



Please note, [Lunar Poetry Podcasts](#) is produced as “audio content” and is intended to be heard and not read. These transcriptions are to be used as an aid alongside the audio recordings. If it is possible I recommend you listen to the audio which includes emotion and emphasis, not included in this text. This transcript is produced by a human and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

If you would like to see any changes to the way this transcript is formatted, then please contact us on [Twitter](#) or on [Facebook](#). Alternatively, please take the time to complete this short online [survey](#).

The rights to any and all poems printed in this transcript are retained by the author, **do not** reprint or copy without the permission of the author. – David Turner, Lunar Poetry Podcasts.

©2017 Lunar Poetry Podcasts

[Episode 2: Spoken Word Sweden \(November 2014\)](#)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: Olivia Bergdahl (**OB**), Tswi Hlakotsa (**TH**) and Niklas Mesaros (**NM**)

Transcript edited by [Martin Pettitt](#) – 21/03/2017

Conversation.

DT: This is the Lunar Poetry Podcast and today we're in Stockholm in Sweden. My name is David Turner and today I'm joined by [Olivia Bergdahl](#), Tswi Hlakotsa and [Niklas Mesaros](#), and all of those names will be written properly in English on the website. Please don't trust my Swedish or any kind of pronunciation. We're going to start just with a short intro from each of the poets. Just a quick thing, not all the poets here today are from Stockholm. Only one is in fact, but they are all involved in the Stockholm scene so that's predominantly what

we're going to talk about today. But I will let them introduce themselves now, so first, Olivia.

OB: Yes, and I'm the one not in Stockholm... I work as a performance poet, or a spoken word artist, and I'm from Gothenburg in Sweden. Now I live in Malmo but I know mostly about the Gothenburg scene and I won the nationals in Sweden in 2007 and...

DT: So, the nationals, that's a slam competition? Yes, right.

OB: Yeah exactly, a poetry slam. And then the year after that I was in the world cup of poetry slam and then I got to fourth place. I think that's my most... my best titles. And I also do a lot of writing things and workshops and I have written one and a half books because the second one is almost finished. The first one is. So, that's my...

DT: Ah, so, and Tswi?

TH: I am... my real name actually is [INAUDIBLE] and it's a very difficult name so hence Tswi, which my mother gave me, it's basically the middle part of my name. She would always use it when I was... when she was happy and when I was in trouble she used the whole thing and I always know, OK, serious, approach with caution. But, yeah, I live in Stockholm. I've been in Stockholm since February. I come from [INAUDIBLE] South Africa. I was born in a place called [INAUDIBLE] in the Eastern Cape and I lived in a place called [INAUDIBLE] state. Yes, that's me.

NM: And you won also... you are the ruling...

TH: Currency, yes, yes, yes, I won the...

DT: Don't be humble Tswi, come on, get it out.

TH: I won the national slam poetry competition this year in [INAUDIBLE] and I won the Stockholm slam competition also a few months later, and it's been a ride.

DT: And Niklas?

NM: I actually started slamming in Gothenburg. I lived outside Gothenburg and went to a journalist... education and I found this slam in Gothenburg and just accidentally stumbled upon it and started slamming. And I did pretty well and I won the Swedish nationals 2010 and then I entered the competition again in 2012. And I won again. So, I'm a two-time Swedish national slam champion, if titles are of any importance.

OB: You told us that they are, so...

DT: It's not of importance, it's of interest.

NM: It's of interest, yes, of public interest.

DT: In case of disclosure.

NM: I've been performing ever since 2009.

DT: I will make a quick note just to save your embarrassment. I did tell all the poets to mention the competition so they didn't offer that information up voluntarily.

NM: Right.

DT: I did demand that they embarrass themselves.

NM: Yes.

DT: OK, but I think maybe that's enough of introductions. What we do is, there will be more information about my guests today on the blog and website, links to their work, anything that's published or anything on YouTube. So as many links as possible, so that's why we're not really going to go too much into individual life stories here, and we might just crack on with the discussion now.

So, I think I'd like you guys to really begin telling us a bit about the spoken word scene in Stockholm. And I think really what I'd like to find out is, is it predominantly classical poetry based or more experimental spoken word or is there a leaning towards slam competitions and... what style of spoken word what do you find in Stockholm?

NM: I would say... mostly they are divided into slam... when there's slam season and the, you know, qualifications are, there is a lot of... there's mostly two scenes that are in work. And then all year round when it's not slam season it's mainly open mike things. And then it's dominated by spoken word poets but that's not to say that a spoken word poet doesn't pick up a guitar or do the singing. But mostly the open mike nights are dominated by spoken word poets.

OB: When you say spoken word poets, is it like poetry slam poets?

NM: Yeah mostly, the scene in Stockholm is pretty incestuous, you know, because all the people who are involved, who are making arrangements... and usually it's like the ones who are making the arrangements for open mike night, they perform as well on the other... When there's switching. So, it's mostly slam poets doing their thing.

DT: Yeah, and Tswi, because you are the most recent into Sweden [TH: Yep], never mind Stockholm, when you first started performing did you feel like you had to perform in a particular style or did you feel like you were being pushed more towards doing slam in order to get to know people, or was it...

TH: I think for me it was it was easy because I just figured first impressions are very important. So, first impressions of me has to be me and I think my whole life I have always gravitated towards slam [DT: yep]. Even though at one point I didn't know what slam was but that's what I was doing, so when I came here I just did what I did. And then started, you

know, sort of, defining it a little bit more and getting in contact with people who were slam poetry conscious [DT: Yes]. But yeah, I just did me, I just rocked up and thought, OK.

