



PIMPING poetry

The unexpected (and somewhat controversial) melding of two industries has spawned a new ART FORM sending hearts and minds AFLUTTER.

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I choose her for two reasons: her poems and her accent. I think I detect an Australian inflection in the way she omits certain consonants and, like many Southern Hemisphere transplants, my friend and I both get homesick whenever it gets cold in New York. It's autumn in Brooklyn and we're at The Poetry Brothel, a show where poets sell their services in the form of private readings. There are 10 'poetry whores' working the room, enticing potential customers with short public recitals in between the live band, burlesque dancers and aerialists on stage.

This poet dedicates her poem to her father, who had planned to attend that evening until a scheduling change prevented it. In the verses, she imagines his death, describing how, when the time comes, she will mourn her seafood-loving father by eating only oysters for a week. It is a moving love poem and I approach the madame to solicit a private audience with Penelope Strangelight.

That is, of course, not her real name. The central concept of The Poetry Brothel is a fin-de-siècle bordello, the home of fledgling artists and, within that imaginary setting, each poet invents a character for his or herself. Penelope uses purple tulip blood as ink, while Cal the Alchemist joined a travelling circus in order to fund his scientific experiments. >



her published work, not all the poetry whores are so well-established. Many are emerging writers in their twenties for whom The Poetry Brothel is a side door into a rarefied literary sphere. It gives them access to a community of experienced poets and receptive listeners, and a place to build confidence and develop their craft. (A one-on-one reading is a great opportunity for feedback, according to Stephanie: “You can tell when a line’s not working because the person’s eyes will glaze over.”) Private readings are also a new way for poets to get paid for their

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Genevieve Des Etoiles is a French courtesan who was murdered by a jealous lover and brought back to life by Thomas Edison. These poets move through the crowd wearing corsets and feathers, waistcoats and pocket watches; some are playful and chatty, others shy and aloof.

It’s fantasy and it’s fun, a quality that co-founders Stephanie Berger and Nicholas Adamski found lacking in New York’s poetry scene when they met as master of fine arts students in the mid-2000s.

“There’s a stodginess and formality to traditional poetry readings that’s really uncomfortable,” says Stephanie, who acts as madame of the brothel. “You’re supposed to sit quietly with your hands folded and listen to someone read from behind a podium. The idea of The Poetry Brothel is to experience poetry, rather than listen to it. And, in addition to experiencing the art, people are there to socialise and have a good time.”

The pair launched The Poetry Brothel in 2008, enlisting their classmates as

poetry whores and charging US\$5 for entry with a free private reading. Nicholas still recalls an early show where a friend couldn’t make it and his dad had to fill in as the doorman.

Close to a decade later, the production is far more polished – and slightly pricier. Tickets are US\$25 and up, and private readings cost US\$10, which is what a friend and I pay Penelope to accompany her to a quiet, candlelit back room. She leads us to two upholstered armchairs and sits at our feet, then begins to make small talk. Her accent turns out not to be Australian but the result of growing up between London and Atlanta, Georgia. My friend asks her which of those she considers to be home and she replies that for her, home is embodied by certain people in her life. Then she reads us two poems about those people to match our nostalgic mood.

While Penelope read from a book of

work. On average, a poetry whore earns around US\$100 per night.

“For our younger poets who maybe don’t have postgraduate degrees, The Poetry Brothel is an easy entry into poetry,” says Nicholas. It also makes a highbrow literary form accessible to new audiences. Most customers, myself and my friend included, do not read poetry. And yet there we are with more than 200 other people, paying poets we’ve never heard of to read us verses we don’t entirely understand.

Stephanie and Nicholas will often add a featured reader to the bill to introduce patrons to a prominent figure they admire, such as US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky or Harvard English professor Stephen Burt. Yet, despite



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the endorsement of such literary heavyweights, they say The Poetry Brothel has always had its share of detractors.

“Within the poetry community, there are definitely people who don’t take it seriously and who don’t like it,” says Stephanie of the melding of two of the oldest professions in the world. The allusion to more traditional brothels has drawn criticism from both poets and sex workers, who have accused the organisers of cheapening their art or appropriating an identity and vocabulary that is not theirs to claim. And when Stephanie and Nicholas tried to register the business entity name ‘The Poetry Brothel’, the state of New York rejected it for being “lewd and illegal”.

Ironically, aside from the burlesque performers and some of the costumes, there is very little about The Poetry Brothel that could be considered salacious. The poetry whores tend

to break character once you get them alone; the writing is too personal to pretend to be someone else. Perhaps ‘escort’ would be a more accurate term, since they are paid for their company and conversation. Or ‘performers’, for The Poetry Brothel is pure theatre and they constitute the cast.

Reading poetry aloud seems innocent enough, yet these interactions are extremely intimate – imagine being alone with a musician who plays you a song and then tells you about the beautiful or painful moment that inspired it. Rarely is an experience of art so personal and interactive, which may be why The Poetry Brothel has become so popular.

Since registering the – much less risqué – name, ‘The Poetry Society of New York’, in 2010, The Poetry Brothel initiative now takes place in eight major cities around the US and has 10 international branches across Europe and South America. Interested folk can simply email Stephanie and Nicholas about starting a Poetry Brothel in their own city. According to Stephanie, each city brings its own flavour to the show: the Paris branch

is especially international, she says, with poetry readings in seven or eight different languages. The Poetry Society of New York also runs The New York City Poetry Festival and are the creators of The Typewriter Project, where typewriters with 30-metre rolls of paper were placed around the city for people to create poetry, which was uploaded online daily. And in 2015, with the help of a producer at the Upright Citizens Brigade, the organisation received not-for-profit status to continue funding its programs, with the hope of offering grants and residencies to budding poets.

Towards the end of the night, I request a reading from Nicholas, who wears an eye patch as playboy-ruffian Tennessee Pink. He and the madame are the off-menu items, the ones you have to know to ask for. Since all the private quarters are taken, he escorts me up a staircase and past a “closed” sign to an open-air deck with two empty couches. Under city stars we can’t see, he recites one poem of his own and two by other people. One of them is *The Flower* by Robert Creeley. He tells me he memorised it while taking a poetry class at university, and it’s tied to a turning point in his life: when a night in jail for property damage (a group of his fraternity brothers had smashed all the pumpkins at a church sale) ended his life-long dream of entering politics and set him on the path to eventually becoming a poet. And therein lies the greatest pleasure of The Poetry Brothel (for this customer, at least): to have a dialogue with the author – to hear the story behind the words. ■

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