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### [Episode 7: The Audience – Are They Important?](#) (February 2015)

Host: Paul McMenemy– **PM**

Guests: David Turner – **DT**, Jason Pilley – **JP**, Tom Bland – **TB**

Transcript edited by [Martin Pettitt](#) – 14/05/2017

#### **Conversation:**

**PM:** Welcome to the Lunar Poetry Podcast. My name is Paul McMenemy, unfortunately your usual host David Turner isn't able to perform that duty today because he's one of the guests, along with Tom bland and Jason Pilley. All three are well-known on the London spoken word scene for their distinctive styles. Today, we're going to be talking about performance. Gentlemen, can I ask you to introduce yourselves please.

**DT:** I'll go first. So, my name is David Turner, regular Lunar Poetry Podcaster and reviewer. I am also a failed visual artist and occasional poet and short story writer. Outside of this almost imaginary world of poetry, I work in a bronze foundry in Limehouse in East London, which is actually relevant to my background, which is an art technician. I also co-host a spoken word evening with Lizzy Palmer called Silence Found a Tongue which is also the launch event for each Lunar Poetry magazine issue. And these nights take place at [i'klectic gallery](#) in Waterloo and they are on the second Monday of every month.

**JP:** My name is Jason and I do a bunch of things, at a CV level I'm a carer, which sounds great doesn't it, I care. The government pays me to care.

**JP:** You are very caring.

**JP:** I'm a very caring person and that's just my secret identity, that's the Clark Kent, that's the cover story. Behind that my real work is I write this endless sequence of unpublishable and unreadable novels. And I'm also an occasional youth worker which keeps me engaged in the community, keeps me on my toes. And a few years back on top of all that, *on top of all that*, I wrote some poems by mistake and these poems were really like insistent. Like normally when you write something it's like ink on paper, you put it aside and write the next thing.

But these poems really wanted to be spoken, they wanted to be recited. So, I felt compelled to go to a poetry night, which I generally resented, [INAUDIBLE]. I had real preconceptions about what poetry would be or what poetry audiences would be. And I was completely wrong, it was a real revelation so that since four years ago and since then I've been doing constant poetry. My life is poetry now. When I'm not caring.

**TB:** So, I'm Tom and I guess I'm a poet, a reluctant one and an accidental one. I started writing about when I was 15 and then gave it up for a number of years, and then went to [Poetry Unplugged](#), back in the days when [Niall](#) was really drunk when he used to host, which is no longer the case. And I think it was this drunken atmosphere that I found a kind of home and started to write, and started to take it a bit more seriously. And then for the last four years or so I've been studying at [The Poetry School](#) and running numerous nights.

**PM:** Right, great thanks. Okay, so, as I said you all have fairly unusual performance styles, as we'll hear later. I was wondering how you came to your manner of delivery?

**DT:** Yeah, I can begin again. Mine was completely by accident. I mean, I'm the most recent to performance poetry, out of the three of us, I started... My first reading was May 3rd 2014. So about six months or so, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do other than to read a poem in front of people. And I shit myself so much that I couldn't, almost couldn't, finish the first poem. I don't remember that second poem I read.

And then the second reading that I did, I went into like at defence mode and I became almost unbearably aggressive. I sort of like physically attacked the audience, and I went at them, certainly. And my... I've toned it down a lot since then. But, yeah, it wasn't really so

much... At the beginning it wasn't a conscious decision, I wasn't thinking about performance style. I was just thinking how the fuck do I just get through this poem without cracking up. Because obviously quite often I think a lot of us start by writing quite emotional poems because that's where a lot of these things are coming from.

And then to read them to a room strangers is pretty terrifying. Yeah, so that's sort of how it came about first. Then it developed into actually thinking, well why am I being defensive or aggressive? And actually trying to... I found the best way to be defensive was to sort of try to take on a character or... I don't know how Jason and Tom feel about that aspect about assuming a character while you're performing, which I definitely do. It is very rarely me that's onstage, in that sense. But at the same time, it's not acting, maybe we can get into that later, but...

**PM:** The old 'Steward Lee' defence.

**DT:** I probably would quote Stuart Lee on every one of these answers, possibly, because I do agree with a lot he says but I do... I take a lot of my influences from stand-up comedy in that you can play yourself but just an exaggerated version. And it sort of gives you a bit of a shield from criticism. And I'm happy to admit that it's just through fear of criticism that you develop that shield in the first place. But it can be quite useful as well.

**JP:** Yeah, so as I said, I had written some poems that I felt obligated to perform. I went along to what I was told had an open mike section, I had them written down on some paper, I was going to read out these words. I thought that'd be it and I could never have to think about poetry again. I went there and there wasn't an open mike section so I just had to sit and listen. And it was an amazing experience and I was really blown away by the quality, the intensity and I felt like... I really that it was something that I wanted to do more of and I wanted to take it seriously.

So, it was a matter of memorising these poems treating it as you would a song or an acting thing and just... Yeah, have it in your head rather than read it off paper. So, then there was this process of doing that, of reading and reading and reading, getting them in your head. And then one day, you know, the paper was down, I was... My hands were by my side. I was reading out this poem and my hands were by my sides and I was standing still and it was just completely unnatural. So, I was OK what are my hands actually doing and what are my legs doing and what is my head doing? So, I sort of, yeah, just it just felt natural...

**DT:** For the benefit of the listening audience Jason is flailing his arms...

**JP:** Yes, I think my performance style... I mean, you're talking about having a persona onstage, I sort of exaggerate myself, I'm not myself on... I am myself onstage but I'm a more *more* myself, I'm more frenetic.