DT: I wasn't so much... I wasn't really asking you whether you felt like you needed to change your style, as such, it's just more how you found the scene represented itself to you in terms of what you felt. I might be leading the question a bit with sort of preconceptions, I think because my view is if you're doing slam you're doing it to win, and there are certain ways to win a slam, really, or whether... my idea more of open mike spoken word is more it can be more experimental, and you're freer to try, perhaps, but...

OB: But I will also say that because I've been to and met some British poets and it feels like the British scene is more... it's like the Swedish scene in a lot of ways are the opposite of it because it's so much about the poetry slams in Sweden [DT: Yeah]. Even though you're not really into the competition but the scene is the poetry slam. And then in Britain it's more like the poetry slam is just something that happens after.

DT: I think I'd agree with you there. I think that's maybe why I'm asking the question because in London it feels like a divide. It doesn't mean you can't cross that divide but you definitely have slam poets and that's why I keep differentiating really between slam poets and spoken word artists and I might be using those terms wrong, and there would be a lot of people would disagree with me, but that's the difference that I mean. You sort of get the impression from talking to a lot of people over here that, yeah, there isn't... you're not a slam poet or spoken word artist you can just do any of them.

TH: Yeah, I mean, I think what's happening now is the scene in itself has been pretty marginalised as a cultural phenomenon in Sweden. A lot of people don't know what poetry slam or spoken word is so... But now what's happening, as I can see it, is that a lot of people who are doing slams are also becoming more interested in doing other things onstage. And using what they are doing as a slam poet and driving from that. Drawing from that it's doing other things onstage that are similar to a slam poem or... but has other poetic qualities to it.

DT: Would you, would any of you guys, have a view on where you'd like the scene to go in the future, do you think it's... and I have no judgement, I don't know enough about it, but do you think it's traveling in a healthy direction? Do you think it's growing or do you think it could be done differently to encourage new performers to come along?

OB: It can always be done differently. And I think it's always a problem. It's also natural that you are grouping yourself into... It's like for the poetry slam poets and the spoken word artists which are the same mostly in Sweden, they are in like one group and then you have the intellectual and paper writing poets in another group and it's like... And I think it's natural in some way and then also it would be fun to connect them.

NM: You know, I've had always a problem with disconnecting myself from what's happening with the scene and myself because I see myself as a huge part of the scene, which is really a narcissistic way of viewing oneself. But... I don't know if it's me growing or if the scene is changing but I do feel like it's growing. And I would love to see it, you know,

being TV aired like national slam competitions, and I would love to see spoken word poetry having a bigger place in the media or whatever.

DT: Right, so my next question is, why do you guys perform and why did you choose spoken word?

TH: OK, I perform because it just it feels like it's the next step. You know, like a) getting a poem and b) writing it down and c) sharing it. For me it's more sharing than anything. And I like spoken word because there is a lot of things I can do with spoken word. And, for example, there's things that I can do with spoken word that I can't do with music... I can... and, I mean, vice versa also. But for me I feel like spoken word is really a strong way of communicating ideas because reading a book is one thing but then having the author read you a book you sort of get a different picture. So, for me I suppose it comes natural, just the next step. Yep.

DT: Do you have anything...

OB: I can just agree on that.

DT: Yeah well, I have a follow up question about that as well. So, when performing, how do you view your relationship as a performer with the audience. And by that I mean, the way I often frame the question with people, do you just see the audience as a pure necessity. For instance, if they weren't there, buying tickets and drinks, there would be no venue available for you to read in so the scene wouldn't exist, or do they actually... are you trying to connect with them... are they important for your performance?

OB: Yeah, they are, really.

DT: And in what way?

OB: I think it's... I have this thinking about performers that you can see the audience as a friend or as an enemy [DT: Sure] and you can impress on the audience or you can, like, try to get them into your performance in some way. And I'm really on the part like... I really like the audience and I love when they are part of the performance. It's also like performing is a little bit too just... this thing with communication and to reach out for people and then you get something back. And I really like that communication between the audience and the performer.

NM: Yeah, I totally agree on that as well. I love the response thing. I love the performing bit of it, I really love the acting out of... embodying your words and find the physicality in your poems. And just have that connection when you find the response you want, and people are laughing and crying at the same time and it's like, I love that interaction. So, the audience is a pure necessity for...

DT: Yeah, and so that leads me onto to another smaller question. Do you find yourself improvising or changing your performance style based on the reaction of a particular

audience? It's just from my experience, different size audiences, different venues, you get different... I've found you get a different reaction sometimes.

OB: Sometimes, but also, I never change the text.

DT: No, I'm not suggesting the text so much but.

OB: Sometimes when I feel that they are not really with me. I try to reach out [DT: Yeah] and... maybe say something in the middle of the poem, or...

NM: Yeah, you can definitely alternate, I mean, pauses and stuff like that. If you feel like you need to hook them in a way that, you know, you feel like they're not really there. But, yeah, I'm horribly... I'm terrible at improvisation. So, I usually, always come back to my idea of what I'm doing. But sometimes you really have to work a crowd because they are hard stone faces. Giving away anything, it's like are they enjoying it or are they hating it?

TH: Especially Swedish people it's like you guys... [NM: This is true] Swedish grownups just sit there and they look at you. Like I remember the one time I went to a wedding in the south somewhere, and these girls came on and they started singing. And I'm at the back, thank goodness I was at the back because I'm at the back thinking, "Yay, this is brilliant." I want to jump and shout something. And then I look around and these people are very serious.

I'm like, OK, so we are in Rome now so must do as the Romans do. And then when the girls were finished, the applause was so loud. And I realised that, OK, it's different crowds and it has always been very important for me to be able to understand a crowd. Very recently I did... I think I had one of the worst gigs of my life. I had the toughest crowd I had ever had in my whole life, and I have had some pretty hectic crowds. This particular crowd was on another level. I walk into this place and there's like tables and chairs and people sipping on coffee and whatnot, and in the back of the room...

NM: This was in Sweden.

