

Spoken Word Poetry at Ireland's Lingo Festival

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TRANSCRIPT



Extract: 2015 Lingo, Introduction to Saul Williams Event by Kalle Ryan

Hello, 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. Find out more about us on www.poetryoffthepage.net. I'm Claire Palzer, and I will be looking at poetry performances at festivals and more specifically, at Lingo, Ireland's first, and to date *only*, spoken word festival. My PhD research, as part of the PoP project, is all about spoken word poetry in Ireland. And Lingo was an important part of spoken word poetry's trajectory in Ireland. Though the festival only ran for 3 years, between 2014 and 2016, its legacy still resonates with poets to this day. So, today I will be asking, what is it that made the Lingo festival so special? And also: how can Lingo be said to have shaped the meaning of the poetry that was performed there?

Well, before we dive more deeply into Lingo, let's take a look at spoken word poetry at festivals more generally. Poetry and festivals have, in fact, a long history of intermingled existence. Peter Howarth and Rowena Hawkins, who have done research on poetry at contemporary UK festivals, trace that history back to recitations at festivals prior to the 2nd world war. In the late 1940s and 50s poets performed at festivals such as the Cheltenham Literature Festival. Poets also started their own festivals and larger festival-like gatherings, such as the legendary International Poetry Incarnation at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965. Poetry in the 70s was influenced by movements and forms such as Black Arts and feminist performance, stand-up comedy, rap, dub and punk; it became more performance-oriented. In the 80s, we see the emergence of important poetry performance festivals such as Apples and Snakes' first Jazz-Poetry festival in 1987¹. There are also poets performing at major

¹ Thompson 20

music festivals such as Glastonbury in the 80s²; Glastonbury has additionally featured poetry slams since the 1990s and continues to have a vibrant poetry stage, also featuring Irish poets. In the Irish context, we have poetry performances at, for instance, the Galway-based Cúirt festival which started in 1985³. Since the 1990s, open mics and poetry slams have been incorporated into festivals of all kinds. Open mics are events where audience members are encouraged to sign up to perform their own work on stage. Poetry slams also include audience members performing, but they are set up as more or less serious competitions where poets compete and have to adhere to certain rules (like a time limit on their performance). In Ireland, we can see this in, for instance, the Belfast Book Festival Poetry Slam, the Grand Slam which ran at the aforementioned Cúirt festival, as well as the poetry stages at music festivals such as Cork's Indiependence festival or Electric Picnic, which hosts a spoken word arena called MindField.

But it isn't just that poetry "happens" at festivals. Festivals affect the poetry. This is why Howarth and Hawkins talk about "festival as form". They claim that festivals create conditions that shape live performance in ways parallel to the way form on the page may shape the poetry (4). These conditions can be phenomena like sound bleeding in from other areas of the festival, the attentiveness of the crowd, or even broader conditions like the location of the festival, the price of the tickets or the ethos of the event.

Festivals are also particularly great because they allow many different types of acts to come together at once. That means that there is a mix of performers and that audience members can experience various art forms and styles and perhaps be introduced to work they would not otherwise encounter. In this episode, we shall see that Lingo not only reached a wide audience with their events but that the programmers made sure to feature many different kinds of work.

So, what was the Lingo festival? Why don't we hear from a poet who was there, Mel Bradley:

² Thompson 18; English 95.

³ McGuckin 535

They were brilliant. It was like, you know when you were a kid you went away for the summer and all of your cousins were there and it was like cousins you hadn't seen in so long and oh my god the craic. And so you get together and you are like "Yes man, how's it going?" And you'd spend a weekend of just revelry, poets kicking up the storm. Yeah, just proper soul-nurturing kind of stuff. (Bradley interview 20:24-22:07)

Lingo was a spoken word festival, meaning that it catered to many different types of spoken word. It took place in 2014, and again in 2015 and 2016, with a final subsidiary event happening in 2017. It was founded and run by Linda Devlin, Erin Fornoff, Colm Keegan, Phil Lynch, Kalle Ryan, and Stephen James Smith, the latter five of whom are poets themselves. It was very much a grassroots festival. Over a weekend each year, locations in Dublin opened their doors for a range of events; there were workshops, poetry slams, readings, spoken word performances, comedy, debates, and clubbing events. Lingo was an urban festival, with individually ticketed events; in this way more like a book or literature festival than your typical music festival. It was, according to a number of poets I spoke to, a high point of spoken word poetry in Ireland. In addition to talking to the organisers and performers, I was able to listen to recordings and watch videos from a few of the events to base my research on.