**DT:** Is it an exaggeration really.

**JP:** Yeah, it's not a character as such.

**DT:** Actually, the point you just made is... Actually, it's something that I think I want to mention there, is one thing that I found very useful was in my second reading, as a defence mechanism, I picked up the microphone and faced the back wall and I did the whole poem. And I didn't look at the audience once and when I came off someone said to me, I really like your performance style, how long have you been doing that for? And I thought, well, 3 and a half minutes. But I've found, probably similar to Jason here, I've become really... I feel too restricted almost to read if I don't move. And I think that's where we have a lot of similarities. We both move around a lot but in different ways but I can't stand still and stand at the mike. I hate it.

**JP:** No, I think poetry and performance poetry are the same thing, it is a performance. It isn't just the word, it isn't just the sound of the word, these are very important things. I love the process of poetry from the beginning, from that spark of inspiration, through the crafting the poem, through the memorising it. But it's about being in there, being watched and being moving, being related to it at every level, at a physical level... So, yeah that's my performance style, it just comes natural really, it isn't natural just to stand there, blah, blah blah, blah... It's much more natural to go, blahblahblahblahblah...

**TB:** I think my performance style has kind of changed as much as my poetry has over the years. So, to begin with I moved around a lot particularly in my hands. And I would over emphasise words as well, a lot. And I've come to care less and less about performance and more to do with what poems I'm reading and what the structure of those poems are. And I like the poems to kind of interrelate with each other. So, images will recur between poems to create a kind of idea of a narrative is taking place. Even if that narrative isn't that clear in terms of a kind of beginning, middle and an end. I prefer circles to lines.

**PM:** Well, that's an interesting point actually. So, yeah, I mean, how do you go about putting a set together, because obviously, that's a different thing than just having a poem.

**DT:** Well, I can begin, my answers quite short and I haven't worked out how to do that yet. I think I'm terrible at putting sets together. But it's mainly because of what I write. Just about everything that I would be interested in performing in front of an audience, nearly every piece needs to come at the beginning of the set. Because a lot of what I do is based around the fact that people don't really know what's happening at the beginning. I'm either facing away or I seem to be falling apart in front of people.

You can't do one of those poems and then do a second one straight afterwards because it just seems a bit ridiculous. Because once you take away that element of surprise or confusion, it sort of loses its meaning anyway. Yes, so I struggle personally with... One thing I will say is that I do admire people when they put a set together properly because it makes... You can really tell they've put a lot of thought into it. But at the same time, I find it very odd when people have gotten sets so worked out they've even got the links in between. You know, it's all scripted, I find that very very odd.

**PM:** They've got a sort of pattern.

**DT:** Yeah. Yeah, it's a strange thing to watch. I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing but it is odd, I think because it's just so... It's just opposite of how I work it just seems...

**TB:** For me it takes it too much into theatre.

**DT:** Yes, I think that's a problem, isn't it?

**JP:** I don't really see a problem if you are going too far into theatre, personally. But in terms of putting a set together... I think there are different ways to approach that, one is just to think of the audience. You know, there are places where certain poems you just know aren't going to be appreciated and some where there's a certain mood that you want to establish. Or you can go the other way, one thing I like to do is just write down all of the names of my poems on bits of cardboard or paper and just put them in a hat and, OK my next poem is going to be, oh this one. And just completely randomise the set.

**DT:** But then it isn't random is it? Like, I know it's chance, which one comes out, but the set isn't random. The set's a conceived idea, isn't it? Like, that you're going to pull things out of a... Like you've designed the set, you don't know what's happening in the set but that you have designed what's going to happen.

**JP:** Well, I mean, if you've got 2 hours of poems but you've only got a 10-minute set then it's completely...

**DT:** No, no, no, no. I don't mean it's not random which poems come out. But you have planned what's going to happen for the whole time you're onstage. You've planned that whole set out, haven't you?

**JP:** I don't think so because there are many more poems that you could be doing that you won't be doing and therefore it's... I don't think it's planned. There's... You're not making it up as you go along, there's some sort of plan in there but it's... The order of the specific poems, that's completely open.

**DT:** But I think this idea is quite interesting, this idea of improvisation and different levels of improvisation, and how you can have a certain amount of planning but improvise within a framework. And that's what I mean, you're improvising requires a strict framework in which... And that framework may only be that you're on stage for 10 minutes, right? And that you say, hello, I've got bag full of poems. But it is a framework and you have to enter and say goodbye, even if goodbye is just stopping and just walking off.

**TB:** Isn't that true for all improvisation though? That actually what is done in improvisation is that you develop a structure so the structure of what you're saying is that you have the bag with the poems in. But you don't know what poems are going to come out when which kind of surprises you as much as it surprises the audience, which create a kind of general response between the two of you. And I think that's really kind of interesting. And I can't do the same set twice. I can't, like I'll arrange a series of poems and maybe I've got two gigs, one night and then the day after, if I do the same sat twice, it's kind of like I'm

trying to relive the one that happened earlier. And I that for me never ever works, that I have to have... There has to be a certain element of spontaneity in it.

And I think it's less so than you Jason, but in the order of the poems... In changing the orders around and in introducing a different poem and taking one out, then the way I structure the set, gives voice to new ideas that I hadn't previously thought of or hadn't previously developed. And that's kind of what I'm aiming for. And I think the more I do it the less kind of obviously spontaneous it is. That now I don't really think about, oh, you know, I need to say something funny here or I need to be, you know, do something a little spontaneous here.

