

I4. Collaboration

As I go through these topics I say to myself at the beginning of each chapter, “This is my favorite!” Well, this is my favorite chapter. I always collaborated in my own poetic career and in teaching poetry. In this chapter, I am going to discuss collaboration on the macro level (how poetic movements depend on collaboration) and on the micro (some specific examples of collaboration). In both cases, I will be including anecdotes from my own experience to illustrate the power of collaboration.

The Lonely Voice

Most people picture the poet alone, under a tree, notebook in hand, no one around but the breeze and the muse. But if you look at a cursory history of literature, you will see that major movements in poetry are almost always made by groups of poets. Poetry of the Tang Dynasty in China, 16th century Devotional poetry, and Romanticism in 19th century England, were sparked by poets who read, encouraged, and promoted each other. Poetry is a social, as well as individual, enterprise.

Why is this? Let’s recall what we learned about ideology in the chapter on political poetry. There must be material channels of cultural transmission—ways to reproduce the words and generate audience. This occurs through word of mouth, publication, public readings, and networking. These are social, material channels that require cooperation. In the next few paragraphs, I’ll sketch out a few literary movements and then we’ll see what principles we can glean from these historical precedents.

The Host

The frame for Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is that there are 30 pilgrims traveling to Canterbury. They stop at a tavern, and the host of the

tavern volunteers to be their guide. He also suggests that they play a game in which each pilgrim tells a tale on the way and the way back. When they return to his tavern, they will vote for the best story and the teller will have dinner paid for by the rest of the group (note how it is a clever business arrangement by the host). And so begins the classic piece of literature (do you remember what else Chaucer introduced to English literature?).

Ezra Pound, il miglior fabro, An Unfortunate Turn to the Right

I believe that this character, The Host, shows up time and time again in literature. The Host is a person who is at the center of literary activity, a promoter, manifesto-writer, an editor an encourager. In many literary movements, you can almost always find The Host somewhere in the cast of characters. This is certainly true for literary modernism and its host Ezra Pound (1885-1972). Ezra Pound arrived in London in 1908 as the “London Correspondent” for *Poetry* magazine. He came in immediate contact with a number of English writers like Wyndham Lewis, Richard Aldington, T.E. Hulme and Ford Maddox Ford. Pound was brilliant, arrogant, and energetic. While in London he helped establish two literary sub-movements (under the umbrella of Modernism), Imagism and Vorticism. He encouraged and promoted the work of the Irish writer James Joyce, as well as the American poet H.D. He brought together fiction writers, painters and sculptors. In addition, he organized readings, wrote manifestoes, and continued to compose his own work. Indeed, when Hugh Kenner wrote his monumental work on modernism, he named it *The Pound Era* (I believe the era can be just as accurately called *The Stein Era*).

In addition to his own monumental sequence *The Cantos*, Pound had a direct influence on another seminal work of High Modernism, T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. Eliot’s original title was *He Do The Police in Different Voices*. He showed the manuscript to his friend Pound who had earlier recognized Eliot’s genius and had obtained publication for “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Pound took his pencil to the manuscript

(including the awkward title) and the result was *The Wasteland* which Eliot dedicated to Pound with the inscription, “il miglior fabbro,” a quote from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which means “the better craftsman.” Indeed it’s impossible to speak about Modernism in fiction or poetry without mentioning Pound.

What happened to Pound after he helped launch literary modernism? It’s not an inspiring story. Resigned to the waste of human life in World War I, Pound blamed the excesses of capitalism and the financial practice of lending money on interest. This led him to a deep-seated and paranoid embrace of Fascism and anti-Semitism. He moved to Italy and during the war was paid by Italy under Mussolini for a series of Anti-American broadcasts which blamed the war on a Jewish conspiracy for world domination. When the war neared its end he was captured by American troops and placed in custody. For days he was held in a six foot by six foot exposed steel cage until he had a mental breakdown. He was brought to America and tried for treason. He was found to be unfit for trial because of insanity so he was placed in St. Elizabeth Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Writers agitated for his release, which was finally granted in 1958. Upon release, he moved back to Italy where he lived until his death in 1972.

The Harlem Renaissance, New York City

One of America’s literary, and intellectual, movements had its center in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. The movement is called the Harlem Renaissance. During the first quarter of the 20th century there was a mass migration of African-Americans from the Jim Crow south to the industrial north. This led to a major influx of African-Americans in urban areas. When African-Americans returned from fighting in WW I, they found America as racist as ever with a resurgence in the KKK, lynchings and race riots. Led by figures like The Host, W.E.B. DuBois, who helped found the NAACP and edited and published *The Crisis*, there was a creative outpouring of art among African-Americans. This blossoming of art, music, drama, poetry and fiction

centered in the Harlem neighborhood in New York City and is called The Harlem Renaissance.

Writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, among others, were active in this movement.

Many of these writers were represented in Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro*, the preface to which made note of the importance of place:

Take Harlem as an instance of this. Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another.

Locke alludes to the vital energy that is created and maintained when diverse minds turn their attention to creation and collaboration. Inspiration grows by being recycled.

In the early 1960s, New York City was also the center of the work of the Umbra Poets, and then in the late 1960s home of the Last Poets, two distinct African-American poetry movements held together by political, cultural, and esthetic bonds. New York City continues to be an epicenter of coalescing poetry communities.

Language Writing, The Grand Piano

The critical importance of place in developing poetry communities is apparent in the development of Language Writing. Language Writing as a literary movement had two epicenters, New York City and San Francisco. It's interesting, though, in both places, Language Writing followed, and interlapped with, other well established poetry communities—the poets of the New York School in the former, The

Berkeley Renaissance in the latter.

The literary practice of the Language Writers in San Francisco was characterized by highly theoretical left wing esthetics, opaque, discursive writing, and relentless organization. The movement began in the early 1970s. Recently, the practitioners composed a “collective autobiography,” another inspiring iteration of collaboration. The collective autobiography is named *The Grand Piano*, after a coffeehouse in San Francisco which hosted a reading series and became the nexus for these poets. *The Grand Piano* is written by 10 language writers and combines memory, esthetics, theory, poetry and politics. Often, after a movement is established, the original members may find themselves arguing over the “authentic” history. These writers adhere to the roots of community by sharing the responsibility of providing its history. And, as I’ll discuss later, it gives them a chance to continue to collaborate, which brings its own joy.

The Chicago Poetry Ensemble, Poetry Slam

The last example of the development of poetry community is based on my own experience in Chicago in the 1980s. I had just returned home from teaching creative writing to urban youth in West Oakland, CA (if only my treks through San Francisco had taken me to the Grand Piano). I wanted to find poetry in Chicago and happened onto a flier advertising an open mic at a place called The Get Me High Lounge. What poet could resist such a place? At first there were only a handful of poets there sharing the bar with addicts, jazz musicians, and neighborhood drinkers. The Host in this case was the M.C. of the reading series, Marc Smith. Marc was brutally honest and called for poetry that made an immediate connection with the audience. It was a rough crowd and any pretension was brutally heckled out of the poet.

After a few months, the bar filled and “media people” took notice, publicizing the wild gathering of poets at the Get Me High Lounge. There was a political component to the developing community. America was in the second term of the grandfatherly conservatism of Ronald Reagan. Anarchists, party members, and other dissenters used the open mic venue

to register their opposition to the Reagan agenda.

Marc recruited a number of the poets, myself included, to form The Chicago Poetry Ensemble, whose aim was to develop a collaborative poetry and perform the results of that collaboration. The first gig we had was called “Circus Chatter,” a polyvocal staging of poems and narrative centered on the circus. We performed it in the spring of 1986 at a venue called The Deja Vu. The owner of the Deja Vu liked what he saw and offered Marc a regular gig at a historic jazz club in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood called The Green Mill.

At the Green Mill, Marc started off the evening with an open mic, then there featured poets would read; the Chicago Poetry Ensemble performed afterward the feature. The evening ended with the Poetry Slam. Audience members judged the recitation of poets who had signed up for the competition. After some time, the Slam portion of the show became its focus. Since that time, the Slam has become an international movement with slams all over the world. Thousands of poets have stood at the mic to slam. The Slam helped to spark the spoken word revolution and has made poetry collaboration, through slam teams and ensembles, an important practice of poetry.

The Principles

If we look at the local histories of these movements, consistent themes emerge:

1. None of these groups waited for cultural acceptance by the mainstream verse culture. They made culture by organizing themselves.
2. They encouraged each other’s work by reading it and providing feedback.
3. They organized readings so the poets had a venue to bring their work to the public.
4. They started presses and magazines to produce the poetry. Simply put, they took over the means of production.
5. They collaborated on writing projects.

All except #4 are pretty easy to do, though it certainly helps if one

energetic person takes responsibility to become The Host!

Renga

Now that we have discussed some historical antecedents of poetry collaboration, let's look at three ways, among many possibilities, of collaborating in the production of poems. The first we'll look at is the *renga*. *Renga* is a Japanese word which means "linked poetry." It was a common poetic form in Japanese between the 13th and 19th century. While practicing *renga*, a group of poets gather, choose a form and then take turns writing self-contained stanzas to fulfill that form. The most powerful aspect of a *renga* is that the individual ego is assumed into the group. The poem is not an individual expression,; it is a communal expression. Although *renga* is a Japanese form, you do not have to choose haiku or tankas as the form. Choose whatever form works for your group.