TH: This was in Sweden. There is this little section with pillows on the floor and a mat like it's a chill spot, and it's about 25 to 30 kids in a room almost as big as this. And they are as loud as kids can get. It's a Friday night, they just got back from school, the parents are tired, and they are not about to sit down for a good 15 minutes and listen to somebody talk. Even when the MC was introducing the evening and what it was, it was so rowdy and I thought myself, "My goodness this is bad."

I got up and, thank goodness, I had had two sets that day. We decided on the way there I would do two instead of one. During the first set, it was a disaster. Imagine trying to be serious and talk about very difficult issues. The parents, their faces are just distant because they are concerned about their kids being noisy and the kids don't really care. And here you are trying to shout louder than the kids, and it's just trying to out-volume the kids.

It was madness and afterwards I thought to myself, "You know what? It's either I'm going to die here tonight or I'm going to them to join me, because they can't kill me." So, what I did was I decided to invite all the kids to the stage. OK, come. And, I mean, my Swedish is very broken so it was quite funny. I called them all up on stage and we decided to make a beat. And while they made a beat, I did something with the beat.

So, I learned a lot that day because I realised that, you know, some venues, especially with the performance part, the most important thing is being able to understand the demands of a particular venue and a particular crowd of people. A lot of people get it wrong where they are overpowered by nerves and don't really allow themselves to sort of break out of the norm and really experiment. And I feel like as an artist, for you to grow, you need these different scenarios. to sort of prepare you for the future because that's what soldiers do. Soldiers go through different protocols to condition them and to make them ready for a particular situation that might come up.

OB: It is funny to think about poetry reading as military training [INAUDIBLE].

DT: Well I suppose, you know, some audiences might feel that poetry has invaded their space and would rather have [INAUDIBLE].

TH: Sorry, sorry, funny thing, imagine I'm talking about... like one of the pieces I did was talking about, you know, wars and how people use child soldiers in conflict, very serious stuff. In the middle of that a kid gets up and starts dancing. Imagine, it's this rowdy room you're trying to be serious. This is what you're trying to share and somebody decides, no, right now I'm going to get up and I'm going to dance.

NM: I'm gonna bust a move right in your poem.

TH: Oh my goodness, it was a disaster.

DT: There some funky poems you've got there Tswi

TH: I wanted to show him some funky.

DT: Just quickly, you've probably given your opinions really, but... I wasn't going to talk too much about myself but I improvise a lot when I'm on stage. Well if I'm honest it comes from not wanting to remember the lines so that's why I improvise. But most of it comes from... the performing I do is much more about feeling than the text itself, I mean, I hope that the writing is good but... Do you feel like improvisation is a tiny part of the performance scene in Sweden, do you think it's all quite tight? It's all very...

OB: No. We have competition, improvisation, during the Nationals. But I also think like there is different kinds of improvisation onstage because I never improvise the text but I always improvise if there's something happening or there's someone shouting something or like you do with the kids. That's one kind of an improvisation, so... But I think that some poets are really good in improvisation, they have this like text going on in their head so they can use it and others need to write it down and learn it by heart.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:22:01]

DT: So, next I'd like to ask you all if you see yourselves as performers or writers? And I'm guessing we're going to go around and get three answers which say "both", and that's fine, but maybe we can discuss the different sides of an artist in terms of spoken word. And also, if we can talk about your influences both on your performance style and your writing style and whether any of those influences overlap. So maybe we can start with Niklas.

NM: Yes. I first and foremost think of myself as a performer and to be able to perform I need to have something written down. And I always have the room in mind when I'm writing. So, I would not necessarily call myself a writer but the writing part is a necessary evil to be able to perform.

And now I'm writing... I'm putting up... I have a producer and I'm going to put up a show and then I'm writing a full length 60-minute monologue. Which is completely different from what I've been doing up until now which is spoken word poems that could lengthwise be around 6, 7, 10 minutes long. And so finding... that was really challenging to find the rhythm in the writing and more focus on what happens on the desk with the pen and paper or the computer. I don't know if that answers your question but yes, both.

DT: I think you've explained.

NM: So, I'm leaning towards performing who needs to write.

DT: Yeah, and one feeds into the other. And Tswi?

TH: My answers is going to be a little bit different, a little bit deeper.

NM: More profound, not so shallow, not so superficial and self-centred.

TH: Yeah, but I consider myself both, as well, because writing is where it starts and performing is where it ends. I think if you ask a musician are you a musician or are you a writer or a performer, it's almost the same thing. My influences are... there are so many things that influence me. Writing, on the writing side of things I am influenced by human emotion and human interaction, all the stuff that people go through. And then on the performance side the challenge is always to take this, that is written, and extend it, not only extending it but complementing it. Like putting a microphone in front of someone, you know, for me performance is a way of amplifying everything else.

There's a lot of influences to that as well. I love looking at different areas like military training for example, which did come up earlier, stuff like that. I love looking at sports psychology, I love... especially with the competition element because world class athletes have, you know, this zone that they go into just before they go on stage and to do what they do. So, for me it's always interesting to see, OK, how does that guy do it? You know... and you look at Usain Bolt for example, he's very comical, he's playing around, like, this guy is

about to run the 100 meters. And he's playing, you know, like my mum would just slap my bottom, and then you look at Michael Phelps for example and he's just calm and quiet, he's listening to music.

So, all of those things for me, I look at and I'm like OK, how can I take that and use it. Because it's like Olivia was saying about nerves earlier, how she doesn't get nervous anymore sometimes if you're like, ah what do I need to do? I love nerves. I get worried, and very scared, if I am about to go up and I'm not nervous because for me my work is so emotionally charged, I feel like I need those nerves. I need those little shots of nervousness to just sort of heighten things a little bit more. So, a lot of influences... I consider both very important.