I don't kind of have those thoughts anymore because they're kind of distracting me from actually reading the poems and then kind of just working out what's the next bit. So, then a thought will pop into my head and I think, oh, yeah, that's what I should say here. And I think that is what makes a poetry reading interesting both for the poet and for the audience, is when those flashes come out of seemingly nowhere but is somehow embodied in the material you were working with.

**TB:**            Our Death

Night rain taps harshly against the house. Windows stream.  
You smile with white teeth. Mine golden.

You're like an angel. Green eyes. Pale cheeks. Ginger curls.  
I paint your picture with a glance.

Your fingers pull away  
each layer of my skin to know the ether of the bone. My hands  
claw into your body to see bitter bright galaxies.

It's still raining. Our death. Teeth glitter in the empty space.

©Tom Bland

**JP:**     Did you say you improvise within your poems, you've got a basic poem worked out and you improvise within that? Like you do David.

**DT:**     Yeah, I was just about to say that actually, because I agree I don't like doing the same thing twice. I mean, I would like to have enough time to write enough new poetry to just do a poem and then never read it again. But what I've started to do is a [INAUDIBLE]. That now I've started to not write things down so that I either a) forget parts of it when I'm onstage or b) don't worry too much if I want to add something into it. And should something happen on the night you can emphasise it...

Like I've got a couple of... The piece I did a few... A couple of months ago at Spoken Word London, and it was... I thought was quite sad, quite emotional and then I did a couple of bits, a couple lines and then people started to laugh. And I was like if that had been a

written down fixed poem, I probably would have thrown the poem away I wouldn't have rewritten it. But I was then able to just leave those lines out the next time I did it and I could improvise something else within it. But, yeah, I mean, I'm much less concerned now with having a fixed set of lines of writing.

**TB:** I mean, I stick to what I've written when I'm reading the poem. [**DT:** Yes, yeah] And I never learn poems anymore just because I don't have the memory for it. You know, I just can't physically do it anymore. And I think that's a good thing actually because... I'm probably going to disagree with you 2 on this, but for me poetry is a kind of art form. And actually holding a piece of paper kind've of is telling is the audience that I actually have spent time on this, I've worked on this, I've edited...

**JP:** I think that's crazy if you have memorised something then that's basically exactly the same information. [INAUDIBLE].

**DT:** I think I'd hover somewhere in between those two opinions because I really love this whole... You could I suppose, what we're talking about now say there's poetry and there's spoken word, of which, that's bollocks, but I mean you could say that. But that sort of seems where the division is between those two opinions. But I have things that exist that I will do on stage, and I have some of them written down, but I also have poems which I won't read out because I don't want to read from paper. And I don't think I could... I don't want to be worried about saying them word for word.

There are certain things that I write that I believe have to be perfect word for word. And I don't think I want to try and remember them because I'll mess things up too much. When I'm on stage I give up caring about that sort of thing. But afterwards I think, oh shit, I've messed that up. I think I have written poetry, that side of things, but also you can have both.

**TB:** There are kind of poets who do memorise things such as Jason and [Mark Waldron](#) always remembers this poetry when he performs it. Though it's interesting that you wouldn't class himself as a performance poet. And I said to him, well, isn't the definition of performance poet someone who remembers their poetry. Isn't that... That's the only kind of real difference that I've ever actually seen.

**DT:** How old is he?

**TB:** I don't know, He's in his...

**DT:** He's in his 40s?

**TB:** Something like that.

**DT:** That's why he hates the term.

**TB:** Yeah.

**DT:** No, because we've spoken about this, Paul and I, about the idea of the phrase 'performance poet'. So those that were involved with poetry in the 90s it became like... there a lot people who believed the performance poetry thing nearly destroyed what was happening in the open mike because it became a load of actors coming down and not really caring about the writing. And I think there are certain people who believe that if you claim your performance poet it means you don't really care about the writing. Which is I think for us... I don't think any of us believe that.

**TB:** I don't think that's true anymore. I think...

**DT:** Apparently, the appropriate term is 'spoken word artist' which just sounds awful.

**TB:** The problem with spoken word is it doesn't really say anything and I mean who are you classifying as a spoken word artist? That's why, does it... I don't think actually... I would actually differentiate spoken word from poetry. I think they are kind of 2 separate things. Which is... And both of them have their own rules and their own way of crafting their own way of working. I think though there are few poets who are kind of blurring that, [Kate Tempest](#) being the obvious example. I... [Dean Atta](#) as well would be in the other example. Actually, I'm just contradicting myself. Actually, no they are actually exactly the same thing.

**DT:** Finally. Shall we move on?

**PM:** Well, I mean, you're saying that the definition of a performance poet would be someone who memorises but I mean, surely anyone who gets up on stage and reads is performing. Do you consider yourself to be performing. Do you?

**TB:** I think less and less so. I think I'm more interested in just standing up and reading the poems now. I think a part of that is that my influences have changed recently as well. And I'm doing different kinds of gigs where they actually want to hear the poetry rather than me mumbling on about something. I think the whole problem with performance in poetry is that I think the generally conceived view is, you either emphasise the performance or you emphasise the poetry and if you're a poet reading the poetry is the important bit. That's what's been crafted and the performance is the kind of thing you're just having to do to sell books or something. Where the reverse is true with a performance poet where the performance is what is important and the poetry is just kind of what you have to do to get the gig.

And I don't think that's true and I think that's... I think if you just kind of ignore both of those things, if you just take both of them away and just say actually it's a guy standing there speaking. Now is what he's is doing by doing that interesting. I think David that's kind of weird thing you play with as well. You know, I'm just some guy standing up there speaking to us.

**DT:** Yeah, I mean, I really...

**TB:** Sometimes, you know, it seems like you're speaking more to yourself than it does to us. Which actually I love. And I think that's a really interesting thing to do as well.