Have an idea in mind how many stanzas you want to write and how long you allot (either in one day or a number of days) that you will be working on the *renga*. You can choose to do it at a slow pace, like via email or texting, but there are many benefits to choosing one place, stocking it with food and drink and your fellow poets, then having at it. The splendid sense of isolation will emphasize the group dynamics. And you'll discover how powerful the act of collaborative poetry writing can be.

In 1969, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz formed a *renga* group in Paris consisting of himself, the English poet Charles Tomlinson, the French poet Jacques Roubaud and the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti. Since French was a common language, they wrote in French. The form they chose was the sonnet—each of them writing a stanza. The result was then translated into the language of each poet and published.

In 1998 Tomlinson was again asked to be part of a *renga* circle in Japan with the poets James Lasdun, Makoto Ooka, Hiroshi Kawasaki and Mikiro Sasaki. I will quote the first round to give you an idea of how it works:

I

October: the departure of our swallows:
Their aim is Africa, but this year sees
An English pair among the Japanese,
Learning new tunes, new names for flower and tree,
Before cold comes and mono no aware
Charles

II

Mono no aware can always be found anew –
Look! Even through the heart of the pathless oceans,
beautifully opening a path go forth the fish
Makoto

III

A path. A clearing. A habitation...
And how rapidly what seemed pure
Obstruction yields a window then a door...
Careful though: what you thought you came here for
May have already changed
James

IV

The children were playing store
Holding an umbrella, one of them said
This makes a good rain-listening machine
Hiroshi

V

On top of a bamboo leaf
a small rain-frog, and on top of that
its soul, the size of a raindrop, sighing
upward
where clouds are breaking
Mikiro

Note how each stanza stands on its own and at the same time fits with the stanzas above it and below. This is the social nature of renga. Your own work is part of a larger, collective, work.

The Exquisite Corpse

The Surrealist poets (surrealism is an art movement in Europe starting in the 1920s that emphasized the uncanny, the random, and the absurd in the construction of art) had a number of collaborative projects. One of them is called, the exquisite corpse. In the practice of the exquisite corpse poets collaborate on a work in which crucial parts are concealed from them. Andre Breton, the Surrealist, recalls that the exquisite corpse was, “an infallible way of holding the critical intellect in abeyance, and of fully liberating the mind’s metaphorical activity. fill in lines without knowing.” One way to accomplish this is for one poet to write lines of poetry, fold the sheet over vertically so that only half of each line is visible. The second poet then completes each line. There are many of variations of this technique, including multiple poets work on collage together, assigning parts of the poem to different poets, or directing poets to fill in parts of speech to an already existing structure.

The contemporary American poets Denise Duhamel and Maureen Seaton have collaborated on a number of exquisite corpses. Here is a political one, “Exquisite Candidate”:

I can promise you this: food in the White House
will change! No more granola, only fried eggs
flipped the way we like them. And ham ham ham!
Americans need ham! Nothing airy like debate for me!
Pigs will become the new symbol of glee,
displacing smiley faces and “Have A Nice Day.”
Car bumpers are my billboards, billboards my movie screens.
Nothing I can say can be used against me.
My life flashes in front of my face daily.
Here’s a snapshot of me as a baby. Then
marrying. My kids drink all their milk which helps the dairy
industry.
A vote for me is not only a pat on the back for America!
A vote for me, my fellow Americans, is a vote for everyone like me!
If I were the type who made promises
I’d probably begin by saying: America,
relax! Buy big cars and tease your hair
as high as the Empire State Building.

Inch by inch, we're buying the world's sorrow.
Yeah, the world's sorrow, that's it!
The other side will have a lot to say about pork
but don't believe it! Their graphs are sloppy coloring books.
We're just fine—look at the way
everyone wants to speak English and live here!
Whatever you think of borders,
I am the only candidate to canoe over Niagara Falls
and live to photograph the Canadian side.
I'm the only Julliard graduate—
I will exhale beauty all across this great land
of pork rinds and gas stations and scientists working for cures,
of satellite dishes over Sparky's Bar & Grill, the ease
of breakfast in the mornings, quiet peace of sleep at night.

You can see in the poem how the collaboration may lead to surprises that are contained within a wholly coherent form.”

In the next chapter we'll learn about collaborating in performance by writing, and combining, already written poems. Before we move on to that chapter, it is worth discussing, albeit briefly, the nature of being human. Even though our economic system would take as its basic premise that “every man is for himself,” biology, anthropology, and sociology just don't bear that principle out. It is indisputable, we are social creatures.

As a species we have thrived because of our ability to cooperate--and cooperation is facilitated by language. Though poetry is, to some degree, an individual undertaking, if we look at it closely, we can see how social it is. From the language we inherit from culture, poetic forms from the past, from the teachers who teach us, and the audience who reads or listens to our work, poetry is a social activity.

