

the King of Friday Nights

keith roach, little intimacies and art
at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe



Jason, a young filmmaker, studies his every move, calculating in turn how to show on camera the magic that is Keith at the Nuyorican. Keith is oblivious.

Especially for a Friday Slam Night at the Nuyorican, this graduate of DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, with a voice like Gil Scott Heron and the chops to match, must straddle the gamut of the arts: entertain, teach, and referee, but,

always, as he reminds the audience, "It's about The Word, it's about poetry. In the end, that's got to be what's happening at The Nuyorican."

Keith's prowling focuses. Tonight, poet, writer Steve Cannon (The Gathering of the Tribes) is holding forth at the bar; a pair of Cambodian poets and their translators, in from the Midwest, are on stage. Dicey bit of business and classic Keith: The Cambodians are accustomed to all-night poetry fests; their time's been up for half an hour. The audience is respectful, but clearly getting itchy for the Slam to begin. The man at the door, a drinker at the bar, and the barkeep give Keith notes, make the cut-off "T." He's got the drift, but the Cambodian's poem is about the slaughter of his twin daughters by Pol Pot. The poet wails, sings, his voice rises and his arms pound the air; without pause, he segues into the tale of a bloody killing tree he had known when it merely provided shade. No one wants to interrupt, but what about the Slam? The story poem rules in this most democratic of culture outposts, but the audience is wavering. Will it be Dialectic or Lee, the guy from Albuquerque or Mr. Uptown? Who's going to win the \$10 prize? Keith has disappeared.

Suddenly, it's a wrap: the poets are happily picking their way off the dais; the translators are beaming. Smooth, elegant, simple, a script written in the air. Keith's at the mike, and the audience is grinning, as

It's bitter. Winter just won't give up. On this blustery Friday night, minutes before Spring gets official, kids are playing in the street—It's 10:30! Do you know where your child is?—and, as the odd Loisadan ducks into the incandescence of a bodega doorway, the young and hip, in pairs and packs, scuttle toward cafes and clubs, eerie blue in neon and smoke, hesitate, and are swallowed by the dark. Payday's here and The Weekend is on! Uptown and west, reasonable souls have tucked into warm movie theaters, a night of love, or a meal at one of those Ruth Reichl-vetted restaurants where an entree costs the price of a month's rent. But the point is poetry and show and words, words, words, not money, inside these doors tonight.

Keith Roach, impresario extraordinaire at The Nuyorican Poets Cafe, is ready. He's prowling the audience. Tall, slender, handsome beneath a baseball cap and glasses, he has a shy, slow smile and an unexpected laugh that explodes with delight at human foibles. Gliding effortlessly through the crush at the bar, he's Michael Jordan, rising here, feinting there. Bam! He connects. Moves on, smelling the air, giving the high sign to one, a nod to another. Mostly, he gauges the crowd: What do they want? Who's from where? What's going to make this audience cook tonight? How do I move 'em? Meanwhile,

that low, raspy, infinitely seductive voice revs ‘em up. This revolution need not be televised. Is he Superman in disguise?

For the rest of the night, arms entwined or drinks to lips, the audience, almost as one, never takes its eyes off Keith. And he never lets them down. Pacing, growling, searching for an ashtray, calling out the votes, he’s always in motion, but never obtrusive. And whether, like tonight, the audience is a mix of uptown preppies, NYU, homeboys, and middle-aged poets, or something more homogenized, the show which follows is guaranteed to leave the audience believing they have attended the truest human communion in town. Keith Roach sees slam as praxis, a means to rethink and improve your poetry while also bringing the pleasures of the Word to others. It’s his brand of community organizing.

“I first got into the poetry scene

because I was writing by myself, just writing for fun. People seemed to know of places where others read poetry – something I felt I had lost touch with – and I wanted to see it. I remembered a poetry scene from when I was very young, in New York, in the very late ‘Sixties and early ‘Seventies. You could hear poetry all over then. I never forgot it.

But, it was an altogether different dynamic then from now: Those readings took place in small venues that often didn’t have microphones. The poet had to be loud. It was necessary. The audience had to be different, too, in order to hear. Usually, there was a podium and a relatively primitive sound system. The voice might be distorted, but you accepted that. That was the state of things at the time.

I’m just beginning to realize now how many poets have been broken in, in their reading careers, with the spotlight and the microphone. Think of the advances in electronics and sound! Poetry has taken a different form because you didn’t have access then to the equipment that people take for granted now. It was expensive, or else it was chintzy, hardly worked. By the time the hip hop generation became aware of itself, they had access to audio equipment – systems that allowed them to produce quality demo tapes for \$1,500! – that even ten years before was at the high end of the price range. They could get their work out and around because the overhead had dropped precipitously. So, which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

the nuyorican poets cafe

“I originally went to the Nuyorican to see what it

would be like to read poetry aloud and if what I was writing was any good. When I first walked in, for an instant, it was a flashback. I was a kid at The East, Claver Place, in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, U.S.A., listening to poetry between sets of jazz on Saturday nights, maybe Spring, 1970. It was the same kind of small, gutted-out building; same atmosphere.