**DT:** I think that's probably something going to come on to later, but I think it's... That came out of like a sort of defensive thing as well, I thought, well, if I just tell this story to myself then it doesn't... You know, there not really there. And of course, they are. And then you come back to that, then it can sound quite pretentious because you know they're there and pretending they're not is a bit ridiculous.

Quick point about saying about what you were saying earlier or just now, I think people should be allowed to get up and recite their poetry and not be... Not have people claiming they're performing because some people don't want to perform. Some people do just want to get up and recite poetry and there is a difference between... Even though you might be doing the same thing by standing at a microphone and reading a poem, I think there's a vital difference in letting people just go up. Because I think some people...

The danger is, I mean, most of us here are big fans of like the more interesting the performance the better. But I don't think it's fair that certain people feel judged by audiences in their lack of performance ability. Which is the danger of this kind of discussion because you're making the performance side of it seem more important than it really is.

**PM:** Well, the counterpoint to that is that you are in front of an audience and the audience is there for a reason.

**DT:** Yeah, to wait for their five minutes of open mike.

**PM:** At some nights, yeah, but not in all cases.

**TB:** Sometimes they are reviewing it for [Lunar Poetry](#).

**PM:** The audiences then presume... The audience is there and presumably you do want them to have a good time.

**TB:** Is that my responsibility though? I'm not so sure it is... I'm not... I think this is where the whole phrase, 'the audience is irrelevant' kind of came out of. And it's not that they aren't relevant but it was more of a kind of response to certain poets who want to stand up and please the audience for their applause. And I don't think that makes interesting poetry nor does it make an interesting performance. What if Shakespeare had done that, Hamlet would have been, you know, no one would have died everyone would have gone home happy and....

**DT:** You wouldn't have The Lion King.

**TB:** Yeah, and we wouldn't have The Lion King which is much better than Hamlet.

**PM:** On the other hand, Shakespeare did do plenty of plays where that basically is what happens, you know the comedies are... Comedies.

**TB:** Yeah, but are they ever performed? What's performed? Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, the ones with the death at the end are the ones that are performed. But I don't... I think the kind of issue that... If you're doing that what makes it different from just watching a soap opera or, you know, a comedy on TV? I mean, I think poetry needs to be a bit more challenging, and I...

**DT:** Sorry, that was sort of the point I was trying to make about people feeling like they have to perform. If you say to people you can just recite. Because, I mean, this is a firm opinion of mine which a lot of people might disagree with but as soon as you tell people that they're expected to perform, most people will try and please the audience.

And then I think when people feel they have to perform then they get into this habit of trying to choose, their writing style changes, their performance style changes, and then you end up with this really dull succession of crap. And it is not because they have a lack of writing ability or lack of performance ability as such. It's just most people will feel, oh, if I have to perform people should be smiling, they should be laughing should be clapping. Which is what I think us 3 feel strongly. Why? Why should they be smiling and clapping because...

**JP:** Is there that conception though? I think most of the open mike nights seem to be you've got your 3 minutes, you've got your five minutes, there's a microphone. If you want to stand there with a piece of paper do that, if you want to prance about do that? Is there any pressure to perform? I haven't really... I mean there might be...

**DT:** I think so, because it's perhaps not in the poetry it's the jokes in between. You know, you can see how people feel... You can see people trying to ingratiate themselves with audiences and it's the asides it's not always the poetry. The poetry is as depressing as everyone else's poetry but there were a lot of jokes, you know. One thing that we certainly don't do is... Tom makes some jokes but they're clearly unfunny so... But you must have seen it yourself, there are a lot people who stand up and they're... I mean, it's not just because they're involved in poetry, most people that stand up in front of groups of people will make jokes because they don't want to be mortified.

**TB:** I used to do a thing where I would tell a joke that was deliberately unfunny and say, well, I'm not a comedian I'm not here to make you laugh. So, the fact that joke didn't make you laugh is the only response I wanted from you.

**DT:** Actually, one of my earliest memories from starting [INAUDIBLE], I think when it came to... When you were still doing Unmade Bed, and I think that was the first time I saw you host. And you used to say that line all the time, if any one tried to join in with your asides... Because you used to do asides towards the audience but if anyone dared answer, you were like, this is not for you. This is not for you because it's not for you, and I quite like, you know, it's... You may as well... It's nice to give the impression that everyone could leave and it would still carry on. Of course, it wouldn't but it's nice to give that impression.

**TB:** Well, that's my dream really, is just to perform to an empty room. Actually, what I want but only because I know I would perform better then because I wouldn't have the

anxiety of the audience. And I think actually that's what makes standing up in front of people interesting is that it kind of induces a kind of mini trance in my being and then other stuff will start to happen. So, someone might shout something out from the audience or I might be reading a poem and a thought suddenly flashes into my mind. Or, you know, I start to realise a link between a poem which then I can start to play with, with the audience. That the audience are there as a kind of, you know, they're the people I'm playing with, they're kind of like the other children in the playground. And for that five minutes, or whatever it is, the attention is focused on me but my attention is focused on them. And it's that dynamic that makes it interesting.

**PM:** So, you are to some extent still looking for a reaction from the audience. I mean, one thing I was thinking when you were talking about using humour is... One thing that's often difficult with poetry's gauging the reaction of the audience. If they're laughing then you know that they're responding to what you're saying. If you're doing a serious poem you've not really got any idea whether it's gone across well or not because obviously people clap politely at the end whatever. But yeah, talking about audience participation, I mean, is this something to be encouraged?