It's a Blast

If you are serious about poetry (or just passing this class), form a poetic community with what you have at hand. Find others who write poems and read each other's work. Read other's work, traditional and contemporary, with your poetry buddies and discuss them. Talk about language; talk about form; talk about rhythm. Explore poetry with others;

support their work as they will support yours. As evidence from the opening survey of this chapter, poetry has such a prominent place in our culture because poets gather and work together for their own sake and the sake of others.

On a final, and personal note, I can't express what I've felt in collaboration. Late night talks in college about the symbolists and the power of the verbal object, the twice weekly rehearsals for the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, work with students and other poets, it has all been a kind of joy. Yes, it's serious cultural work, but it also fulfills our basic human need for social interaction in shared enterprise.

How To Do It

1. Find like minded poets.
2. Organize sessions where you read, and comment on, each other's work.
3. Organize sessions where you read and discuss other people's work.
4. Organize readings.
5. Publish your own work and the work of your friends.

Mid-week Assignment

You should be in groups of three or four. For the mid-week assignment, you should each write one stanza of your renga. The default form is the Japanese Tanka which is five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Don't feel completely constrained by the syllable count; if a line differs by one syllable, don't fret. If you do not want to use the tanka form, that's fine with me. Choose a form as a group (let's say no more than five and no less than three line stanzas and no more than 12 syllables per line and no less than five).

If you want to choose a theme before you begin, fine. Just make sure it is not an obvious and cheesey theme like "love in the spring." Or you can let the first participant construct the theme by writing the first stanza and then

move on from there.

Weekly Assignment

At least four stanzas apiece. So if your group has three members, the total number of stanzas will be 12; if your group has four members, the total number of stanzas will be 16. Remember, each stanza must be a “stand alone” stanza while at the same time being related, associated with the stanza that came before and the stanza that came afterward.

The qualities of a good poem:

- a. It will be both diverse and unified;*
- b. The form will be standard among the participants;*
- c. The theme taken up will not be cliched;*
- d. There is discernible energy from the result of collaboration;*
- e. As always, the language is compelling.*

I5. Performance

Remember the scop in *Beowulf* who, after Beowulf defeats Grendel, entertains the crowd with well-crafted lines accompanied by his lute? The scop was the tribal poet and oral historian. He has already crafted a poem about Beowulf's victory and delivers it to an appreciative audience.

Two things are notable about this scene. First, that there was an expectation of entertainment and that was the scop's job. Second, the scop was able to "improvise" a poem about events that had happened just a few hours earlier. This first aspect has been forgotten by many poets. Poets ought to entertain their audience. As William Carlos Williams once said, "if it ain't a pleasure/ it ain't a poem." This second aspect, the improvisational, has been kept alive by MCs everywhere who engage in freestyling.

In this chapter, you're going to gain some practical advice about reading your poems outloud. You'll also learn a little about how to put yourself in a position to improvise. Then you'll learn how to collaborate in performance. Finally, you will learn how to organize and publicize poetry readings.

Performing Poetry

The following principles of reciting your poetry are based on experience, from giving and attending hundreds of poetry readings over the years. They are not written in stone, but are practical and effective:

1. If you are reading solo or with a number of poets, find out well beforehand how long you are expected to read and choose your poems so that you stay within the time limit. It is rude to go over time, no matter how much you think the audience is digging you.
2. Within your time allotment, make sure that your pieces have some shape—a mixture of poems in terms of length and tone. Start strong and

end strong.

3. It goes without saying, no matter how experienced you are, practice practice practice. If you can memorize your poems, the better your performance will be, though, even when I have poems memorized, I always work from a program so I have something to refer to if I get stuck.
4. Do not put the text between yourself and the audience. Recite to the audience, not the text.
5. Keep eye contact with the audience. I do this by using a hand to gesticulate and move down the text so that when I look at the audience, I will return to my place in the poem.
6. Slow down; you are always speaking faster than you think you are.
7. Never give too much preliminary information. I can't count the number of times I've been at a poetry reading and the poet introduces each poem with anecdotes, information, and wry commentary so that the prelude is longer than the poem itself. Give the audience an idea of who you are by introducing yourself but *get to the poems*. If your work is esoteric, provide enough information so that the audience can hold onto the poem, but not so much that you are crowding them out of their attention.
8. Vary your pitch, tone, and pace to match the language of the poem. It will keep your audience attentive.
9. Enjoy yourself. It is very cool to perform your work to an audience. Be the vehicle for your poem. Show the audience you enjoy being there.
10. The foundation is practice. Practice enough so that you are not "poet delivering poetry" but become the vocal medium for your work. Respect your poetry by being prepared. Respect your audience by being prepared.

