

Spoken Word Theatre: Poetry in the Cross-Art Laboratory

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TRANSCRIPT



“I want music people to go to music stuff and realise that they’re watching spoken word and realise they all like spoken word. That’s what I want. So, I want people to come for the sick base and stay for the life changing words” (Gardosi interview)

Extract: *Dancing to Music You Hate* by Jasmine Gardosi

That was Birmingham-based poet Jasmine Gardosi for you telling us about their blending of music and spoken word poetry in their show ‘Dancing to Music You Hate’ followed by an excerpt from the titular piece.

Hi, and welcome to Poetry Off the Page. This is the podcast of the research project “Poetry Off the Page: Literary History and the Spoken Word, 1965-2020.” We explore recent developments in British and Irish poetry performance. You can find out more about us on www.poetryoffthepage.net. I’m Shefali Banerji, your host for today, exploring Spoken Word Theatre: Poetry in the Cross-Art Laboratory, which means I will be talking about the cross-arts practices in spoken word theatre in the UK. How are different artforms employed in spoken word theatre? Do they serve an aesthetic purpose? Do they add to the meaning of poetry? We’ll hear examples together to find out! For this purpose, my focus will be mostly on the use of music, sound poetics and other similar oral or aural innovations, though worry not, I will also briefly touch upon other forms of artistic blending in this episode!

Now there are two terms that require clarifying here: cross-arts and spoken word theatre. Starting with “cross-arts”, if you’d asked me 1.5 years ago, what artforms can be employed in spoken word theatre, I would have offered you the simplistic answer of “spoken word poetry”, “theatre”, perhaps, a bit of storytelling. That should be it, right? Well, not really! After having investigated the artistic scope of spoken word theatre over this period, I now know better! So, what is “cross arts”? It means the use

and blending of different artforms employing image, sound, movement, and other practices in one work, or in the case of spoken word theatre, in a performance, a show. This play with different artforms is also called intermediality in performance studies. While the term “intermediality” has different definitions based on the discipline that uses it, the one that I’m referring to here covers the combining of two or more mediums and artforms to create a blended immersive performance. So, to summarise, I will be discussing the various ways different artforms and mediums come into play in spoken word theatre today.

Which brings us to the second term to discuss: what is spoken word theatre? Here, Pete Bearder’s definition from *Stage Invasion* comes in handy, where he defines the form as:

theatre shows (usually lasting an hour) performed through spoken word poetry. Spoken word theatre blends theatrical staging with the conversational and intimate delivery of spoken word. (56)

So the “spoken word” in spoken word theatre signals a close relation to existing or emerging poetry performance traditions, the performance being distinctly recognisable as spoken word poetry in that a) the poems are performed rather than read – so there is a deliberate use of gestures, facial expressions, movement, as well as sometimes costume or dress, and b) the performance follows a consistent tradition in spoken word poetry, it is performed by the poet themselves.

Spoken word theatre’s adaptability to the varied types of spaces and venues it occupies makes it possible to employ both minimal props and technological setups as well as more complex staging technologies. The possibilities of incorporating various artforms in its performance aesthetic, or as explained earlier, its intermedial scope, as well as the element of audience engagement, where the audience may be invited into the performance in varying degrees of involvement, are vital features of spoken word theatre.

There have been spoken word theatre shows produced with music, dance and movement, storytelling, animation or art, puppetry, crafts, which are vital components intrinsic to the fabric of these productions. And these artforms not only add to the

creative aesthetic of the performance but are important elements, right at the core contributing to the meaning. They often form an integral part of the theme and structure of the shows.

What do I mean? Here's an example for you from Bristol-based poet Malaika Kegode's phenomenal show 'Outlier'. The show premiered at Bristol Old Vic in 2021 and Kegode collaborates with the band Jakabol live on stage:

Extract: *The Way I Like Oskar...* by Malaika Kegode

If you enjoyed that snippet, you would have loved the amazing animation design by Christopher Harrison that's projected on the stage area, and later also included in the film version of 'Outlier'! This is how various artforms can interact with each other within spoken word theatre so as to create an intermedial experience. There's rhyme and poetry – say, in the instance, “hippy camps and circumstance” – but there's also storytelling. The live music is in conversation with the words of the performance. Malaika Kegode, playing the character of Mal, is in conversation with the band. But she also interacts with the audience. In fact, at the start of the show, the poet informs the audience “there's no fourth wall here”, implying the audience are not mere spectators watching the drama unfold on stage, but they are very much part of the play where the poet-performer will interact with them. The music creates meaning in conjunction with the poetry. The animation shows us what words cannot express. The interaction on stage and with the audience creates an engaging performance that brings everyone into the conversation. The abrupt pauses heighten the emotion, the vocal delivery and body communication create the meaning in ways words on the page cannot! This is what poetry performance does, and when extended into a full-length show using a narrative thread and theatrical strategies, spoken word theatre comes into being!