**TB:** No.

**PM:** I was thinking because in a lot of your readings you do seem to invite it. Apparently, the way you present your work in the sort of pauses and the kind of preamble to the, you know... Whether you consciously invite it or not it often seems to happen.

**TB:** I think I actually like reactions from the audience and I... I do deliberately provoke the audience in certain moments. And I think one of the influences that's already been mentioned is Stewart Lee and kind of in his book, which name I have forgotten now, he talks about dividing the audience up into different sections. Those who get what's happening, those who are unsure, and those who couldn't care less and thinking about sheep or whatever.

And I think that is kind of true at a poetry reading as well. And I think he does that to kind of actually bring the audience together for the punchline. You know, he's kind of... He's stirring you up to actually kind of hate him or to like him or not to know whether you like him or hate him. Which then makes him vulnerable and that he can give you that unexpected line. And I think that's an interesting thing to do in poetry. But I don't think I think about things like that anymore. I wouldn't like deliberately try to provoke the audience in the way I would have done a year ago. I think I much prefer the poem to do the work and whether the audience gets it or not....

Well, I wouldn't know how to judge that. I mean, if they laugh or clap or whatever there's an interesting response but it doesn't kind of actually uncover anything that's going on beneath the surface. And I find that more interesting and that'll play out in different ways. You know, usually more after the reading than during it. And I think that's... And the job of the performer is just to hope that even if they don't know what's really there to hold.

**JP:** Right this is called Words for Catherine by Jason Pilley.

An actual love-riot breaks out, charity gangs throw hard cash up and down the mobbed streets, cackling balaclava'd grannies push each other in shopping-trolleys past the flames; London burns with mad passions, new angel terrorists attack the florists with flowers, attack the banks and coffeebuzz shops with flowers, attack! and the police bring tea and lovely biscuits. It's all getting too wildly nice for me: you tug us from the throbbing crowd, in the skate-park you borrow my bike and get a puncture but it's one of those punctures that fixes itself, down by the canal every subculture wants to claim *you*, we all end up back at some stranger-stranger's room, Rachel's room in her squat, I've never been in a squat before.

*All the places that you've played!  
& all the plays that pleased the place!  
All the saves that saved the grace  
To grace the grey days you have saved!  
& all the teachers you have taught!  
All your thoughts that wrought the right!  
All your night to light the light  
On all the fun wars you have fought!*

Queen of anywhere she wants to be queen! – she arrives to the party late and leaves early to arrive late somewhere else. This party is anti-everything: there's a guest-list but you're only allowed in if your name's not on it, and the freebase Alpha MethylTryptamine is metallic down our throat, a metal slipperyslide throat stuck nice down our throat quickslither-silver throat becoming colours up our throat and out of our eyes, the colours are like in the earliest computer-games and... *ahhhh-hhhh...* and even on your knees puking into the toilet you're beautiful and the colours are still cumming.

*All the tests you've put things to!  
& all your news that knows no less!  
All the face all saints love best  
To bless the doors that you got through!  
& all the birds of prey you've been!  
All the scenes that you have sound!  
All the sounds that upped the down  
To sing the sounds that you have seen!*

She makes movies and doesn't bother to film them. We're all in her movie and this could turn out to be one of those nights where everyone goes home with fifty grand in their pockets. Queen Pirate: Our Lady of the BANG the drum, bang the drum bang the fucking drum for *us*, make us real, midwife my imaginary friends and silly stories into Being; just by their names she always knows which horse is gonna win its race. She lives in a



**PM:** Sorry, yeah, because I was going to ask you about... Since we're talking about this then, you had a thing a few weeks where...

**DT:** Yeah, I was going to say... Because I used to be categorised as someone that interacted with the audience a lot, purely because I used to walk through the audience. When I first started...

**JP:** You had people drawing on you as well.

**DT:** Writing on me as well. And...

**PM:** It's a whole interactive experience.

**DT:** But I didn't view that as them interacting with me. I viewed it as me using them as props, which is a slight mental shift. I mean, they are interactive because they are touching you but when you're sort of walking through the audience the only interaction you've got is they're going out of your way and it's not quite the same thing. I mean, there is a division, isn't there, between people actually getting up and saying something, heckling or joining in, or touching you. I mean, people can put... Can interact with you purely by looking at you. I mean, you can have that moment where you've just looked at someone and you can tell they got what you said and that's a pretty strong interaction.

And I think you'd have to be a bit of a liar, I think, if you said that that kind of moment meant nothing to you. I think it's pretty much what everyone is searching for, is to have that moment when you've really connected with someone. But then I started toying with the idea that it might be nice because I speak Norwegian, I lived in Norway for five years. Actually, the idea was to do a poem quite a funny poem hopefully in Norwegian and have one Norwegian speaker in the audience and have them laughing at the poem and no one else understanding what was going on. And I never got around to writing it plus getting the Norwegian in the audience. And then I thought actually it would be funny to have two people but have them separate, in separate places, so these two people are laughing randomly.

And I was at a night called [Paper Tiger](#) in Kennington a couple of weeks ago, and I did an improvised piece which just started to come... Within 30 seconds just unravelled completely but I quite enjoyed that because I just... There were certain people in the audience that I know quite well and they know it's unravelling. And then you can see them sort of laughing and it becomes a challenge to finish the set without falling apart in front of people you know. And I thought that this is the time going to go into Norwegian, so just I start talking Norwegian and just this guy who was sitting at the back answered but I wasn't asking any questions and really weirdly he just kept saying to me over and over, are you Norwegian, are you Norwegian? So, this whole interaction between he and I happened in...