Difficult Audiences

What happens when your audience is inattentive or hostile?

Let's start with an inattentive audience. If you are prepared, then don't compromise. Raise your voice to see if that works. Add intensity. Find any portion of the audience that is listening and delivery the work to them. Use humor; bring their inattention to their attention.

A hostile audience is much more rare and alcohol is usually involved. Back in the days of The Get Me High, fights would break out among poets and audience. I never would endorse that. Twenty-three year old Mike Barrett may have had a different principle. If you have any incendiary poems, then deliver them if you choose to fight fire with fire. Humor works to turn a hostile crowd as well as an inattentive one. Ignoring trouble rarely works, unless it's obvious that you hold the attention of most of the audience.

Finding Opportunities

How do you get a poetry gig? Remember collaboration? That is one way. The more involved you are in the poetry community, attending workshops, readings, etc, the more likely you will be asked to read. When you attend readings, find out who hosts or sponsors and introduce yourself. You don't have to ask directly, "Can I get a reading?" Ask, "How do you choose readers to read?"

The easiest way to get your poetry out in public is to find out where the open mics are. Get there early and sign up, though it is rarely a good idea to sign up for the first few slots. Anywhere in the last third or so of the open mic session works. Then make your attendance at the open mic consistent. That way, you'll meet other poets and be on your way to forming a poetry community. Whenever I travel, I make sure to check the town where I'm staying for open mics and if it works out, I read. It's fun and I've heard and met a number of poets this way. One night in Galway, Ireland, I attended an open mic. Long story short, I ended up in

a underground gaelic club improvising verse with Gaelic poets and a jazz saxophonist from South Africa. Always say, “yes,” when asked to read!

If the town is big enough to have an “alternative weekly” newspaper, it will list open mics. Check local coffee shops and bookstores. Say you are going to Sacramento. Conduct a google search on “Sacramento poetry open mics.” (By the way, at the time I wrote this, there were a number of venues in Sacramento offering open mics).

Improvisation, Hip-Hop, Mnemonics

A few years back, I spent Monday evenings at a local night club which hosted “Mad Real Mondays,” which gathered hip hop and graffiti artists. The evening began with an open mic, then featured MCs. The evening ended with freestyling. I would do a spoken word piece during the open mic section. I was given the first spot (the worst of the open mic spots) because my verse was definitely the redheaded stepchild. Nonetheless, I had a wonderful time on Mad Real Mondays. Though I had listened to hip hop before, I gained immense respect for the skills of MCs, particularly during freestlyling. To be able to compose spontaneously and rhyme is a major feat. I talked to as many of the MCs as I could to discover their technique in freestyling for I had experimented with improvising poetry. One of the MCs told me, “A human talks around average about one hundred words per minute. Break those words down to around maybe six or so in every line. When you’re on the first word of any line, you are working the sentence to the end word. That end word is in a network of rhymes. Basically,” he said, “I’ve got a rhyming dictionary in my head.”

This is why battling may be easier than freestyling; you already know the topic. When you battle, you know, rhetorically, what every line is going to do—it’s going to be an insult completed by a rhyme in a network of rhymes. Note also the analogy between the foot in poetry and measure in music. Rapping distributes syllables over beats in a measure as metrical poetry distributes syllables over feet. I imagine that there is one word that most MCs would use to describe how they learned to rap: practice.

The same goes for improvising poetry. Try to do it off the top of your head, you'll find yourself in difficulties. Indeed, improvisation is really not "speaking off the top of your head." It's slowing time down enough in your mind to formulate a line while speaking the previous one. The more you practice, the better you get because the more time you have. Try an experiment. Read a text outloud until you can discern the difference between your reading comprehension of a line and its vocalization. It is in that interval that improvisation grows.

Once I put on a multimedia poetry show that culminated in 10 minutes of improvised poetry. I have no recording of the event, but I recall that the poetry held the audience and passed the internal censor that shuts down bad verse coming out of my mouth. I'll relate my technique and practice schedule as a case study. If you choose to improvise, you may develop your own technique for generating poetry on the spot.

First, taking my cue from medieval and renaissance techniques for remembering information, I developed a very simple mnemonic devise. It was based on the four directions. Each direction had a topic that was broad enough to be developed in myriad ways. I visualized a compass with the center being myself in the present time. That me gave five points to develop: north, east, south, west, the present. (I have since used this mnemonic device to memorize a number of speeches). For two months before the performance I would randomly choose five words out of the books I was reading and write them on an index card arranged according to the mnemonic as follows:

	Amelia
post	
outline	
	mousetrap

Practice

With the mnemonic device, I had themes for each direction and specific words to use in developing those themes. I also knew how I would tie up the poem—by bringing it back to the present moment. Just as MCs are not starting from scratch when they freestyle, they have a structure

they are filling, I created a structure to fill when I improvised. I would record the results of my practice sessions and critique those results. As the performance neared, I grew confident because of the practice. During the performance, I gave the audience members exercises to generate words and used those words to improvise. This was a way to include the audience in the construction of the poems. Just as I was halfway in, a street busker with a violin began playing outside so the music became part of the poem. One of the keys to effective improvisation is to be open to the logic of the moment. Follow the directions that the present provides. If you're nervous, then you'll be closed. Paradoxically, being open to the moment of improvisation means to have practiced long enough to attend to the here and now rather than the concern of "what am I going to say next?" Be open, but only after you've practiced long and hard.