It's like in spoken word it's a mutual relationship. You need both writing and performing, they need each other. You can't say you are a good spoken word artist where you don't come close to finding a balance between the two. So, that's my mission, to just sort of find that balance.

DT: And Olivia?

OB: Yes. it's a lot the same. I consider myself both but it's more like when I started performing it felt... I had this like... the first time I was on stage I was so comfortable and relaxed and I had this like... I think like the stage that you can find this place where it's so quiet in some way and clear and you can really do things. And I really really love that place. But for me everything started in the writing [DT: Sure] and so it comes from the writing and I have been writing as long as I can remember and that's my natural way of handling things.

And then the performing was another thing that I hadn't thought about. It was just a coincidence that I went to a poetry slam and there was not enough people competing so I was in it. And I was like, OK, this is the thing to combine the thing I do, for myself, and in some way, making it as a thing for other people and to be part of something. It's not I think... it's also like you said with the influences, it's like, I don't really know, it's so many small things that you combine.

As long as you feel something for something you can write about it and you can make a performance about it. Try to collect all the all the feelings that surround you and also see how other people use feeling to do things.

DT: Now, that question and the three answers pretty much went in the direction that I expected.

[INAUDIBLE]

DT: I mean it's just... Well, that's just how things work. What I'm really interested in, and maybe this might not go anywhere, but from my own point of view, so, I'm very much a performer. But I view myself as a writer because I don't only write the stuff that I perform I write other things as well. And I couldn't get anywhere, I couldn't get onstage for instance, I

can't get up and perform other people's writing, I can only do... So, I see myself as a writer and performance comes as an extension.

I think in terms of... just going back to the influences, the reason I mentioned that is the biggest influences on my performing, and I suppose my writing as well, and where it overlaps, is traditional stand-up comedy where it's one person with a mike controlling your audience. I suppose in a way really that's just saying the spoken word influences my spoken word, and I think that is fine as well. That's... I'm just interested whether you find any influences that really cover both sides for you. I mean, there might not be but if...

OB: I think all of them do. [DT: OK sure] I think it's more like that because I also write things that I don't perform, I write prose and articles sometimes. And that kind of writing is, I can't really separate it, like in the influence way because it's like, OK, there's something that I want to do something about and then I can do a spoken word piece about it or I can do some writing about it. And it's... I know that some themes are more likely to be on paper and others are more likely to be onstage. But I can't really... [DT: No, OK, that's fine] it's also with... I also like comedians or actors or everyone onstage. I can get influenced by musicians but I can also use that influence into the paper, I guess, it's very hard to...

NM: I watch a lot of film. I love film. I'm a really film nut. I have always been interested in finding a [INAUDIBLE] or setting... making a scene or setting that I can use visually. That's both sort of pre-staged act of that that I can do with the live... That's really not stringing a sentence together, sorry.

DT: You get to a point when you've done a certain amount of performances then you can then begin to write with a view to perform that and then can you can use film or theatre or you know... you can use...

NM: I can re-watch a scene and say, and I think, what is it in this scene that really moves me or makes me weep or cry or laugh, and then I try to dissect that and then if it's the lightning. And then I can use that as a descriptive thing in the narrative in the poem. Like... I try to find all those elements in a scene that really moved me and...

OB: I think it's also like where you... if you want to be... if you really want to be a spoken word artist then maybe you... really you are listening to spoken word artists and you are writing spoken word. But if you are more in a place where, "I really need to say something and I don't really know how this medium is good for me", then I use that and then...

TH: There's a scene in Game of Thrones in Season 1, I think. Where that little boy was just pushed off.

NM: Brian.

TH: Yeah. And Nana is telling them the story of how the white worker's kids came for the first time. I downloaded that scene and I just listened to the audio without the visuals, and the way that old ladies voice was... it was like watching a paintbrush. The places and ways in which it cracked when she spoke about certain things you know, it was like, ow.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:37:38]

DT: OK. So, next I'd like to talk to you guys about this idea of... within poetry or spoken word, are we looking to hide or highlight a particular concept behind that poem. And this subject might only be interest to writers with a fine art background, but... really I'm asking, do you feel it's your job to show an audience how much work has gone into your poem or are you trying to make it look effortless, and...

TH: Well... who wants to start with that?

NM: Yeah... oh, you were saying? Saved by the gasp.

TH: For me it is quite easy because even though there's a lot of work that goes into it... But the most important thing for me is the outcome it's going to have on the audience. I think that is the end to which, you know, the means are based upon, and sometimes it takes a lot of work. But the most important thing for me, even though this might betray my philosophy of not trying to downplay the importance of hard work, but the outcome is more important.

OB: Yeah, but if you have the hard work behind it and people feel that you have the hard work behind it. I think it's easier to listen to it actually or I can feel that myself if I listen to a poet and the poem I can feel that, OK, this is a well worked poem. Then I listen to it more seriously in some way otherwise I am more listening to the performance, I guess, of the voice or of the body. I try to... I think I try to be as professional as I can in some way, but also, as Tswi is saying, the most important thing is the reaction in the audience and...

TH: There's... just a quick one, there's a... the current world slam poetry champion is a guy from Canada, he's born in Nigeria but he lives in Canada now. And he did a poem at this year's finals, where he basically took the alphabet and he killed it. He went from a to z and I'm thinking, yoooo it's crazy. And then he goes from z back to a. And I'm like no... And then he goes aa, bb, cc and I'm like... immediately when you see a piece like that you're like... I'm done, that's it.

NM: Yeah, but that's the thing. When you can make it seamlessly but, you know, all the hours you spend on something and then you can make it flawless flowing naturally onstage. That's when I'm [INAUDIBLE] when you've really struck gold because, you know, that's going to make you a world champion, I suppose.