Actually, mine was broken Norwegian and his was broken Danish but I was trying to explain to him that, no I'm English but I speak Norwegian, could we please chat after. I'm sort of doing something... And he just didn't... Why he thought I was just standing on the stage

hoping that someone could speak Norwegian to me. But it really... But actually it made the whole thing better because prior to that people just assumed I was talking gibberish. But once there was a conversation going on then there's something happening which is what I wanted to do with the laughing thing, where there's a dialogue going on between two people and the rest of the audience are missing out. Which actually comes back to another piece I do which is based on one side of a telephone call.

**TB:** Well, my question is about that would be would you classify that as poetry?

**DT:** No, I don't really classify anything I do as poetry to be honest with you. But I would go... I understand what people mean about spoken word being too open a term. But it's easier for me... I mean, I write poetry. But when I'm on stage it's usually looser than that.

**JP:** For me personally the word poetry, I can just have a wide enough conception of poetry that, yeah, what you do is poetry. If someone gets up there and just blows bubbles for 3 minutes...

**DT:** That's the thing, if I was to go up and do a five-minute piece and Tom thought it wasn't poetry and Jason thought it was poetry. That's fine. I don't really care what people think about it as long as I get to do what I do.

**TB:** Because the focus was still on language and it was about how people were responding to that language then it still has the dynamics of a poem.

**DT:** I mean I hope that what I say even though I... Even when it appears that I'm completely rambling, I hope there are elements that are poetry within what I say. Because a lot of what I improvise references stuff that I've written before, you know, things come up from short stories or from poems. And I think... I hope that I write enough so that when I'm actually improvising that's what's coming out.

**JP:** For me writing prose and poetry, the difference is there's a voice. So, it's like I said before that with prose, with stories, or essays, whatever, you write it down and it's ink on paper. Whereas you know something's a poem because it starts when it's a sound so it needs to be spoken. So, for me, yeah, poetry and spoken word, I don't have any... There the same thing to me.

**DT:** I mean, and the difference is, I think what I'm improvising onstage, if you wrote that down and tried to give it to someone as prose it would be nonsensical. It wouldn't make any... There's no coherence to it but you could say well that's maybe a slightly strange poem and people will go, I don't like it.

**PM:** Okay, so one less thing before we get onto the final question. We were talking the other night, Jason you were saying and I'm saying that I thought there were certain similarities between the three of you and you couldn't really see it. I think one of the things is that all of your performances have the potential to make the audience uncomfortable. How do you feel about that?

**JP:** [INAUDIBLE] David you can make them uncomfortable.

**DT:** Yeah, I'm really good at it. I really like the idea of making people feel uncomfortable in that, it sets... It gives you much more leeway to go in different directions afterwards. And then you have that element... And it does sort of like... I mean, I don't want to keep referring to the same man, we keep saying his name, but the comedian. Not just him but I think the reason people refer to him so much because he writes about the theory behind what he does. And I think what he writes about applies to a lot of stand-up comedians. But this idea of a... Most of what I do is a terrible joke. It's the same setup. But the punch line is awful, you know, but it still works, it's got the same arc. But if you start with the audience being uncomfortable I think it gives you more space to take them on a different sort of [INAUDIBLE] take them on a journey. Come with me. I'm going to be horrible to you. Come with me it's going to be awful.

**JP:** Do I make people uncomfortable in my performance?

**PM:** You are quite loud.

**JP:** Yeah, but they can handle it, can't they? Yeah, I mean, there are specific poems I do that, yes, certainly there's some that very much getting in people's faces and some hysterical shrieks of... I wouldn't say I'm looking to make people feel uncomfortable. I think that has actually thrown me. I don't really... What do you mean by that? Apart from being a bit loud at times.

**PM:** Yeah, I mean, your style is, as you were saying earlier, is very energetic, it's very kind of physical and it's not the norm for most poetry nights. And so, I would say that the reactions that people have to you are possibly not the same as... Well, I don't know, you'd be [Inaudible] by that kind of thing.

**DT:** I think maybe what makes people uncomfortable is they don't know what's coming. You know like people seeing you for the first time may think, shit, who let him in. Which is a great thing I think, you know, I think that's why... The people certainly sitting around this table admire what you do. But I think people don't, you know, if they come to a poetry night and then you're flailing around and screaming into a microphone... Or but it's the same thing like we're... Paul and I have talked about this whole idea of being intense performers, and I think it's a really lazy phrase because 1) it doesn't mean anything because it allows people to say that I'm intense and you're intense and somehow that makes us the same. Of course, it doesn't because we don't do the same thing.

**JP:** No, but intensity doesn't necessarily imply similarity. Yeah, we both have energy that is quite a... But I don't...

**DT:** But you do the same thing as me. You cross that boundary you walk past the microphone and if you walk past the microphone people shit themselves. If they're not used to watching you, if you... People are fine because they know that microphone is a barrier between you and them. And as soon as you walk around it people don't know what's going on.

**JP:** I haven't felt that, I've felt more curiosity than uncomfot, more kind of... I should've just left that sentence where it was. More curiosity than discomfort, yeah.

**PM:** I was also thinking about... I think the first time I saw you was when you did the piece with Sean Wai Keung where you basically end up wrestling each other. And, you know, that... You're both doing poems simultaneously.

**JP:** Yeah, I challenged him to a poetry duel.

**PM:** And your sort of fighting for the mike and... It's a very physical piece.

**JP:** Can I jump in as well because for another collaboration me and Stephanie did. We got a member of the audience, we did ask them, we thought about not asking them and just grabbing someone. And yeah, we got them onstage, gagged them, put a gag around their mouth, and just spent four minutes pointing water pistols at them, and they were empty water pistols. Yeah and just screaming our poetic manifesto at them. So, I suppose that could quite uncomfortable but there's more of a kind of WTF kind of feel, what the fuck, rather than an actual... I don't think anyone really...