Another way to become adept at performing improvised poetry? Make a habit of spontaneously breaking into poetry.

Organizing

As we learned in the previous chapter on collaboration, working with other poets is immensely rewarding. Once you have established or are part of a poetry community, you can begin to think about producing poetry events yourself.

The first thing you need to do is gather a group of poets. You could do a solo show, but the more people you involve in the development of the show, the more audience you will have.

Venues

Once you have a group of poets, you need to find a venue. Bars, coffee shops, and music venues are possibilities. Rooms at the library, art galleries, schools and churches are also candidates. When choosing a venue, come up with a number of audience members that you might realistically expect. This number will help you choose an appropriate venue. Once you have that number, develop a short list of venues you are

considering. Contact the venues and ask who does the booking. When you contact that person, give a brief summary of your plans and let them know how many people you will be expecting. Find out if the room has a rental price. If it is a bar, coffeehouse, etc, discover if a cover charge is required, and if so, how much the venue retains and how much you retain.

Cover charges can be a hard sell for a poetry show, but if it takes place at a club, it may be somewhat expected. If you know anyone in a band, offer the band the last slot in the event, after the poetry. Cover charges are expected for bands. Some of the things to consider when choosing a venue: can you arrange the seats so that the poets are clearly visible? Does it have a sound system? If not, can you secure microphones, speakers, and amplifiers? If it has good acoustics, you won't need a sound system.

What you need to remember is that the promise of an audience is your most persuasive selling point. If you tell a private venue that you are expecting, say 50 people, and they usually get 15 for their events, they will be persuaded to book your event.

If you want to keep things simple, out of your group, choose the dwelling with the biggest single room. Empty it of furniture and put it on there. Or, if you're like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland from the 1930s, find an empty barn and turn it into a theater!

Publicize the show through fliers, listings in entertainment guides. Write press releases and send to the entertainment editors of local newspapers and television stations. Tell your family and friends. Coming from Chicago, I completely understand the economy of "pulling in favors." If any one owes you a favor, get them (and their friends) to come to the show. It's true, unless the show really sucks, if it is packed, the audience will feel like they are part of something that is "happening."

Developing the Show

Once you have the venue, set a date and now begins the fun part, putting the thing together. I've produced shows for more than 20 years and have discovered a few basic principles. First you'll need to choose

a theme. It can be abstract, concrete, general or specific. Avoid clichés, as always, and chose a theme that will generate multiple ideas. When working with the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, we developed shows from themes like sound sin nature, “Animal Songs,” Einstein’s theory of general relativity, “Six Voices in Time,” and on community, “Trust Fall.” Since that time I’ve produced pieces that started with DNA, “Code-A-Cell,” cinema, “Screenplay,” and cognition, “Activision.”

The overall arc of the piece will develop during rehearsals but choosing a topic broad enough to develop will enable the poets to write toward something. Once you have written some pieces, rehearsals begin. Typically, they start out as workshops where the poets bring their work and help each other hone the texts. In addition, if you keep timing the length of the pieces, you’ll know how much material you’ll have and how much you’ll need. I recommend keeping the time to an hour or less.

Polyvocalics and Genophonics

When shaping the program, consider a mix of solo numbers as well as group pieces that are polyvocal arrangement of texts. Those polyvocal pieces add another texture are exciting, and increase the energy. Working in a few pieces that include music, film, or visuals also work to add variety to the show.

The main goal of polyvocal pieces is to hear the mixture of voices—when they come together and when they break apart. Look up “slam teams,” or “poetry ensemble,” on youtube to see some examples. I’ll provide a couple of examples below.

The first piece is called “Amerimix” and is taken from Chicago Poetry Ensemble tribute to the late poet and political activist, John Sheehan. John was a member of the ensemble and we were celebrating the publication of his poems. The entire piece was called “The John Sheehan Suite,” and was a polyvocal performance of John’s poetry (with other material). As you read the transcript, imagine places where the voices overlapped and the pace of the vocalization that would make music out of the words and voices:

Mike: Walt Whitman sez:

Dave: I resist anything better than my own diversity
And breathe the air and leave plenty after me
and am not stuck up, and am in my place
Divine I am inside and out and I make holy
whatever I touch or am touched from...