OB: And it's also, I really like that kind of writing myself, like... writing poems where every word starts with the same sound and the same letter and like this very advanced rhyme things that no one really... You can see if you watch it, if you're reading the poem on the paper but you don't really hear it. [TH: Aha, yes] And I really love to do that myself just to know that, OK, I am really smart. No one knows it but I.

TH: I Have always felt that... Do you ever feel like sometimes there are certain golden nuggets in your work that are, sort of, are lost and only you know about them? And even though every part of you wants to explain to the audience what you've just did?

DT: Every time I read, there's at least one point where I think, "Should I break character? You've just missed something."

NM: You didn't get the reaction you wanted.

OB: Sometimes I even have done that.

NM: I said...

DT: Have a cue card with: "Good Bit Coming Up". Definitely, yeah, but I think maybe that question grew out of... I'm wondering whether people don't class spoken word as a true art form, in that sense, you know. Questions of concepts and subtexts which are there in a print poem, aren't often discussed in spoken word, maybe because it's often quite fast flowing and you don't get... you do miss those nuggets, you don't always see those. How do you feel about that, because I come from visual arts world where it's natural to talk about these subjects?

NM: This sort of conversation, I think is, you know, will prove essential for the growing of the art form, especially in Sweden. If we are to take this to the next level we need to have this sort of conversations and discussions about, you know, poets amongst themselves but also, you know, outwards to an audience. The more you dissected it and talk about, analyse, what you do with a more, you know, firmer foundation we will have to stand on when, you know...

OB: And I also think that is... it is a problem when it's just the poetry slam and the competition because then you just have 3 minutes and... you can do your poem but you can't really do the big concept of it. Like now I'm just reading poems that start with this letter. In this way or making this like...

NM: It's very fast paced and after all it has a lot of wits and punches and like... next poem, next poet, next poem...

OB: Yeah and I think it's a really big difference if you perform for one hour. Even though I'm just reading poems for one hour, I can still make... like connect poems to each other and then you can like... I start with this one and I end with this one, and it's...

DT: You can really build a subtext that people can have time to digest.

TH: I've got a fine art background as well. And one of the challenges, and I was just downright uncomfortable with it, was the fact that, fine artists, while back in art school, we seemed to be more focused on creating art that is accessible to the academic. And to the general public which might not necessarily have the same kind of information and theory

that the academics have, sort of lose a lot of the meaning in an artwork. And it's begging the question then who are we creating art for?

Is it for the masses or is it just for, you know, like... You walk into a gallery and there's this huge piece of canvas and there's nothing on it. And, you know, the artist comes and they're like: "Yeah, the concept behind this is negative space this, that, blah, blah blah." And the layman on the street is like: "Yeah, but I just see a blank thing there." And with poetry as well, I think the danger, there's a real danger in creating poems for poets and especially if you want to grow from it, because if you're looking to grow the poetry movement then poetry needs to be accessible, both intellectually and in terms of where these sessions are held.

DT: I think it's a really important point actually because until people start discussing it properly... the problem is if you take that point on face value, like we need a bigger audience it seems like we need to bend our poetry to suit taste and that's not the point. It's just you need to be more considerate of who you're trying to reach. It doesn't mean you have to write simpler poetry. It just means you need to find a different language.

OB: And I also think that, and I think that's important that you're able to be both. you can be really really intellectual and talk to the academics and you can still do it in a way so everyone can relate to...

DT: And, yeah, because I often liken the poetry scene in London to the pedigree dog showing scene, you know, it's lots of people with lots of dogs showing their dogs to lots of people with lots of dogs. And if you go to a poetry gig, it's just people with lots of poems reading to people with lots of poems and there isn't really anyone from outside and that.

I think that's just what I'm meaning really this whole idea of concept and subtext and really questioning what you do. Because until you do that, until you really look at yourself and why you're doing something, you can't really communicate, not well enough to draw in a wider audience. And I think that's what fine artists have been doing... most successful at, what they have been forced into doing... and designers, graphic designers. They've been forced to interact with the public but find really creative ways of doing that.

NM: A way of doing that is, in Stockholm is that we've been doing a collaboration with the Royal Theatre, here in Stockholm. The Dramatic Royal Theatre... whatever. And it's been sort of like a way of finding a new generation of audiences, finding that really... castle of a cultural institution, the Royal Theatre, a new audience in there and a way of doing that was implementing spoken word nights in those really fine salons, you know...

DT: OK, so next I'd really like to ask you all about this idea of... social commentary in spoken word and should there be more. Or is it unfair that there is perhaps a bigger expectation on spoken word than there is on other art forms to be more socially active.

TH: I think it's unfair. I honestly think... yeah, it's a little bit unfair because it's art. You don't tell a musician what to sing, so why are you going to tell a poet what to say, type of thing. I believe that, we spoke about this when we met earlier in the week, that there's

enough poets going around, there's enough poems going around, it's just a matter of, I believe, the individual finding their niche and being the best they can be at that.

OB: I also think because... it's a very... it's an easy art to do to write a spoken word piece. So, if you want to say something political, it's easy to do because you don't need anything else than yourself. So, because I can also feel that sometimes when you in a poetry slam it's like everyone is saying very political things in almost the same way. And they say really smart things but I can be like this... but where is the poetry? I want the love poems and the nature poems and all that... But I think it's like...

DT: You know, I hadn't actually considered it like that before. That's quite an interesting point. In that, yes, it could happen as soon as you choose a particular message, it would be very easy to figure out trying to write, I say properly, but in a skilled way or following a particular form. Yeah, it's quite interesting actually.

NM: Well, all spoken word poets are in a way activists in their field... in the body of work. But I am myself very much aware of being a white male person and the space I take onstage and the time I take. Am I taking it from someone else, what am I saying, what am I... how am I using the time I have onstage? And it maybe not as much shines through in every poem. In a political way. But I am in other ways, with my poetry, breaking a norm or, you know, trying to make a change if it's finding another way for people to re-evaluate their own position.

