

Journal

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News of The Cultural
Council Foundation
CETA Artists Project

"Words To Go" Poetry Truck Riding High

By DALE WORSLEY

Roland Legiardi-Laura is the CETA writer-leader of the poetry truck, known as Words-To-Go. I went to his house one Sunday afternoon to interview him about this project. His loft is still being renovated, so I sat in his bathtub while he put up metal studs, and we began this interview.

What is the poetry truck?

The poetry truck is a group of about a dozen poets who travel around the city in teams, giving free readings to people who normally don't have any interest in, access to, or desire to hear poetry. The literary arts are seen as a private club where a few friends get together and talk their own language to each other. I see art and politics as completely indistinguishable. Artistic creations, for me, always have four elements in them: the aesthetic, the psychological, the spiritual and the political. What's been traditionally deemphasized in American culture and literature, as far as I can see, is the

political aspect. You write a poem, it has an ideological stance, no matter how you look at it. I feel very strongly about the political situation in the country, and I want to use my art and my skill to influence this.

Is the Poetry Truck an instrument of politics for you?

First, let me qualify what I just said. When any of the elements takes command over any of the others in a work of art, it loses its artistic quality and becomes propaganda or a psychological profile, for instance. It has to have a balance. No. The truck is not a propaganda organ, using propaganda in the negative sense of the word. I don't see it in that way at all. And certainly the people who are on the truck represent many different political viewpoints. I see the function of the truck and, in fact, the function of the whole CETA program as based on a political concept of community art. Most artists are forced to either compete with each other for the few dollars that are available, and a few of them make it big, and the

continued page 2

Breaking Through Old Taboos With the Elderly

By BARBARA BARACKS

Here's Death twitching my ear. "Live," says He, "for I'm coming."

Mors aurem vellens, "vivite," ait, "venio."

From "Dancing-Girl of Syria" ("Copa Surisca")

Tradition attributes this poem to Virgil.

We are sitting in a circle in a carpeted room. To one side is a coffee urn and what's left of the cake. In the middle of the floor is a tape recorder. Sonya, who recently emigrated here from the Soviet Union, occasionally jokes about my selling the tapes to the KGB. But, for the most part, after meeting weekly for two months, everyone's become pretty good at ignoring the machine.

Aiesha, eighty-two years old, is describing becoming old:

This state of mind comes gradually. And because this comes gradually, you're accustomed to it.

continued page 2



Bargemusic, Ltd., was the site of the week-long celebration *Salute Brooklyn at Fulton Ferry Landing* June 15 through June 22. Attending the event are (l to r) actress and director Geraldine Fitzgerald, Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden, Olga Bloom, Bargemusic founder and director, and Pearl Primus, distinguished dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist. In background is painter Alan Samalin's and ceramicist Joe Stallone's mural for the Clark St. subway station.

Richard Velez

Poetry Truck...

cont. from page 1

audience, (the viewers, the consumers, the readers, whatever they are,) are put in a passive stance. They can either take it or leave it.

Does the way the poetry truck functions fit into that scheme?

For me, if the truck worked in an ideal way (I've had to compromise, because, for one, CETA has limited funds and personnel, and it's been very hard to combat that), it would be outfitted completely with a copying facility, a tape library, a film library of the writers, its own book library and a really fine sound system. It would be in a neighborhood for a time, and we could teach workshops from the truck and work with people there and also give readings around the neighborhood. It would be a total project. Because we have to be a visible advertisement for the CETA project (and I agree with this,) we can't really do that. We've had a lot of failures, and we've also had a lot of little victories.

Can you give an example of a little victory?

Well, Chris Kraus just got a letter from her reading last week in Tompkins Square Park, saying it was really wonderful, and most poets are really kind of reclusive. This respondent felt that the poets on the truck were really generous. That was nice. Someone came up to Neil Hackman at a reading in Battery Park and asked him to send her some of his poems. There were lots of little stories like that all last year. The public can come up and read their own stuff, and I want to make that as much a component of the truck as anything else. You're going to people, rather than asking them to come sit around a darkened cafe.

Have you ever had any tomatoes thrown at you?

Never had any tomatoes thrown at us. To get back to the truck. For me it's valid in the sense that it allows people to come and experience poetry. O.K.? And they don't have to feel that it's something that's beyond them or is stupid. Secondly, it's important for what it does to poets. It throws poets together in a little hot box and makes them cook. They get angry at each other or they don't get angry at each other. But what they're forced to confront, which they normally don't have to confront, is audiences that are not favorably inclined to them. People that are out to read a newspaper are confronted with these guys mumbling verses.