Rob: this southeast texas
the roots of my parents
my boyhood home
was not cowboy texas
but creole gumbo texas

Karen: We
Americans
Yankees
Dixieland Black
Hunkies

Jean: We
Shakespeare Dante
Homer Aquinas
eggplant Parmesan
creole gumbo

Anna: None of us whites
come from Irish bogs
or English fogs
from Russian steppes
or Bavarian thickets
we spring bright and brilliant
from the shining Parthenon

Voices: We
rust piles (Karen)
salt piles (Rob)
gravel (Dave)
wrecked cars (Mike)
huddling the harbor

Jean: for better or worse Gary's my home
and I'd rather live in this left-over city
than any suburb I know

Mike: My globe misprints Gary as Gray
what is Gary anyway?
(Dave): America

Rob: this hodgepodge
garden farm
lakemill
duneswamp
tangletrack
polyglot
dumping ground
hinterland

Mike: Sometimes my mind says America is not the place
to stay
what is America anyway?
(Dave): Gary

Karen & Anna: Potawotomi
Miami
Ottawa
Illinois,
Menominee
Dutch Sheehan
Irish Jew

Rob : A Pious old Irishman
turned to my wife benignly
(Dave): and when she turns around baby
that's revolution at its best
and said,
“I love all negroes.”
She ungratefully shot back,

Karen: “Why you son of a bitch
I can't stand half the motherfuckers myself.”

Mike: Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable
is the French name
of a Black man

Jean: Voodoo Mama
off-beat Oddyseus
wild Dionysius
Pilgrim Maid

Dave: Vietnamese or Congolese
Viennese or Japanese
Pekingese or Siamese

Anna: We
minstrels and mountebanks
sages and clowns

Karen: We
a Klean Kristian Kommunity (KKK)

All: Discipline
empire
bloodshed

(Karen): we need some green
(Anna): taste the salt
(Mike): give half your bread

Rob: consider the Potawotomie
the Comanche the Cambodians
and the poor folk of Chile
and the kids growing up

(Dave): an ordinary street name
among the sparrows of Gary

they can see trees and squirrels and birds
and every manner of god-given beauty
in the trash-lined dunes and swamplands

Mike: touched by the divine

my dwelling, Gary,
rusted, holy and green

Although the transcription does not do the sound justice, trust that if you arrange multiple voices speaking the alphabet in an artful way, it will sound great.

When I produced the show, “Code-A-Cell,” the human genome had just been completely deciphered by the Human Genome Project. As you may know, the human genome is completely made up of four basic building blocks, adenine(A), thymine(T), guanine (G), and cytosine (C). In other words, the entire human genome can be represented as a string of these letters. For the polyvocal portion of “Code-A-Cell,” myself and three other writers chose one or two syllable words beginning with each of those letters. Then we took a series of sequences from the human genome as used that as a score to arrange our recitation of those words. We interspersed this throughout the show and the conclusion included the audience developing their own words then reciting those words together with a sequence we provided.

What follows are two of the easiest ways to arrange voices with this polyvocal. The first is in “around” (like “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore”). The second is when each voice is responsible for only one letter.

If we were to take a short sequence, TGTGTTTAG, arranged in around, the transcript would look like this:

#1 tune garden tune garden tune tune tune tune ass
garden

#2 try going try going try try try
always going

#3 three gift three gift three three three
three away gift

#4 time george time george time time
time time alert george

If we were to take a short sequence, CAGCGGCTTC, and give each voice one letter to speak for, the transcript would look like this:

#1 tune tune

#2 always

#3 care care care
care

#4 george george george

Each semester, I help my students produce a poetry show and often we use this technique (which I call “genophonics”). It is very easy to master quickly and provides an easy way to practice polyvocalics.

Practical Advice

The more you practice polyvocalics, the better you will become at it. You must give yourself over to the performance though, no self-consciousness. Invariably, when students first try, they end up giggling. That means they are entering the learning curve. At first, it is essential that you wait for your cue and then concentrate on, no matter what your colleagues are saying, your words. After you have mastered that, you can begin to explore ways that your voice plays with the voices of those with whom you perform.

Programs

I want to encourage you to give something else to your audience—an artifact. Provide a program of the performance. An artifact orients the audience to where they are in time. If they get momentarily distracted and look at the program, it draws them back into the show. And it gives them

something to carry into the future—reenacting parts of the performance in their mind's eye. Edward Tufte, a philosopher of visual information, has been a key inspiration and guide on this matter. What follows is the front piece of the program for "Recto Verso" The frontpiece (which follows) shows the arrangement, and bits of texts and images of the pieces in the order that they are performed.