DT: I think I've also often considered [NM: Privilege] that there are far more spoken word poets doing... making social comments than people realise but just because they're not standing up and shouting about politics.

NM: Yeah, you can find a more subtle way of doing it.

DT: People talk about mental health issues, they talk about gender roles, masculinity, femininity. You know, all of these things in between which are all vitally important to society working but quite often it's missed because people don't listen or the poem moves too quickly or they don't understand the subtext. It takes in all the things we have been talking about now. I do think spoken word artists much more socially aware than their given credit for.

OB: And then it's also like you need to be aware that the moment you're standing on the stage you are political in some way. Because you are taking, as you said, like you are taking this place and you're taking it from someone else of course, and you're standing there and your body is political.

DT: And even if you're getting up and reading the alphabet, forwards and backwards, you're doubling up you're probably making a stronger comment about what it is to be an artist or be creative.

OB: And I also think, because I think it's interesting, because when I started doing poetry slams in Sweden there was almost no female poets. And I was one of the few female poets

in Sweden and then I was very political. Always, I was booked as the female poet at all those gigs, and nowadays there are more good female poets than male poets in Sweden so I'm not political anymore onstage. And it's really interesting to have this like...

DT: So, you find it shifts and your role can change.

OB: And then in some way I'm freer and then in another way I'm not. It's very... it's a bit strange in some way because then also before I didn't need to write political poems to be political, now I need to write political poems to be political, in some way.

DT: Yeah, I suppose, but when you're... just by... Yeah, that's interesting. I've been discussing with people in London and by far the best or most obvious social commentary comes from the LGBT community. But that's a good point, it may just be when a particular type of performer is in the minority they are automatically considered an activist or something because they're standing out alone.

Once that voice becomes a majority like the young white heterosexual voice, or in London even the young black guys standing up. There isn't that sort of... had it been the early eighties, they would have been seen as political activists but now when balances shift and people become majority and no longer the minority. So, that's an interesting point as well, even without trying [INAUDIBLE].

OB: When you are representative for something then you...

DT: But I think also there's that... maybe this question of social commentary comes from really... perhaps older generations because they've... certainly poets that I know that begun in the late seventies, early eighties and read poetry before punk gigs and stuff and that was quite a hard time to start. Everything was political because you literally to get up and shout and it might just be resentment is too harsh or what, I don't mean it like that, but then maybe they just would wish that that voice had continued. You know, because maybe they saw a saw power in spoken word which is being neglected now.

OB: I don't really think we have that kind of poet in Sweden.

DT: So maybe it's a different issue.

OB: We had spoken word poets in Sweden in the eighties but it was not really political in that way. So, I think it's much much more political now than it was in the seventies.

DT: That's really why I brought up a sort of brief background of London poetry there because I think my questioning is... that's where the question is coming from. So, it might not seem as relevant for you guys in that you... perhaps this isn't a question within the scene like it is in London.

OK, so I would want to know about performance style, and if there any particular things that you find important. So, the two points I'm going to bring up are how theatrical should spoken word be allowed to become? And also, just a quick one, reading from page or

memory, is it an issue for you when you see other performers do it? Yeah, your preferences but also how you feel about other people's styles. Maybe start with Olivia.

OB: If it's good, it's good, I would say. it doesn't matter.

DT: In terms of reading from the page or from memory?

OB: Also in terms of how theatrical it can be. It's like, if it's a good poem it's a good poem or if it's a good performance it's a good performance. And I don't really like this actor kind of way of reading poems. A lot of spoken word artist don't. But you can do... And I really think it's important that spoken word should be that open that you don't really have, "OK here is the limit of how much theatre it can get." You can talk with 10 voices if you like and it can still be a poem. You can have just paper, reading from it, and it can be great and you can also read from papers and it's really really bad. And you can like your poem by heart and...

TH: I love reciting from memory. It's very difficult for me to grasp the idea of "freedom from paper because I need my books so much". And but with the paper thing, there are people who were able to do it brilliantly. Two performances I've seen come to mind, one [Saul Williams](#) gets on stage and he's got this scroll and he just reels it out on the stage and begins to read it. I thought that was brilliant.

And then this other guy, He walks up he's like, "Yeah I just... I wrote this poem." Sorry... I love speaking accents, so every word in my head is a character. So, there's this South African political accent. You talk like this [INAUDIBLE]. You don't twang, you don't talk like an American white boy. This is how you talk. So, this guy walks onstage like, "Yeah, I have just written this poem, and I think I like it." And then he stands there with the piece of paper he reads the whole thing and then at the end he tears it up and throws it away. And I'm like...

You know, so different ways in which people use the mediums, for me that is the interesting part, the actual reading on its own is [INAUDIBLE], I don't know. Mainly because I come from a place where poetry is so raw and it's just grrr it's, yeah. But that's the reading part. And then, I mean, the other part is... it can be anything, spoken word I feel like just take the chains off, take the limits off and just let it fly and just see where it's going to go. I don't think anything can ever be too much and I say this very carefully, I don't think anything can ever be too much, but yeah.

OB: But I also think that if it becomes too much theatre people will call it theatre and not spoken word, so it's...

DT: That's what I mean... [INAUDIBLE] are we in danger of killing?

TH: Killing the poems.

DT: Kill the fucking... kill the poems. Actually, I am in favour of killing the poems but that's another subject...

NM: I mean, I... up until recently I've been having a really hard time memorising poems or text but I'm getting there and I've been using paper or like a book or something that I've been writing it down in. So, I've been accustomed to using paper in a way that feels natural onstage and I think I've been successful with it. But as I'm moving on and growing as an artist I want... I do want to be becoming better at, you know, being free onstage with no...

OB: What do you want to do with your hands.