Another example of the intermedial spoken word theatre experience is Jasmine Gardosi's 'Dancing to Music You Hate' – of which you heard a snippet at the start of this episode. Gardosi's debut show about gender identity and coming to terms with queerness was commissioned by and premiered at Warwick Arts Centre in October 2021. It's an hour-long show with dubstep bass-lines and folk violin which, as their

website states, “blow apart the boundaries of gender and musical genre alike”. ‘Dancing to Music You Hate’ won the Saboteur Award for the Best Spoken Word show in 2023. I had the opportunity to attend a live performance at Birmingham’s Symphony Hall in January 2023!

The show is structured in a way that music is its central component. Music and poetry are blended from the start. The show opens with Gardosi leading the band using a rhythmic vocal beat, then the refrain “take a breath, take it back”, which slowly transitions into them beatboxing, and segues into the title poem or track. The controlled breath at the beginning establishes the rhythm of the performance and shows us an impressive range of verbal techniques that are employed in poetry performance and spoken word theatre.

Extract: *Take a breath, take it back...* by Jasmine Gardosi

The interaction between music and poetry flows throughout the show where the live band is a significant component of the show. Like in Kegode’s show, live music and the band’s presence on stage contributes to the meaning and theme of Gardosi’s performance. Gardosi goes on to engage in conversations with band members to move their narrative forward. Interestingly, halfway through the show, the poet engages in a conversation with musical instruments. A segment is performed where the poet enters into dialogue with the saxophone, played by critically acclaimed musician Xhosa Cole. Cole responds to the poet in music, not in words. The audience thus has the opportunity to choose their own words or make their own meaning in the course of the performance. The following extract includes an example of this:

Extract: *Should I tell my students that I am gay?...* by Jasmine Gardosi

Music is however not only a part of the conversation but also becomes a disruptor in the poet’s performance of a piece on censorship pertaining to gender identity and the subjugation of trans voices. Here the poet is strategically interrupted by a musical tone mimicking the harmony of a traditional ad, after the poet exclaims: “I’ve been given a platform”. Over the course of the piece, the tension between the words and

music heightens where the poet gets to start their sentence over and over again, only to be overpowered by the saxophone in the end. Let's hear a snippet from the piece to make sense of what I am talking about:

Extract: *I have been given a platform...* by Jasmine Gardosi

Beyond interaction with the live band, music also forms a vital part of the poet's own experimentation with vocal percussion. Gardosi is in fact an incredible beatboxer, so beatboxing features at regular intervals in *Dancing to Music You Hate*, particularly prominently in the performance of their poem "Be poet". Let's have a listen, shall we?

Extract: *Be Poet* by Jasmine Gardosi

On this intermingling of music, beatboxing, spoken word poetry, Gardosi tells us:

"My philosophy when it comes to working with any art form, or even just with poetry itself, is that I want my poem to be impossible without the artform that I'm playing with." (Gardosi interview)

Now, I must mention here that experimentation with sound has been a consistent feature of spoken word theatre. Sound manipulation and sound poetics using a loop pedal has been employed by Hannah Silva, for instance, in their 2014 show 'Total Man', commissioned by *Penned in the Margins* and *Mercy* as part of *Electronic Voice Phenomena*. The show utilises satirical poetry, quotations from Stan Gooch's book 'Total Man', various sound effects as well as vocal play, of which Silva is an absolute master! The rhythmic use of breath, the whispering, the play on sound merges artistically into Silva's poetry performance, as can be heard in the following excerpt:

Extract: *Is there anything more improbable than our own existence?...* by Hannah Silva

It is important to highlight here that intermediality has been intrinsic to spoken word theatre since the early days of its inception. In 1999, Jonzi D blended spoken word poetry with hip hop dance in 'Aeroplane Man', developing a new performance

practice called “hip hop theatre”. Today, hip hop theatre plays a significant role as part of spoken word theatre.

