



Bronwyn performing at Sisters for Sisters at The Toff in Town, Melbourne. Photo by Philip Werner

IT'S POETRY ...

BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

Forget the dreary recitations of droning verse that you remember from your schooldays. Since then poetry has leapt off the page and into pubs and parks, where it's entertaining a much wider audience. Award-winning poet **BRONWYN LOVELL** writes of the new enthusiasm for poetry that's a social and multisensory experience.

It's not that small collection of lonely and neglected books that most readers walk past at the back of your local bookstore. It's not the baffling lines your teacher made you memorise to pass your high school English exams. And it's not old-fashioned or difficult to understand. So what is performance poetry? It's vibrant, relevant and happening right now at a venue near you.

Spanning a wide range of the artistic spectrum and borrowing techniques from other classic performance arts – such as theatre, storytelling, rap, speech-making and stand-up

comedy – performance poetry is magical to behold. Whether you love or loathe poetry in books, the poetry that is performed live on a stage is infused with an electricity that you don't get from a silent page. The poems are evocative and will engage and inspire – and they're guaranteed to stir something deep inside even the most poetically challenged.

If most poetry on the page leaves you a little perplexed, then you'll be pleasantly surprised by the accessibility of performance poetry. You will rarely come away from a performance poem wondering what it was all about. Poetry

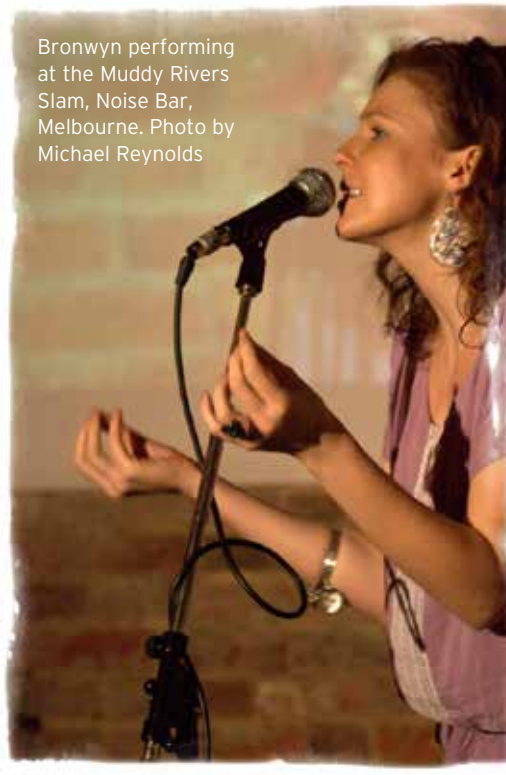
comes to life when poets employ their whole bodies as well as their voices as instruments to express their poems.

Performance poetry isn't a newfangled fad. It's taking poetry back to its roots, which are firmly steeped in the oral tradition. And for every beanie-wearing hip-hop poet performing spoken word beats in the city, you can bet there's an Akubra-wearing, Driza-Bone-clad regional lad or lass reciting a ballad. Performance poetry announces itself in many forms and in myriad voices.

Bush poetry is for your modern-day Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson types who write rhyming poetry, usually narrating yarns from country life. Before you say that that's not your thing, just remember that the unofficial Aussie anthem, 'Waltzing Matilda', is a classic example of this style, and who can resist its charm? If you'd like to see bush poetry in all its glory, get yourself along to a campfire at the Dunedoo Bush Poetry Festival, the Bundy Bush Poetry Muster, the Toolangi Festival or The Man from Snowy River Bush Festival.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that bush poetry is out of date. There are plenty

Bronwyn performing at the Muddy Rivers Slam, Noise Bar, Melbourne. Photo by Michael Reynolds



of people still living a country lifestyle, and bush verse continues to appeal to rural and urban audiences alike. Contemporary topics are often performed in bush poetry to brilliant comic effect.

If you really want to experience how entertaining poetry can be, you should try going to a poetry slam. Each participating poet must perform within a strict time limit. (So if someone's poetry is really awful, at least you won't have to endure it for long.) And at poetry slams, the audience is an active part of the performance. Go along

and you might even be chosen as a judge, since the judges are randomly and creatively selected from the audience at the beginning of each show (if you get hit in the head by a Fantale that means you've been chosen). And if you're not a judge, but you think the judges are doing a lousy job, you are actually encouraged to boo and hiss like you're at a panto. Slam poetry audiences are completely invested in the art they are there to witness. It's poetry for the people, by the people.

They're teaching performance poetry in schools these days and inspiring new generations of students with a love of words.

Poetry slam etiquette

Poetry slam audiences are very passionate, but if you were to cheer or wolf-whistle during a poem, you might drown out the words of the poet or upset their concentration. So here's a tip: if you dig what a poet is doing, you can click your fingers to let them know; this



is a subtle way of showing appreciation and expressing encouragement to the poet during a poem without distracting them from their performance or interrupting. It's also respectful to other listeners.

Slam poetry effectively turns poetry into a sport. There are qualifying heats, state finals and supreme glory for the overall winners.

Poetry lessons are no longer met with groans because these days poetry is totally cool. (I sense your suspicion and disbelief, but honestly, it is!)

In Victoria, participating high schools compete in Australian Poetry's annual teen team poetry slam, *OutLoud*. Students write and perform together: honing harmonies, mastering metaphors and mesmerising their audience at the Melbourne Writers Festival each year. To my knowledge this is the only team poetry event in Australia, but with any luck it will catch on and go national.

The adult competition, however, is already nationwide and has been running for years. It's called the Australian Poetry Slam and there are heats at a local library near you.

But if competitive poetry isn't really your thing, open mic events might be more to your liking. Open mics attract poets of all ages, levels and styles, and songwriters and storytellers too. Beginners are always warmly welcomed and encouraged. The standard is, as you might expect, variable at such events, but generally it's surprisingly good. I bet you'll be impressed by your local line-up.

Poetry has recently had a huge resurgence in popularity and it's attracting unlikely fans and participants to its ranks. But don't take my word for it. Check it out for yourself.

Poets are not just at writers' festivals; you'll find performance poets at fringe festivals and comedy festivals too. Not to mention the events that specialise in poetry, like the Queensland Poetry Festival, the Tasmanian Poetry Festival and the WA Poetry Festival. There is also a



Bronwyn performing at *Passionate Tongues* at the Brunswick Hotel, Melbourne 2011. Photo by Michael Reynolds

wealth of resources and local gig guides online that will lead you to the many pubs, bars, parks and unexpected places where performance poetry tends to pop up and make itself at home.

If you feel as though you're one of those readers who loves prose but has never really understood poetry, or who has felt a little intimidated by poetry's pretence to high art, then I especially urge you to give performance poetry a go. I think you'll find it refreshing.

At the very least you'll discover that poetry has a much

broader definition and far wider reach than you had ever imagined. **or**

Bronwyn Lovell is a Melbourne-based poet who works for Writers Victoria. Her poetry has been published in Australian Love Poems, Antipodes, Cordite Poetry Review and Global Poetry Anthology. She has won the Adrien Abbott Prize for Poetry and has been shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize, the Bridport Prize and the Montreal International Poetry Prize. Find out more about Bronwyn, her philosophy of writing and her performances at bronwynlovell.com.

Want to learn more about performance poetry?

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