**DT:** I think if you... Because I was at the 2<sup>nd</sup> night of [Jawdance](#), and I think what I did maybe put people on the back foot little bit there as well because I was down in the audience. But I think if you'd have done that, what you did with Sean, if you'd have been on a smaller stage it would have been much more intimidating. I think people were able to enjoy what you did because you [INAUDIBLE]. You were on a proper stage, which you don't often get with open mike.

**JP:** No, [Richmix](#) is amazing. Oh, I'll try that with someone else then. I challenge you to poetry duel.

**DT:** Fair enough. It might clear the place.

**DT:** [Untitled]

I dreamt years ago that enough of me would drain that I would shrink down small enough to fit into your breast pocket only you weren't you then and that wasn't your pocket you said that your only regret was you'd never told me how you really felt you weren't the only one there I could never find the words to tell you that it was your pocket it always was my goal my destination to be cradled up in your permanently cold fingers deposited against the warmth of your chest. home.

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**TB:** I think I'm a lot more... I think for... I got very much into the French kind of theatre theorist Artaud and his theatre of cruelty. And I did try to kind of implement some of his kind of thinking into poetry, you know, how intense could I make my poetry? And the experience I'm listening to it. How much could I kind of draw out of the audience that would

make them feel uncomfortable about being in that room with me? I don't think I'm that interested in it anymore actually. I mean, I'm very interested in performers who kind of make that happen such as yourself David. But I'm no longer kind of interested in trying to provoke a specific reaction, I'm much more... I think I'm interested in generating a certain intensity in my performance for myself. And then how that relates to the audience I'm not concerned with.

The one thing I would say though is that Artaud always emphasised humour, he said humour was the kind of key to the theatre of cruelty. And I think that's a really kind of interesting idea. And what does humour and intensity bring out apart from vulnerability? And I think for a performer that is the kind of key for me is when I'm writing my poem... when I'm performing my poetry, and when I'm writing it, I have to be somewhat vulnerable for something to work...

**DT:** I completely agree with you because I've been striving for some level of intensity and some provocation of the audience since I started writing and performing but I've since discovered that the performances go down... There is a much better reaction in terms of having a connection with the audience if I'm vulnerable in the piece as well.

**JP:** You just said something about being not concerned with the audience so much but what primarily do you want from the audience. Or do you really just not care?

**TB:** I'm not looking for a specific thing from the audience. I don't think, I'm not looking for their love or their hate or anything like that. I do like it when they listen. Apart from that that's the only kind of real criteria and then... And I want the audience to make up their own minds about what's going on. And that's one problem I have with some poets is that they want to show themselves through the poem to be a good person or to be a charitable person or a very kind of neo-liberal kind of almost hipsterish kind of personas.

And I think actually that is putting on a kind of mask in front of the audience. And that's the problem I would have. Or even like there's quite a well-known poet who's been kicked out of the poetry cafe now. He used to really want to make the audience hate him. And that too is a kind of mask, you know, you're trying to provoke a specific thing to confirm, you know, what you want to believe about yourself.

**DT:** You become a caricature, don't you? That's the problem.

**PM:** Sorry, I was just going to say, well, yes, but you can say that but vulnerability as well. Earlier on we were talking about humour you said that's a way of ingratiating yourself with the audience but so is coming across as vulnerable. Please love me I'm a shy delicate flower, yeah.

**TB:** But then isn't...

**DT:** I would liken it more to saying I've done this, this is awful, I thought these things but I'm just the same as you. I think really, it's not... It's vulnerability, it's not a façade, is it?

That's the difference. It shouldn't be, it can be of course but I don't think it is as much. I think with Tom's it's not.

**TB:** It's not like a switch on, click on, now I'm going to be vulnerable.

**DT:** No exactly, that's what I...

**TB:** I think what is that.

**DT:** What would you say is more honesty than vulnerability, is that what we're trying to.... You're trying to be a bit more honest about your character rather than...

**TB:** What it is is about being a bit more honest about myself and even, you know, my poetry isn't autobiographical but it's about those images somehow relating to me and that connection isn't always that clear to me either. So, when I get on the stage and I perform those poems those little connections start to make more sense to me. And the next time I'll do it those connections make sense in a slightly different way. So, it's like looking at a part of yourself in so many different ways that I somehow either recognise myself more or less and that is that kind of tension that then opens me up to some kind of vulnerability. My grammar was awful in that sentence.

**JP:** My poems, I think... I hope don't say anything about me as a person. I don't want people to know anything on a factual level about me in my poetry. But I suppose I would like my audiences to be curious about me afterwards and to... I think I am very aware that I think in the last four years every single kind of social thing that's happened to me ever has been for the poetry scene, because that is my entire... Poetry is my social life. So, I'm very aware of an audience in that sense, that yeah there are potential friends, potential allies. I want everyone to feel madly in love with me and join my gang, join my cult.

**DT:** Well, I think that's something we can all agree on, the best kind of audiences are the ones that shut the fuck up when your reading and then come and tell you how brilliant you are afterwards.

**JP:** It's not enough for them to just tell you how brilliant you are, show don't tell.

**PM:** All right, so, I think we have to wrap up now. So, two quick questions. What would you say your primary influences are and do you have any recommendations, not necessarily poetry but any recommendations, for our listeners?