Research on festivals points to the significant impact that the founders and organisers' artistic visions and approaches to programming have on the event⁴; I would say that this is one way in which festival as a form comes to affect poetry performance. Lingo's core aim was to highlight the vibrant spoken word scene that existed in Ireland. One of the organisers, Kalle Ryan, who you heard at the beginning of the episode, talks about Lingo's goals:

At Lingo we had a couple of remits or things we wanted to make happen. Obviously, one was just on the financial side making sure poets got paid for what they do and that Irish people could stand alongside international acts. A) for the sort of exposure/experience side of it but B) to you know show that they're just as good as anyone else. And then there was sort of

⁴ McGuckin 528

the programming aspect which was like, let's put lots of variety in terms of how people engage with the poetry and how they receive the poetry and that there are loads of ways to love poetry or spoken word. (Ryan interview 18:33-19:10)

Many poets who performed at Lingo also felt that it was a moment that shifted ideas of what it could mean to be an Irish poet with a performance practice. Besides being paid for their work – and all Lingo performers were paid – being platformed alongside international acts was particularly important for the poets' sense of professionalisation. This balancing of local and international acts is something many festivals strive to do⁵. At Lingo, local and international artists shared the same stages, such as when internationally renowned poet Hollie McNish was programmed with Elaine Feeney, an Irish poet and novelist. Or, when Derry-based poet Abby Oliveira won the Lingo poetry slam and therefore got to perform as Saul Williams' opening act; Saul Williams is a famous American poet and performer who was featured at the 2015 Lingo festival. Oliveira talks about the impact of Lingo in our interview:

It was amazing, it really was. It was a time where you're going oh my god, yeah, right, it really showed what we could be and how far we could reach. And I think up unto that point I didn't really appreciate that. It's not that I thought we couldn't do it or anything, but I just wasn't there in my head. They had Saul Williams, Polarbear, all them people headlining, real professionals, and it was just such a boost. I think it was a boost for our general sense of self-esteem, but also our sense of being professional people engaged in a profession. (Oliveira interview 36:19-37:19)

In addition to staging Irish poets alongside poets from the US and the UK, Lingo also aimed to platform a wide variety of Irish voices; they foreground this aspect specifically in their 2016 programme where they talk about honouring the voices of the spoken word community and about the importance of using one's voice⁶. The word "voice" here is very interesting to me, since my PhD work revolves around this

⁵ Cf. McGuckin

⁶ Lingo

polysemous term. “Voice”, on the one hand, can metaphorically refer to poets’ identities; events at Lingo often had specific remits in that respect, such as platforming young spoken word performers, Black poets, or poets from specific regions. On the other hand, “voice” can also refer to a poet’s or performer’s distinctive style and aesthetics. Events that took place during Lingo’s 3 year run often highlighted the many different genres and styles that can fall under the spoken word umbrella; the organisers purposefully maintained a broad sense of the term “spoken word”.

So, how was Lingo’s ethos of diversity of voices enacted in the programming? To answer this question, I’m going to introduce you to the 2016 launch event. It was called “North South East West: Lingo, We Have Ignition”. The evening started off with a politically driven performance by the festival’s poet laureate Sarah Clancy, from Galway, responding to the conviction of a young protester who was fighting the planned charges on water. Then one performer from each province of Ireland performed a set of about 15 minutes. This programming choice is clearly connected to the organisers’ desire to make sure that Lingo was not a *Dublin* festival; the capital wasn’t – and isn’t – the only place with a thriving poetry performance scene. These four performances were followed by the annual Lingo poetry slam, which included poets from around Ireland and the UK; again, international and local poets shared a stage. This event was actually broadcast live by the local radio station NearFM; we’re going to listen to a few extracts from the event to illustrate the different performance styles that could be found in a single Lingo event. Let me give you one example up front; this is from Felicia Olusanya’s poem about anxiety; Olusanya was the performer from the South.

Extract: North, South, East, West Event Performance by Felicia Olusanya

Describing a poet-performer’s style is a complex process; I could honestly spend an hour doing so for each of these performers. In poetry performance, like on the page, a poet’s style is characterised by the features of the text; this is similar to how people talk about any writer’s “voice”. But performance style is also characterised by their actual voice, or the way they produce sounds. This includes pitch, accent, tempo, emphasis, timbre etc. These elements are determined partially by physiology, partially by personal history, and partially by creative choice. A poet’s body

communication or ways of engaging the audience may also be considered part of their performance style. And their overall performance practice may also incorporate other art forms, as my colleague Shefali Banerji talked about in the previous episode of this podcast. My goal in the next few minutes is to show you the wide range of styles one could encounter on the Lingo stage and in Ireland more generally; so I am going to highlight a few features that I find particularly remarkable in the North, South, East, West event.

We can describe performance style on small and larger scales. For instance, Felicia Olusanya, as you heard, uses elongations of individual sounds, especially sibilants in their work to great effect such as in the words “once”, “twice” or “each”. This feature is recognisable in the Lingo event, which took place when Olusanya was still fairly new to the poetry performance world. Nowadays, they go by the name Felispeaks and are well-known as a poet, performer, and playwright.

