primarily a page poet, but it makes a place for me that the page does not provide. Even as a member of the audience, I feel like I have been a part of something. Performing my work recasts the experience of authorship as if I have made a new poem. It changes my relationship to the work. I feel like the poem has been ``out there`` in the world. I feel like I have tossed a sea anchor off the port and starboard bows of my vessel and that I am pointing into the current, the way a poet should be.