**JP:** I think influences... It's hard because every poem obviously is coming from a different place, especially for the writing. I've got some... I noticed that a lot of my poems, the way I sometimes approach an idea is that I'll engage with another poet. Like when I was reading a lot of Rumi, I was amazed by it. I thought I was going to write a poem about the experience of reading Rumi, and just this kind of real delirious twirl of imagery and this kind of simultaneously very religious but also very kind of knowingly humorously blasphemous and very playful. And another time I just thought the idea of a poem called David Bowie would just be great. So, I just listened to every single David Bowie album and just sort of let

them just take one journey and wrote down words. So, yeah, I've done that a lot, I've got a poem about Taliesin and... Who else? The one I did this year, the opera poem, was just about immersing myself in opera and just trying to... Again, filter that through my own sensibilities and just make something from that, so yeah... It's hard to talk about influences overall.

Do any of you know Alan Moore? He's an amazing [INAUDIBLE] throughout my life. He's not primarily a poet, he's done some poetry, he's done some performance pieces. I saw one in the Old Vic tunnels under Waterloo Station. It's this very magical process, very kind of... He does invocations of gods and spirits and stuff and yeah, he is a very sort of sometimes very serious, very playful, very magical but very mundane. And very committed, but yeah, he's an amazing person and I think he's a very strong influence in trying to... Again, if you listen to his magic performance pieces, they're all about taking maybe an idea or a place, you've got... What's it called? Psycho-geography. And, yeah, and the amount you can do just by taking a few streets and just alluding to the history of them, the people there, which isn't actually what any of my poems...

I've got one, one of my poems is about there's like a ruined castle in Southend. I just went there and I heard... Someone told me it'd been haunted, no one ever told me that when I was a kid. But just apparently like 50 years ago when people said it was haunted. So, I went there once, took a load of a drug called AMT and just puked a lot and wrote a ghost about this ghost... Wrote a poem about the ghost rather. Which, yeah, I think, engage with your environment. There's poetry everywhere. Every book you read you can get a poem from it, everything you see, everyone you meet, there's poetry everywhere.

**DT:** I think.... So, one of the sort of poetry influence is a poem I read at secondary school. I had a really fantastic English teacher, Mr Partridge. And he was amazing and I can remember reading him a poem called Outside the Gates of Eden by John Cotton. And then in my early 20s I managed to find it because he's really... It's not a well-known poem and I don't think John Cotton's that well-known. But it's a fantastic poem and I actually rip it off a lot, without really even thinking about it but it's just the language in it... Descriptive language is really cool.

But performance style I've always been really influenced by market traders and the way they... I think it's a very masculine... I think it's a working class masculine thing. I obviously spent a lot of my childhood was in South London and stuff and growing up and watching... There's this way that men talk to women when they're trying to buy from their stalls which is really overly... They project more than they need to, they talk all over the customers because they want... It's the whole... it's the showmanship of the thing. And that I was always fascinated by and I didn't really understand it until I became older. And then you sort of realise why people do it.

And more recently a guy called [Spalding Gray](#) who is just absolutely insanely fucking brilliant. Just how someone can be so engaging by just normally sitting at a desk and reading from papers. It's just fantastic, I can't recommend highly enough for people to check him out on YouTube. But I find, yeah, he's a big influence. And I'm really influenced by art a lot, mainly painters. It's strange, I don't really like poetry and I'm heavily involved with poetry. I

don't like painting but my favourite artists are all painters, three in particular Leon Kossoff, Francis Bacon and the Frank Auerbach. To go on to the recommendations, Frank Auerbach currently has a small collection of paintings shown in the Tate Britain and next... In summer 2015, there'll be a retrospective, major retrospective, of his work and also...

Yeah, as recommendations I would say people should get along to small theatres, like I go a lot to the Oval Playhouse in Kennington and just see... I find it really really inspiring to watch solo performances whether it's theatre or dance, it's just the way that people interact with their audiences and to see new ways of, I quite... I don't know there's this mix of, you quite clearly performing for an audience. But there's a barrier there between, you know, because the audience aren't involved with the story. And that I find interesting as well you know that idea that you are performing yet there's this invisible area. And a book that I've been reading recently it's a collection of short stories by [B. J. Novak](#) and it's called One More Thing. And They're absolutely hilarious, they're really good, and very... It's really dark, just about all of them could be done as spoken word performance pieces, they're just hilarious. That's it.

**TB:** Influences. Well Spalding Gray was... I saw him when I was very very young and I had no idea who he was. My father took me along to see him and he was incredible. I don't think I've ever been so enraptured. Like you said, listening to a man sitting behind a desk and I still kind of remember the actual experience of being there. Other influences, Niall O'Sullivan I would rate it as a very high influence on me. Sylvia Plath and a lot of the confessional poets. Although, there kind of it's more the imagery rather than the confessional aspect that kind of influences me.

There's some performance artist [Franko B](#), his last show was absolutely amazing. A lot of it was just him standing there staring at the audience and you talk about making people uncomfortable. Literally, just standing there facing the audience for 10 minutes. And the nervousness in the room. Though it's never a kind of performance I would do, but when he did the blood performance at the Tate, which was his kind of big kind of... The one that got his name in all the newspapers, I mean it's online you can watch it. I mean, just the intensity of seeing a man walking up and down all painted white with blood coming from his body is a kind of mesmerising experience.

A lot of contemporary poetry are influencing me at the moment, Mark Waldron, [Bobby Parker](#). A lot of American poets like Matthea Harvey and Ariana Reines. Recommendations. Read everything if you've got enough time or read Lunar Poetry.

**PM:** Cheers. Alright, this has been the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Thanks very much to David, Jason and Tom. See you next month, cheers.

**End of transcript.**