Let me play the devil's advocate and ask if it isn't a violation of the privacy of the people in the park to bring this poetry to them when they haven't asked for it?

We've had a couple of things. One thing happened last year. We picked a site which happened to be right in the middle of a soccer game. The soccer players were very amused by us, but they continued their game, and it did more damage to our ability to read. On the other hand, last year someone left a note on the truck saying the sound system was much too loud and it disturbed the peace of their Saturday afternoon. And I think that's a valid criticism. That's what we have to contend with. But so far most people see the truck as positive and pleasant to them, rather than as an intrusion.

Poets have always been soothsayers and seers in society. Homer, if he had a truck, or a motorcycle, would have traveled around Turkey and Greece. He basically brought the news of the Trojan War to his home. That was his function. I see him sort of as the great-great-grandfather of the poetry truck. Poetry then was the most respected means of carrying news and editorial comment. Now it's been reduced because it's competing with heavy media.



Poet Roland Legiardi-Laura (front) with poet Nathan Whiting.
Shirley Stein

It tends to become more esoteric because it's beaten out of the gate by the media?

I think so. So this is our way to sort of beat the media back, to make poetry much more alive, to bring it back off the page, and develop our skills as readers and as performers. Not turn ourselves into actors, but develop a truly poetic delivery.

Do you have to select your poems according to your audience?

The more conscious you are of the audience, the better your reading is going to be. I think you have that obligation. But if you don't have anything that's really for them, then you just read what you have. The audience also has to give a little. They are the ultimate and most correct judges.

(Words To Go recently received a \$5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.)



AHA dancer Ana Ortiz performing at Bargemusic, Ltd.

Richard Velez

Taboos...

cont. from page 1

Last year I was in Freeport, I was helping a friend of mine. And every morning there is a point where the boats come in. Every morning to this point and back, I can make it, four miles a day. I was very satisfied. I believe this is a normal thing. But I will go to Freeport next week, and I will try to make the same thing, to make four miles. I am not sure of that. If I make the half of that I will be satisfied. I will tell you: "Is not bad." I cannot explain this medically or scientifically. But there is a state of our brain which tells you: Be satisfied.... Physical suffering is a terrible life, especially when you are alone and you know that there is no health. I believe there is more courage to suffer. To throw yourself out of the window, it's hard to do — but this is five seconds.

Soon after Aiesha spoke, Lisette, who also is 82, began weeping, because, she said, she was not kind to her sister, who died twelve years ago. She has told this to the group many times. "I didn't talk to her for a long time before she died, and I heard when she was dying she cried for me —"

Sonya, in her seventies, gently interrupted Lisette here: "I want to tell you a story, a funny story."

We are practicing the art of oral history, or living history, as some prefer to call it. We are newcomers to what we're doing. Because this group consists of particularly old people, there is difficulty, and tenderness, and illumination in the ways people in the group reach out not just to their individual pasts, but to each other sitting in the room together.

Kitty Urquhart, a social worker, is co-leading this group with me. Her extraordinary ability to sense and draw out feelings in the group has been a rare lesson to me with all my impatience. A lot has happened in a short period of time. After eight meetings — midpoint in the group's fifteen-week lifespan — I can offer documentation and some insights along the way on what the group and I are beginning to discover.

The group is not a large one. Some people drop in and out, but three women are regulars every week. Sonya, in love with America, fiercely independent, optimistic, sympathetic; Lisette, whose reading of pop psychology, preens the plumage of her neuroses, lately beginning to trust her own

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perception of things; and Aiesha, frail, passionate, intelligent, coy — a morbid, thoughtful philosopher. Some people don't come every time because their physical disabilities are a great obstacle to travel, even with the assistance I'm willing to provide with a taxi ride. Others don't come at all because they see what we're doing as strange, frightening, confusing. Or boring. There is no easy label to put on the kind of talking the group does. It isn't strictly a social group, like the "Friday group" which meets at SPOP. Nor is it oral history in the more directly documentary tradition of Studs Terkel.