NM: I don't know If don't want to do more with my hands because I have this wave thing, you know, it's a wave thing with my left hand, I'm always waving it in a sort of spastic rhythms. But I feel I would be more free in my mind if I felt like putting the paper down, because we talked about this earlier this week, that you feel like you have a shield like when it's a safety net.

DT: There are definitely some performers that use it as a barrier, between them and the audience.

NM: And I want to rid myself of that. And I have been getting better at it.

OB: I'm really impressed with people that can hold a paper like this for a whole poem without shaking their hand because I get really... even though I'm really nervous I start to shake in my body.

DT: I shake constantly all the time and I...

NM: That just... it takes away the attention from...

OB: Yeah and you can hear the sound...

TH: And you feel someone's nervousness when you see it.

OB: When you see someone just holding it completely still, I get so impressed, and it's also like this intense thing when you see someone reading from still paper, I really like that kind of performance because it gets like... it's a little bit more intense.

DT: I quite like, and this is not going to work on the audio recording, no one's going to understand this, but you'll see.

TH: We'll describe what you're doing, David's now taking his clothes off.

DT: Christ, what's wrong with that! I like doing that slam thing where... it may be an English thing, but they hold a piece of paper out and as they chat to the audience they take it from one hand pass it under the mike stand and hold it up again. That's the only reason to hold a piece of paper for me, I've done it a couple of times tongue-in-cheek. I love it. It's just this thing... it's sort of, "Oh this old thing, this is nothing. [INAUDIBLE] two minutes to write... I don't know, I'll read it to you anyway, I'm embarrassed almost to read it to you."

NM: But like papers, you said Tswi, in a way you use it and you leave it to us as well, if you use it as a prop, if you use it in a creative way, it becomes... it heightens your poem. If you if you can find a way.

DT: I quite the idea of reciting a poem from a piece of paper and then turning it around and the paper is blank. That kind of thing because it becomes more... I mean, you've got to be careful it doesn't seem really pretentious but you know stuff like that or I really like that whole idea of ripping stuff up...

NM: Yeah, I'd like that.

OB: Or just dropping the papers so they fly away.

NM: I've seen someone who came out... or, I don't know if I've seen... this is a funny thing, how memory changes things. I don't know if I've seen it or I thought of it and I wanted to do that but here I will give it away. Of like having one word written on each page and then come out with like a whole like a stack and then just do a Dylan thing but with like one word printed on each paper. So, at the end of the thing it's like papers everywhere.

OB: I have almost done that... because I did it like once but it was not one word it was like two sentences and I was throwing away a lot of papers... on the audience.

DT: I've done it once with a visual cue, I've gone up on stage and I didn't know which poem to read. So, I had two poems on paper, they were both about the idea of love but not quite reaching that love. "One is set on a dance floor and one is set up a hill which you want?" And they chose one but I know both of them from memory so I don't need the... I don't know why I did it actually because I don't need the paper, I just wanted to show them something [NM: The illusion of choice]. But when they chose I threw away both pieces of paper and then read the poem from memory.

OB: But do you like that the audience choosing because I feel like half of the audience is getting disappointed because you read the poem that they don't choose.

DT: It is a bit... I knew which one was going to read anyway.

TH: But on the flipside the good thing about that is you're getting the audience involved.

OB: Yeah, that's good.

DT: I actually because... the girl running that night, hello Kyla if you're listening...

NM: Hi Kyla.

OB: Hey.

NM: She runs a fantastic night called Union in Putney. She'd seen me read the other poem, that I wasn't going to do, so I was waiting for her to choose it, so it was all part of... I

hadn't really planned it, it just sort of happened but it was that element of some improvisation. Although I was going to read the poem as the text was written.

TH: This is all very interesting because I mean... a lot of people actually... a piece of paper is considered just be a medium where you put your words down but... just listening to you guys talk now, I'm actually getting a whole lot of ideas. What can we do to extend that piece of paper or to use it? So, I think that that's a good [INAUDIBLE].

DT: I think it's better to view it, this is going to sound really pretentious, more as a vehicle to take your ideas somewhere. It becomes... it's not then just... some people describe it as a canvas, but even the canvas is too rigid. A canvas just still goes on the... traditionally it still goes on the wall or just you still view it in that same way.

NM: And the paper onstage is a call-back as well to what we were discussing earlier. Are you viewing yourself as a writer or as a performer because you take [INAUDIBLE] it's sort of like you said...

DT: I think maybe what it was, almost subconscious, it was me, right, this is my writing you can have either one but once the performing starts that's not what you don't get, you don't get the paper. You get me but this is where it comes from.

OB: That's interesting because I have always been me... it has been really easy for me to learn the poems by heart. This... I just remember texts and nothing else, and completely nothing else. So, for me it has been very natural to read without papers. And also, I'm writing most of my poems... I am writing like just speaking them. And then I write them down so I know them by heart and I write them down. So, it feels really [INAUDIBLE].

DT: OK. Now on the sunny subject of depression and this idea that performing or writing or using poetry as therapy. It's obviously a very common thing. I suppose I just want to ask you three, whether any use your poetry for that reason. And if you do does it work, does it help?

NM: I'm moved by someone who goes up on stage and reads something that you can feel that they've been through some really... been through some shit, you know, and they... it transcends into their poem, poetry or in their performance. And then I don't really much care if they are using it as a way of making themselves feel better if... because that's how I view what I write as well.

If I take something that's been... was really hard. And I, you know, transform it into a poem and then every time I read it I feel a little better. But then I know also someone in the audience also might have, you know... feel that identification in what I'm doing or saying. And then they get that same like soothing feeling calm and like, "Fuck man, I've been through that I know what you're doing and what you've been through."

