Illinois Wesleyan University
Digital Commons @ IWU

News and Events | University Communications

2011

Poetry Through Performance Course Slams onto Campus

Courtney Keenan '12
Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation
Keenan '12, Courtney, "Poetry Through Performance Course Slams onto Campus" (2011). *News and Events.* Paper 1578.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1578

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Ames Library, the Andrew W. Mellon Center for Curricular and Faculty Development, the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Commons @ IWU by the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Poetry Through Performance Course Slams onto Campus

Dec. 7, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – When one thinks of traditional poetry courses, quiet classes spent analyzing meter, form, and imagery come to mind. However, there has been a relatively recent movement to educate people on contemporary forms of poetry, such as slam poetry.

Slam poetry, or the competitive art of performance poetry, originated in 1984 when construction worker Marc Smith started a poetry reading series at a Chicago jazz club, looking to breathe life into poetry. The experiment spread to other clubs in Chicago and eventually to Ann Arbor, San Francisco and other major cities with nation-wide slams throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Slam has been well publicized in the media through television shows such as HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, and the 1998 film, *Slam*. Some people think slam is brash, perhaps even abrasive, but others find it moving and persuasive and "the obvious power of slam poetry puts to the test the power of other kinds of poetry," said Associate Professor of English Michael Theune.

Due to the fact that slam poetry is a relatively new art form, the study of these forms is just beginning to gain acceptance on college campuses. With this in mind in the fall semester of 2004, Theune structured his first Poetry through Performance course to incorporate aspects of both traditional and slam poetry. The course involves three performances: a memorized sonnet, an alternative monologue—that is, a performance that sets out to critique a previous performance of the poem—and an original slam poem. Each performance is accompanied by a written reflection on the poem and the performance. Students are also required to attend at least two poetry performances outside of class in order to see poets who have pursued performance poetry professionally. IWU students have responded to this new type of poetry course with great enthusiasm, and since then, Theune has taught the class in six subsequent semesters.

The goal of the Poetry through Performance course is to challenge students with, but also treat them to the prospect of embodying poetry. "While the course respects, encourages and teaches the careful reading and study of poetry, it also wants to endorse a new kind of reading, of engagement with texts, the kind described by poet Wallace Stevens when he says, 'One reads with one's nerves,'" said Theune. "In Poetry through Performance, students begin to read with their nerves by plugging poetry into the body, the nerves, tendons, and tissues, both sides of the brain, the mouth."

By exploring forms such as the sonnet, in this course students learn about a poetic form with deep roots in European history and culture. Performance poetry in general is a return to ancient lyric poetry meant for an audience and often accompanied by music. The course grounds itself in traditional poetry, however it aims to change students' perspectives on what poems are and do. "Very often, readers come to poetry expecting that poems are quiet and serious statements of eternal truths meant to elicit our silent awe. And, sure, a few poems are like this," said Theune. "Much more frequently, however, poems are wilder than this. They are transcripts of active, searching consciousness. They are impassioned, moving arguments. They consist of speech, sure, but also of cries and whispers, definitive shouts and uncertain hesitations. I don't think anyone has truly read a poem until they are capable of understanding the tremendous action the poem demands of its reader."

Associate Professor of English Michael Theune

Students engage in the performance aspect of the course not only by performing the works of published poets, but also their original material. "The class days when students perform poems are simply thrilling. There's palpable electricity in the class," said Theune. "It's nerves. It is the mix of excitement and anxiousness, but it is also the sheer joy of presenting and being presented with work performed with energy and feeling."

Theune was turned onto slam poetry by attending monthly slams at the Coffeehouse in Normal. At one of these slams, he met Robbie Q. Telfer, now director of performances for Young Chicago Authors and the head organizer of Louder Than A Bomb, the largest team-based youth poetry slam in the world. Since then, IWU's Tributaries and Lyrical Graffiti, the student-run groups that promote creative writing on campus, have brought Telfer to campus to perform numerous times. Students have brought slam poets such as Buddy Wakefield, Alvin Lau and the creator of slam poetry, Marc Smith. Theune says, "Students should attend these events because they are some of the most high-octane, high-voltage events on campus." Additionally, as these events involve open mic and slam competitions, students can attend to check out poems their fellow students are writing as well as share their own.

With courses such as Theune's, as well as this year's large turnout at a number of Tributaries and Lyrical Graffiti's slam poetry events, it is evident that this contemporary genre of poetry is quickly gaining recognition and popularity at IWU.

*Contact: Courtney Keenan, '12, (309) 556-3181, **univcomm@iwu.edu***