I didn't know that when the group first met. I was eager for results and came armed with a selection of ready-made topics for recollection. I thought we would concentrate on specific themes, work, love relationships, childhood, etc. — with the narrow purpose of so many bees swarming out for pollen. We couldn't just sit around and talk, this was supposed to be *work* — right? My anxiety was quickly communicated, and the results were brittle like sitting down and trying to write without giving your mind a little breathing space to ramble along and talk to itself, warm up.

It was as if we were locked up in separate boxes lying side by side. We remained painfully isolated people rehearsing pain, both past and present, aware that no one really was listening to anyone else. "The immobility of the things that surround us," Proust called it. "Things" are what we still were to each other.

It was then, supersaturated with formulae, that we — or, rather, Aiesha — broke through. She began to talk about what was really on her mind, something that had happened just the other day. From my notes:

Aiesha was translating for a man with an old Russian mother. (It seems that, though the mother speaks Russian, the son does not, and they can't communicate with each other without a translator.) He had put his mother in a home, a "good" one — since he had money — in the Bronx. The son had called Aiesha because he'd written to the home three times without an answer. Aiesha went up to the home with a letter for the mother from her son. "This is Mother's Day," he wrote. "Tell my mother my best regards. We put her photo on the table on Mother's Day and eat around the photo." The mother, Aiesha found, was totally senile. "She didn't remember that she had a son," Aiesha said. "She asked, 'Who is Yanid?' and then she started to cry, to take her to the children, she wanted to be out of this house. It was pathetic. The problem is that she is in good health except her head." And now Aiesha came to her point. "I think" Aiesha continued, "there must be a law. When you come to a certain age, when you have this kind of case, make an injection and finish this kind of thing.... I certainly, after a year or two, when I am not able, I will make an injection and I will be finished, certain."

Thanks to Aiesha's introduction of death and dying to the conversation, everyone became alive again. Lisette in particular was furious at the idea of euthanasia, especially when Aiesha went on and said that, if old people weren't willing to kill themselves, then a commission of doctors should decide for them. The great taboo about death had been violated, and the great thaw had begun.

The subject of death and dying came up, after that, again and again, in the shape of losses of friends, family, powers of mind and body. It was invigorating. People began speaking with detailed commitment about the past and present. We began to like each other. Memories became resonant, and the grappling hook of everyday experience began stirring up all kinds of strange material from the past: mud and debris, odd fishes, jokes, governesses, terrible corpses, childhood sweet-hearts.



Painter Robert Smith's mural "Different Walks of Life" for Human Resources Administration at Dyckman Center, 4660 Broadway. Robert Smith

We began to talk about relative degrees of loneliness. Sonya on her husband's cancer:

He couldn't work and he was in the bed four months. He suffered so. He told me, "If there wouldn't be gossip about you I would make suicide. I would throw myself from the fifth floor." He loved me very much and he was a very good man. So when he died I didn't cry. He suffered. In three days when I went back to work. [Kitty remarked that Sonya had said her husband was devoted to her. "How," Kitty asked, "did you feel about him?"] "He loved me," Sonya said, "more than I loved him."

Sonya described her job helping people in a nursing home:

You know, I became a philosopher in this nursing home. Because so many people, they were long ago. One was a famous architect, his pic-

tures are in the room, and now he is nothing. We have one Hungarian diplomat here — and now he's nothing. He doesn't understand anything. So you have to be a philosopher, because —

Aiesha interrupted here: "So you have to make an injection and make it go away."

Sonya: "Not so easy. He wanted it, the former architect, he wanted to make suicide. But unfortunately they saved him."

Aiesha: "And I don't understand why they saved him."

Sonya: "I thought much time about that, even when I was young. Such people have not to live, but if they say it be a rule, they will begin to kill healthy people."

Aiesha: "We have a limit of time. We have a vegetable, a senile vegetable for two years. It's

No April Fool

A mixing of hydrogen & oxygen
we all sat listening to WBAI
waiting for the primary enclosure to
explode,

they all sat brainstorming on methods to
cool a bubble;
da... tons of ice-cubes, how 'bout alka
seltzer or
tons of anti-acid tabs...

I read that Oslý's out of jail & making
hits of acid
to fit in all our mouths,
will we taste it?
should I send proposals out there?
should I gather cat & poems & food...

to EVACUATE?

why yes...no...I mean you should...that is
would...if you
could...yes...children & pregnant
mothers...yes...no...well
so far everything's under...I mean...
I think so...yes...of
course...but NO...IT ISN'T SO,

& the scientists of the world call for an
immediate evacuation
of Harrisburg & surrounding the
governor puffs on one of the many
pipes he owns & says, "Look at me with
my protective boots,
I'm alive!"