I don't really mind if it's therapeutic for them or not. I use humour as a way of taking up on really difficult topics like one of my most fun poems is about me getting the shit kicked out of me in Gothenburg. I got... they just beat me to a pulp, these couple of guys, and then I try

to visualise whatever they saw in me that could have provoked them to the point where they need to feel that they, you know, kick me in the face. And it's a really fun poem it's like, you know, it's all right people are laughing, I'm laughing. And that's sort of therapy but not in a sticky way like I'm not enforcing, you know the... yeah.

TH: I actually started writing poetry plus or minus 15 years ago, because I was in an extremely emotionally charged place. So, I think for me it started as therapy and I was really upset. That in itself not only sort of shows you that, you know... the thing is people are emotional beings and people want to connect, the most important thing about any performance is to connect. Because if you can connect then you're able to help people or destroy people you can never be influenced by somebody you don't connect with and I think as poets that is so sort of our goal.

So, connecting. And the thing is there's a lot of doom and gloom in the world people are broken, people are sad and sometimes they don't have the capacity to express that. And you might just be the one person, it's like, "That's what I have been feeling, I never had words for it." So yeah, it's... that's the beauty of it is that it can be so much and nothing at the same time.

OB: Yeah and also, I think it's so much about... the therapy in writing, I think I do that a lot, I write but it's just for myself. And then I sometimes fool myself into writing things that is very very passionate. And then I write it in a way that it's like it has nothing to do with me. And then I can use it for a performance. And I think that's like... trying to be as honest as possible onstage but still never telling the truth about things or people.

And I always when I write about people I used to change gender on them for example or age or something... Just not to be the person standing onstage and talking about someone or something that... the people around me can't talk about because it's me standing onstage and then I have the power of... the story, in some way.

DT: Actually, there's two really interesting points. One that Niklas brought up and yourself Olivia, this idea that it may begin as therapy for yourself but how important is it you might connect with someone in the audience and it may become therapy for them. You see someone standing up and being brave enough to talk about it so there's that side of things. Also, this idea of honesty within poetry. I find it very very odd that people demand complete honesty from poetry.

NM: All poets are liars. Can we settle this once and for all? All poets are liars.

OB: But you need to talk... you need to see what is the truth.

DT: That's exactly what I'm saying. Some of the most beautiful things I've seen onstage are things were quite clearly something has actually happened to this person. But then it's just been delivered in an arc which... because most life stories wouldn't fit onstage... you couldn't just... I've tried it, it doesn't work, it felt all right for me but the audience didn't like it.

But no I think it's a really important part... it's an important point why we... why are these demands made of us to be honest all the time, completely honest about everything. And it's... maybe that doesn't actually exist but there is a pressure there, isn't there?
[INAUDIBLE],

OB: I just think that if you're in the audience and you see something you want it to be true because it feels true. And then if it's not true you are fooled by it, by the poet.

NM: Yeah but that's the thing, isn't it? If it feels authentic, if it feels like it's happened to someone, then it becomes a sort of truth and then your job is done. That's it. Because you made that person feel whatever you needed to feel or find that key to whatever they are trying to unlock or... it doesn't really matter what is fabricated and what is... the truth behind it because it all blends in to [INAUDIBLE].

DT: It but it does seem to matter.

NM: Yeah.

DT: I wonder how that can best be because I think sometimes it distracts from the power of the poetry itself because people dismiss things because once they find they're not true. I have a piece which is based on my character's sleeping with a girl it turns out that she's refuses to kiss me. The twist is that I'm a young guy and I'm upset. I don't have any intimacy, an issue that would usually be considered something girls would worry about, not having that intimacy.

I'm a young guy onstage questioning whether I have this closeness with someone and longing for it. Two weeks later I'm asked, "Did that girl ever kiss you" and I'm like, "Well, she didn't exist." It's made up. And then that disappointment and then my piece was somehow no longer valid because it was based on a fabrication but those feelings were still true. You know the points are still valid.

TH: That's not fair, that's another thing that's not fair. If you pick up a novel, you can let it paint you with all the hues that it has for you. And why should then somebody who is saying something out loud on the stage be held to a different standard, I think if it's all art then just take it as it comes.

DT: I suppose it might just be something very basic and that this is only art form where you see the whites of their eyes. And if you see the whites of their eyes they shouldn't lie to you. It might be just that basic human expectation.

NM: It houses in a person and then you expect that person to be honest with you because nobody likes a liar.

DT: I don't think that anyone would question a dishonest printed poem in the same way they would a spoken word one.

NM: You don't seek out the author and want to validate it. It didn't really happen to you.

OB: But the thing is I think it's a difference also... for myself because a friend of mine... I know he had said like false things before he read the poem and it's just me knowing it. I think some more people knowing it but then it's like I'm totally fine with the poem but the story before the poem when it's not true, I'm like yeah but you don't need to say that. Then I get a little bit more sensitive when you're not reading the poem you're just talking. And that's my line I guess.

DT: It's interesting. There's a lot of scope to play around with this idea of truth or dishonesty but this maybe something to go into another time because it's a deep subject. But I just want to say thank you very much to Olivia Bergdahl, Tswi Hlakotsa, and... fuck. I swore, yeah, I got right to the end and I just said fuck. Those who know me will know how difficult that was... Niklas Mesaros. Again, their names will be written more clearly than I can ever enunciate them on the website.

This was for Lunar Poetry and I just want to thank *Drömfakulteten* which is the Dream Faculty in Sweden and they've let us use their fantastic studio space to make this recording. Thank you to Katja Lindeberg and Ofelia Jarl Ortega.

NM: Thank you for having us.

NM: I've really enjoyed it and hopefully you will come to London and say hello to the people whose ears are taking in these sounds.

NM: Definitely.

OB: All of them.

DT: Every single one, line up. There'll be about 3 of them so... OK, thank you very much.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[01:22:14]

End of transcript.