

## EDITORIAL

Over the past year or so I have had the privilege of performing with Carol Ann Duffy and Mark Pajak at venues which would not otherwise have been available to me, and may never be again. To travel and read with the Poet Laureate has been a great experience, and I'd like to share some highlights and thoughts with you.

In February last year, we performed at the Royal Society of Literature (RSL) T. S. Eliot Memorial Reading in the British Library. I remember getting off the train at St. Pancras, very nervous, and quietly asking John Betjeman's statue to wish me luck. I put this down to too much coffee during the journey from Halifax.

As many of you will know, when reading at a big event, you get put up at posh hotels with bathrooms big enough to hold a dance in. The problem is, often there is only a chance for a power nap and a quick shower before the sound check, so not much time to luxuriate. Maybe if I win the lottery I'll book myself in again and use all the facilities!

The RSL event was the first of our mini-tour, and therefore perhaps the most nerve-wracking. The RSL hospitality was, however, wonderful, and the organizers did their best to make Mark and me feel at ease. Carol Ann has, at every reading, been lovely with us, chatting lightly, showing us the ropes, and ensuring we have had a quiet time to mentally prepare.

Prior to this event, the largest audience I had performed for was perhaps thirty people, so to view an auditorium that would soon be full with upwards of three hundred was, for me, exciting and daunting in equal measure. I know some people, even experienced actors, suffer great anxiety before they perform. I once saw the brilliant comedian Frankie Howerd in the wings, due to go on, physically shaking. But once he began his routine, he appeared relaxed and completely in control. They say some nerves before a performance are a good thing, but it certainly does not feel like that at the time!

The format for the RSL show was one we have stuck to throughout the tour: first Carol Ann read some poems, then twenty minutes from Mark reading from his Laureate's Choice pamphlet *Spitting Distance* and poems earmarked from his forthcoming Cape collection, then twenty minutes from me, after which Carol Ann took the stage again.

I found it difficult to concentrate on the readings before my own – nerves again – and my own performance seemed a little like an out-of-

body experience. I felt, somehow, not present, and immediately afterwards I was unable to remember a thing about it. At the end of the event, we were ushered into the foyer, where a long queue had formed to have Carol Ann sign books, and a smaller queue for Mark and me. Then the organizers treated us to dinner. Arriving back at the hotel, I was unable to sleep.

But, paradoxically, the whole evening was intensely enjoyable and, since the RSL event, we have performed together in Manchester, Hebden Bridge, Edinburgh, Durham, and the South Bank to audiences of five hundred to nine hundred people, with book signings and food to follow.

The Gala Theatre in Durham was a delight – to perform in a proper theatre with tiered seating, excellent sightlines, and great acoustics is such a pleasure. And in Edinburgh I have to admit to being starstruck when introduced to Queen guitarist Brian May who was appearing on the same day – I babbled at him like an idiot. He nodded and smiled. The Queen Elizabeth Hall at the South Bank was our largest venue, where we were joined by the poet Imtiaz Dharker who read from her most recent collection *Love Is the Hook*. Carol Ann performed work from her new Picador collection, *Sincerity*.

You might have noticed I use the word *perform* a lot. This is not because I consider myself to be a *performance poet* but because I do believe in the necessity of bringing an element of performance into a reading. Carol Ann and Mark prepare assiduously for every reading, and I do too. I read my work from a folder, but my poems are memorized, and I also learn a ‘script’ linking each poem. Eye contact with the audience (even if a spotlight blinds me!) is, for this poet, essential.

For me, a total familiarity with what I’m going to say not only helps to counter-balance the out-of-body sensation I experience when performing to these large and august audiences, but I also feel it allows me to at least *appear* in control. More importantly, thorough preparation respects the audience, and helps them to feel they are in safe hands. I have attended many poetry events where the poet does not seem sure of what poems to read, or their order – there is a constant shuffling of bits of paper, hesitation, overlong explanations, and the audience (albeit always polite) becomes restless and bored.

Having written for, and watched, many accomplished comedians, I don’t see why some poets feel it is beneath them to simply give of their best. I know the word *entertainment* is seen by some poets as inappropriate

for our art but this, to me, is wrong. The very best plays entertain, or perhaps I should say, engage, an audience. There is nothing cheap in this – the audience deserves it. To prepare, rehearse, deliver to the best of one’s ability does not buy into the ethos of performance poetry, but simply allows the poet to communicate effectively. Carol Ann Duffy and Mark Pajak, in their own styles, do this supremely well, and I follow their lead.

I once heard a performer say to Les Dawson, “I need a couple of minutes out there to establish myself”, and Les replied, “You establish yourself before the curtain opens”. Les was a poet by any other name – his lyrical flights of fancy, him standing beside a grand piano, were rigorously rehearsed: every aside and *ad-lib* scripted, and the effect was a seamless comic recitation that appeared spontaneous.

My own work might best be described as tragicomic, so perhaps a script, with the odd joke or anecdote between poems, suits the delivery, but I do believe all poets who feel they need to communicate their work live can benefit from a belief that they *are* performers, and that the audience do appreciate some gentle stagecraft which adds to the power of the poem.

These are, of course, purely my own opinions, but standing up in front of larger than usual poetry audiences can be doubly intimidating if one’s preparation is not thorough. And we owe it to the people who left their homes on a wet night to support us.

I look back on my tour with Carol Ann and Mark with fond memories. I have learned a lot and consider myself very lucky to have been given these opportunities. I am now back at my kitchen table, in the solitude we all need, to read, ponder, contemplate and, most importantly, write and rewrite.

Keith Hutson

**This issue is dedicated to the memory of  
Professor Dr. James Hogg (1931-2018)**