Leading a life of subtle Hiroshima
breath of radiation death — I remember
the first thought
I digested in ecology class — everything
connects to everything

& rarely disappears beyond
our fathers, did it all along, we
consented too,
it's our bodies & it's dismemberment.

I wanna live but I'm ready to see it all
blurt a last...

Well, o.k. I'll go...I mean I'm ready...if
I can have colored lights
& muzac & cognac...I want a REAL
SPECTACLE!... & my friends
too...o.k.?

And we all get high awaiting our turn
to die.

Joining their dreams they harnessed the
energy of the atom,
the memory of making mud & straw
sculptures in Joyce's back yard,
age 6 comes to mind & trails out to
HYSTERIA...

NO WHERE TO GO
NOTHING TO EAT

And if I die I want all those who
decided I should die to die
with me, & if I live
I still want them dead.

— Rose Lesniak



Painter Johan Sellenraad and Project Director Rochelle Slovin at opening of Sellenraad's watercolor series at Brooklyn Union Gas Co. Called "Industrial Buildings in Brooklyn", the series was executed for the Long Island Historical Society where they will soon be exhibited.

Taboos...

cont. from page 3

finished!"

Aiesha later continued:

Most people — how sick you are you never believe. I tell you, I remember this boy, it was in the Russian Revolution. He was only twenty years old. And I took him from the battlefield, he had his belly open. He was a critical case, there was nothing to do. And we put him in the train. When we took him on the train, his bed was near the passage where I was coming and going, making injections, giving some drinks or some pills. Every time where I pass he was grabbing my — where he could reach, he couldn't talk properly. He was speaking to me, saying, "Nurse, I will not die, I will not die." He was a beautiful boy, maybe twenty-one, I was twenty-one too. He was always grabbing me, by my shirt, "Hold me. I will not die — ." I was always saying, "Misha, no. Never, never." When I brought him, he was dead. I knew he would

not come to the hospital, I was sure of that. I didn't want to tell him. He had plenty of life, plenty willing to live, to enjoy.... He was grabbing me: "Nurse, nurse."

And so, back to the present. Sonya said: "I have an ulcer, but we live together in peace."

Aiesha: "When you're alone, how can you be optimistic. How normal are you, if you stay alone. There is a certain decline in your mind —"

Sonya: "Loneliness is a very good thing if you have a friend to tell about your loneliness."

CCF Poet Barely Survives Epic Struggle

CCF poet Grove's epic, *The Giantess of Diamond Match*, will be published by Red Dust Press. This is an interview with the author.

Q: I understand you're about to publish an epic poem. How does that feel?

A: Well, it doesn't feel too good. I had a couple of accidents along the way.

Q: How long did it take you to compose your epic?

A: Let me check that out here in my notebook. Let's see. 1961. 1960. Sure, here it is. Thursday night, bad. Friday night, terrible. Saturday night, can't make that out. Well, let's be conservative and say three bad nights.

Q: You wrote an epic poem in three nights?

A: No. In three *bad* nights. That part was easy. Trouble was it took me 20 years to unwrite it.

Q: It took you 20 years to unwrite three nights' writing?

A: Yeah. That's the way it goes sometimes. It was quite a tangle. But it's all over now. I can just sit back and wait for the royalties to start rolling in. And what with unemployment insurance and all, I'll be able to knock off a couple more epics by 1981.

Q: Do you think it'll take you 20 years to unwrite them?

A: Golly, I hope not.

Q: O.K. Let's get down to the nitty-gritty. Is this so-called epic of yours really any good?

A: Speaking for myself, I'm not sure. But I have a message here from Bob Holman, delivered the morning before the night he read it. It says, "You have just produced the most important poem in the American language since Rabelais."

Q: Gosh. That sure is impressive.

A: Yeah. But let's face it. It came out of a Chinese fortune cookie. And it wasn't even his. It was his girl friend's, or something like that.

Q: How can you be so vague about it? You mean he didn't really say it?

A: Let's not split hairs. That kind of stuff is unimportant.

Q: What *is* important?

A: What's important is that it's true.

Q: O.K. Have you got any advice for other epic poets?

A: Yeah. Don't look back.

Q: Why is that? Something may be gaining on you?

A: No. I'd never say that. Somebody else said that.

Q: Thank you.

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