In the year 2000, Roger Robinson was weaving puppetry, storytelling, music, movement and spoken word poetry into his show ‘Shadow Boxer’, which premiered at Battersea Arts Centre as part of the British Festival of Visual Theatre. Since visual theatre was the dominant theme of the festival, corporeality or bodily presence and movement are a significant part of the show. Poetry, puppetry, musical bits, movement, humour, and impeccable acting and storytelling skills are woven into the theme of belonging/unbelonging, especially with respect to the Black experience. The performance opens with “where am I from?” (Robinson) to then trace the poet’s journey to England. Robinson proceeds to perform poems in ‘Shadow Boxer’ and weave them into a narrative that follows the poet’s journey from Trinidad to the UK. The puppetry incorporated in the show is of an improvised kind using object manipulation: for instance, Robinson uses a shoe and a jacket to create a puppet-like mythical kung fu master who also acts as a narrator in the story within the wider narrative thread. But how did the poet come to use and learn puppetry in the show? Let’s hear it from Robinson himself:

“The Puppetry Institute was actually in Battersea Arts Centre so they allowed me to go in and just play with puppets and understand the history of puppetry cause that’s one of the things I wanted to learn: the history of puppetry and I performed pretty good but I really didn’t know puppetry at all.” (Robinson interview)

The music employed in the show is an instrumental track that plays in the background in select pieces to highlight the dramatic tension of the moment or to signal a shift in the mood. Here’s an excerpt that demonstrates Robinson’s skilful combining of poetry, humour, and storytelling with music to narrate a childhood memory of visiting the beach with his family:

Extract: *The trip to the beach...* by Roger Robinson

Now, while the scope of a podcast only allows me to offer you short examples of oral/aural innovation, there have been experiments in spoken word theatre with several visual, kinetic, and sensorial artistic strategies beyond sound and movement.

Examples include Jay Bernard's projection of archival material from the George Padmore Institute in the backdrop of their performance of 'Surge'; John Berkavitch's mixing of poetry and hip-hop dance with animation in 'Shame'; Scottish Spoken Word Theatre Company In the Work's use of gimmicks in their show 'The 900 Club' – a show based on a bus journey which has also been staged on buses to create a more immersive experience; Mel Bradley's use of burlesque aesthetics in her show 'Ms Noir's Seven Deadly Sins'; and Rose Condo's preparing of sandwiches on-stage for audience members which she serves during the interval of 'How to Starve an Artist'.

These intermedial strategies demonstrate the various ways poets play with art forms, incorporating them into theatrical narrative structures such that each performance blurs generic boundaries. They also reveal the potential to manipulate sensorial experiences beyond sight and sound to create innovative longform immersive performances. The dive into cross-arts innovations in spoken word theatre shows is a continuing process in my research and every day I find ways in which poets and practitioners make the form new with different creative tools, whether it be by incorporating oral storytelling traditions from their cultures, or whether it be through using innovative digital technologies. And so, understanding the cross-arts or intermedial scope of spoken word theatre is an ongoing and fascinating task for me. By the end of my PhD, I hope to have a tangible mapping of this intermedial potential of the art form, along with answers to other important questions like, when did spoken word theatre emerge in the UK, how has it developed or evolved over the past 3 decades, and what are its major cultural and artistic influences.

With that, I bid you farewell for now. Do tune into the next episode where Claire Palzer will talk about Spoken Word Poetry at Ireland's Lingo Festival.

The "Poetry Off the Page" project is based at the University of Vienna. It is conducted in collaboration with the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes and supported by the European Research Council and the Austrian Science Fund. You can find out more about the project and all our partners on www.poetryoffthepage.net. Our podcast page there includes a list of references and the transcript of this episode. My particular thanks go to Roger Robinson, Apples and Snakes, Hannah Silva, Penned In the Margins, Malaika Kegode, Bristol Old Vic, Jasmine Gardosi and Warwick Arts

Centre, for their precious time in personal interviews, or for providing the archival footage of the shows. Finally, don't forget to follow us on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and Spotify. Goodbye and take care.