

## **The Poem Performed**

**Felice Belle**

It is my inherent belief that poetry is written to be read aloud, not quarantined to the pages of books left on library shelves. A poem is fully experienced when given voice. I do not privilege the spoken word over the written word. If anything, the written word must hold more weight because without it there would be no words to speak.

I have heard professors and other poets comment that the quality of slam poetry is less than that of published poetry because the emphasis is on performance and not the work itself. However, if a particular poet has a dynamic stage presence or an exceptional style of delivery, that does not automatically discount the quality of his or her work. In fact, it is the unique and enviable ability of this poet to combine art and engaging performance.

The finest slam poems work on the page and on the stage. Just because poets are published does not mean that their work is more intelligent or better crafted than that of the average slam poet. There are bad published poets and bad slam poets. The true test is to compare quality academic poetry to quality slam poetry. When this is done, you will find a successful poem is a successful poem—whether it is performed or on paper.

Academia traditionally supports and promotes a small community of university-trained poets, while forums such as the Open Room at the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City are open to all. The poets there speak to social issues including, but not limited to, sexism, racism, police brutality, exploitation, and oppression of the working class. These poets have a sense of urgency about their work and use the stage to speak for those who may lack a public voice. It is this relevance to lives of everyday people that makes the slam poet an integral part of the genre.

Slam poets have infiltrated MFA programs. They are teaching in universities. They are shaping the next great poetry movement. Those people whose last experience with poetry occurred begrudgingly in a high school English class are being drawn to the drama and passion that slam poets offer. My students are learning that poetry does not have to be dense and obscure; it can be accessible. It can be about their neighborhood and

their experience. The artificial divide between slam poets and poets in the academy is slowly and surely closing.

*New York University*

### References

- Algarin and Holman 1994 Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman, eds. *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*. New York: H. Holt.
- Anglesey 1999 Zoe Anglesey, ed. *Listen Up!: Spoken Word Poetry*. New York: One World.
- Cabico and Swift 1998 Regie Cabico and Todd Swift, eds. *Poetry Nation: The North American Anthology of Fusion Poetry*. Montréal: Véhicule Press.
- Medina and Rivera 2001 Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera, eds. *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Ziegesar 2000 Cecily Von Ziegesar, ed. *Slam*. New York: Penguin.
- [www.nuyorican.org](http://www.nuyorican.org) A website for the Nuyorican Poets Café.
- [www.poetryslam.com](http://www.poetryslam.com) A website for Poetry Slam International.
- [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org) A website that houses slam poetry.