On a macro-level, we could look at Aindraís de Staic, who represented the West. He is known primarily as a storyteller or as a *seanchaí*, as they are known in Irish. Even as he uses rhyme to give force to his stories, the narrative is at the centre of his work. Not only that, but he incorporates music; he plays violin on stage during his first piece at the Lingo launch event and at times almost raps. The boundaries between storytelling, music, and poetry become blurred in his act, as you can hear in this fast-paced snippet.

Extract: North, South, East, West Event Performance by Aindraís de Staic

The performer who represented the East at the Lingo event was Karl Parkinson, a poet and novelist who is celebrated for his depictions of Dublin working class life. His 15-minute performance reflects a number of influences, including that of Beat poetry and musical traditions such as hip hop; in particular, he uses rap and beatboxing techniques, which we will hear now:

Extract: North, South, East, West Event Performance by Karl Parkinson

In this piece, called “Rap-Hymn”, Parkinson deftly manoeuvres between sounds and words, splitting up the word “rhythm” to make it into a rhythm, mimicking a heartbeat. In a YouTube version of this piece, he incorporates actual instruments as a backing track, and the piece becomes more rhythmically consistent than in his live

performance. What you may have also noticed in the extract we just listened to, is the moment in which he calls out to the Lingo crowd and doesn't speak directly into the microphone. He is clearly reacting to the circumstances of the event and adds "Lingo" to the phrase "Yo, where all my mother-fucking *Lingo* bards at?!" He is addressing the audience, which included many poets who were performing at the festival; the event directly impacted this performance choice.

Another performance that shows how the festival can affect poetic production is Colin Hassard's "Titanicland". Hassard is a poet from Banbridge, Northern Ireland, who had been performing for a number of years prior to the North, South, East, West event. Let's listen to the beginning of his first poem...

Extract: North, South, East, West Event Performance by Colin Hassard

In this poem, Hassard engages in a humorous critique of a marketable Northern Ireland, that's full of stereotypes and profiteering off traumatic events such as the sinking of the Titanic and the "Troubles". The persona he adopts here is a kind of salesman, characterised by the effusiveness of his tone and the alliterations which are kept up throughout the piece. In Hassard's set the impact of the event's location can be most clearly discerned. He has changed certain words in the first minute of this poem to suit his audience in Dublin, so he uses "Northern Ireland" and a "new country", rather than "Belfast Town" and a "new city", which he uses in versions of the poem he's published online. By doing this, he subtly widens the scope of the poem. From his comments at the show as well as during our interview, it is clear that he was aware of his position of representing the North to a non-Northern audience. He takes that role seriously, but that doesn't mean his work becomes serious in tone. Again, the location of the performance and the specific title of the event impact the poetic performance.

I hope this exploration of the poetry has given you a sense of Lingo's ethos of platforming a wide range of voices, in terms of style as well as identity, and how this clearly manifests in the North, South, East, West event. The performers we have just listened to are not to be taken as simply representative of their respective regions by any means; but they should serve as examples of what is possible in spoken word and how spoken word practices can be found across Ireland. If you listen to the rest

of the show, including the poetry slam that came after the main performances, you can hear even more variety in the poetry.

The assortment of styles, practices, and performers at this event as well as throughout Lingo's programme as a whole not only showcased Ireland's spoken word talent, but also attracted various audiences, including new audiences.

Organiser and poet Phil Lynch reflects:

It was very successful in its own small, small way. But I think it actually achieved a lot of, all of its objectives really, in a way. In that it gave stages to people, to a bigger audience. It brought the whole thing to a wider audience. And we did some audience surveys after each festival as well that showed that, you know, the majority of people attending there had never been to a spoken word event before, maybe not even a poetry reading since they left school or whatever. And were quite taken by how entertaining it was and how they enjoyed it and were prepared to go to other events as a result of it. (Lynch interview 00:50:30-00:51:30)

Despite Lingo's success, it ended in 2017; it was a labour of love, as we heard at the beginning of the episode, and the organisers simply couldn't continue to put that amount of effort in, particularly in view of the very limited funding; not wanting to compromise on their artistic vision meant that the Lingo organisers declined to go the corporate sponsorship route. To quote from their goodbye message: "We have decided to let our three years stand as a statement of what is possible, but also as a statement of what is not."⁷ And Lingo's legacy lives on, as the poets quoted in this episode and the many others I spoke to emphasise.

I think all this goes to show how key Lingo has been for the development of spoken word poetry and spoken word audiences across Ireland. It helped strengthen a sense of professionalism among poets, showcased the abundance of poetry performance practices around Ireland, and brought new audiences into the spoken word space. I hope this brief introduction has shed light on the significance of Lingo for spoken

⁷ Lingofest

word in Ireland, but also more generally, the ways in which the festival frame can impact the meaning of the poetry performed.

That's it for me – stay tuned for future episodes to learn more about the wonderful world of poetry performance.

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.

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Finally, don't forget to follow us on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and Spotify. Goodbye and take care.