I said, ‘Yes! This is the place I had been thinking about.’ I didn’t know until that moment that I was even looking, but instantly, I knew this would be a cool place to work. That’s the major issue. It all boils down to Where can I do my best work? Where can I grow, get better, perfect my craft?

There are so many bizarre ideas people have about slam – that it is too competitive, that it is not poetry – but there is something happening here. Hip hop and slam are like what be-bop was for the Beats: they both brought poetry, a certain kind of communion, to the people and an opportunity to make a connection, publicly.

And, yes, slam has changed my own poetry. The guy who hosts the Slam and the guy who reads his poetry are different. I am still terrified of reading, but, because I have spent time in a community of poets – we did workshops with Steve Cannon for a couple of years – talking issues of craft, of what is a poem, I have had to think about my own approach to poetry, become more concentrated, and work to be sure that the words that I’ve chosen are true.

slam and the poet exposed

“I like to make things happen, and slam has become the poet’s avenue for expression. I don’t think I’m as great a poet as some of the poets I have come in contact with, but I am a good organizer. I’ve been into sports and active in my community all my life. The Nuyorican is one more place where I am doing it. But, if I were not doing it here, I’d be doing it elsewhere in some other form.

Slam struck me, when I first got into it, as an interesting spectacle: I am a competitive person; I like physical, contact sport. And the more you see, the more you begin to realize that some principles remain constant in both endeavors: First, there is the element of practice. Practice for slam is different than the practice you do for the other, more casual kinds of readings. It’s performance.

And second, slam gives you a different perspective on how to approach poetry: It’s a different focus, a different dynamic. And there is always drama! To some extent that’s because you’re fixed upon scores, what kind of numbers you will get, how the audience will respond. But also because this is your

poem. You can get out there and try to fashion it into a performance or a reading that is about to transcend anything you've ever done before, but you've got to make the shot, go the whole nine yards, all those sports metaphors.

And, third, at the end of the night, despite the fact that we say that this is a gimmick, somebody actually wins the gimmick. It's a poetry reading! I insist that it's a poetry reading, with a few embellishments to accommodate what people naturally do. But, there are poets in the audience who are secretly thinking, 'I can do better than that.'

So, something else does go on; otherwise, audiences wouldn't show up every Friday.

To pretend that we're not competitive is silly. You may say, 'I don't like competition. I battle for excellence within myself.' Which means to me that even yourself is something that you want to do better than!

Still, if you are not driven to do better all the time, if you are not driven by the poets you listen to and inspired to find your own way to say something, then just write poetry. But you'll still want to compete with yourself.

After a slam, I don't advise poets on 'what they did wrong.' I send them back to themselves. I ask them: Did you make a connection? If not, why not? Was it the voice, the material, or the attitude? Did the words bring real clarity to your expression? Slam is not for everyone. But, at the end of the night, something has to have been achieved, even if it is only to learn why you did not connect with the audience. You have to remember: The Poet Exposed, that's what the audience wants.

the dramatic lure of small intimacies

"I am having a great time when I host the Friday Night Slam. It is human drama in a hundred ways and so many actions indicative of human spirit. We get the sense of having small, shared intimacies. People will read poetry that is so very personal, I often say, at the end of the night, 'If the poet touched your heart in some way, let him know.'

I also ask, 'How many people are in love here tonight?' No one ever answers. So, I know they're a bunch of liars because there are some gorgeous people out there most nights. I try to make it a little easier, so they can act on it, if they're so inclined. That's part of my job, too.



Keith during the Friday night slam at the Nuyorican.

being there

I like the edge. Part of the process in slam – or for me as the announcer – is that confrontation between the artist and the audience. In the past, that was a one-way process: the mainstream would dictate what we should think of as good and how to react to it. With slam, that changed.

I would like to say I am prepared for anything, but in fact, I like the thrill of making it up as I go along, and the audience responds to that excitement. I don't know what the poets are going to read, so I am fresh to the material. The audience doesn't know either what I will do or the poets will read. That keeps the show always fresh. Sometimes we're short a reader and a poet volunteers. He's not prepared, but he gives it everything he's got. He'll often win, and there's the great lesson: Read the poetry that turns you out the most, that rocks your world."

*to court death without avowal
to slash faith with genius
i gather round my heart
serpents of arcana
codes for new vanities
codes for new assassins
here on the eve of a resurrection
payment for undone affairs*

from *Wait* by Keith Roach.