Mike Barrett

me hahaha
not-me not-hahaha
self black not-black
not-self

I want to be

alone in the impossible
self. I can't stand him

because he stands in me.
In astrophysical units

the *social*, oddly enough,
is the self.

Middle Eastern

grief Memphis, TN to
Cairo, IL race riots

a buggy green
rainy wet riparian
hike today in order
to walk with a little
more gravity

putting one over
on Cohort

lives
Ingredients for self, not-self:
marrow, heart, fucks, eyes,
kidneys. Age for one lifespan.
lived

Who are you? *Don't care.*

The prophet sd *space*

Cast

Remember the red man who lit
fires in the Chinese forest?

The Viet fisher who lost a pearl?
Green man who slipped you a Mickey?

Remember the prophet?

Narrator
Conservative Catholic Dick
Bernard of Clairvaux
Peter Abelard
Mississippi River
Satan (likes porn)

from *Recto Verso*
poems written in the white spaces of Carl Jung's *Liber Novus*

This was used for a 12 minute performance at the Green Mill in Chicago.

Include the Audience

The final principle is that when you put on poetry shows, you are helping to build poetry community and culture. It is not about your ego, but drawing the audience into the creation of art. That is why I always try to figure out, however briefly, a way to include the audience, and their voices, into the show. Sometimes I give them prompts and cues (another use for the program) when to deliver their part. When the audience is involved, in the moment of the performance, then poetry is fulfilling its social function by encouraging the creative spirit.

How To Do It

1. Gather a group of poets (include artists from other genres as well).
2. Find and book a venue.
3. Choose a theme.
4. Write toward that theme.
5. Work collaboratively to polish the individual pieces and arrange them.
6. Develop polyvocalics.
7. Create a program to tell the audience where they are in the show and where they are going.
8. Include the audience in creating the material for the show.
9. Rehearse repeatedly.

10. Get people in the seats through publicity, word of mouth, and pulling in favors.

Mid-week Assignment

Your mid-week performance is to record your reading of one of your poems. Choose a poem that will accommodate a stirring reading. The easiest way to do this is to make a powerpoint presentation of the poem and record a narration. When you design your page (forget that nonsense about 10x10x10 powerpoint presentations--that's effective if what you have to say is only 10 lines), set the design to "Portrait" and "Letter Size" to display. Make a text box (from the Insert submenu, then textbox). Paste your poem into the textbox (it may take you more than one slide). Then choose "Record Narration" and record your reading of the poem. Play the slide show a few times to make sure that it works. Make sure that you check the "Use Timings" dialogue box so that the slides and your reading will be in synch. What we get as an audience when we play your power point presentation is a copy of your poem and your reading of it.

MacIntosh Computers

Recording vocal tracks are fairly easy using Garage Band. Go to New Track then choose Real Instrument. Press record and do your stuff. Using the Share Icon, save your track to disk and it will convert the recoding to an MP3 file which we should all be able to hear.

For the Ambitious

If you are super-ambitious and technically adept, make a poetry video and post it. If you do music and want to do spoken word to music, go ahead (no singer-songwriter stuff NO SONGS). I have some poetry videos I've posted to youtube in the Course Introduction material. The Most important thing is to prepare a recording of your poem for your audience--

the rest of the class.

Weekly Assignment

You have two weeks to complete this. Organize a poetry event with one or more of your classmates. Develop a reading list (if it's for two people a 20-30 minute show will work) and include at least one polyvocal arrangement--you can always do genophonics if you like. Secure a venue--it is perfectly appropriate to do it like a salon, that is in your living room. Invite friends and family. Name the theme and give it a title. Create a program and make the show happen (offering snacks and beverages ensures that your audience will enjoy themselves).

Any of your friends or family write poems? Invite them to read with you. Give them parameters such as how long you would want them to read and what order you'll go in.

Working together is always a joy but if logistics prevent any collaboration on the show, then put together a one person show. You should have enough poetry material for at least a 10-15 minute reading. The organization of the event applies still in all ways. Do not think of this as an onerous assignment. Do what I always do when I put together shows--make it a party.

In the Weekly Assignment Workshop area you'll need to post a two paragraph narrative of the event. In the first paragraph, describe what you did. how long you read, what polyvocal you used, etc. In the second paragraph, tell us how it went. Describe your insights as well as the audience's reaction.

In your posting, attach some proof that the show went on: a program, audio recording, photograph, a short bit of film (ideal, but it should be 30 seconds or less) that shows the poet and audience.

Get work on this right away and trust me, even if it's you in front of your family and a few friends, it'll be a blast.

The qualities of a good performance:

- a. There is an audience;*
- b. The poets read intensely and soulfully;*
- c. There is collaboration and polyvocalics;*
- d. There is a theme and title to the reading;*
- e. An effective program;*
- f. Everyone has fun.*