

AWP panel Poets Theater

Bios:

Founder and editor of Action Books and author of nine hybrid books, Joyelle McSweeney is fiercely interested in what happens when art presses across national, linguistic, generic and bodily boundaries. She teaches at the University of Notre Dame.

Neil de la Flor is a writer, educator, and Executive Director of Reading Queer, a Knight-funded organization dedicated to promoting queer literary culture in South Florida. He is the author of three solo collections of poetry, including the hybrid published last year, *The Ars Magna for the Manifold Dimensions of z*, *An Elephant's Memory of Blizzards*, and the award-winning *Almost Dorothy*.

Douglas Kearney is a Foundation for Contemporary Arts Cy Twombly awardee and Cave Canem fellow. He's published six books and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. He identifies as a poet, performer and librettist on his website.

Rodrigo Toscano's website says he's a poet and rhetor. He's the author of ten books of poetry, his most recent this year's *The Charm & The Dread*. His previous books include *In Range*, *Explosion Rocks Springfield*, *Deck of Deeds*, *Collapsible Poetics Theater* (a National Poetry Series selection), *To Leveling Swerve*, *Platform*, *Partisans*, and *The Disparities*. He works for the Labor Institute for environmental and labor justice and health & safety culture.

Terese Svoboda's first book was *Cleaned The Crocodile's Teeth*, translations from the oral poetry of the Nuer in Sudan. *Theatrix: Poetry Plays* is her eighth book of poetry. She has published six books of fiction, two forthcoming, a biography of the radical poet Lola Ridge, and a memoir that won the Greywolf Nonfiction Prize. She's also taught at Williams, William and Mary, the Universities of Miami, Hawai'i and Tampa, Davidson, Sarah Lawrence, Columbia, Bennington, Fordham, San Francisco State, and Fairleigh Dickinson.

Opening remarks by Terese Svoboda

Good afternoon, and welcome to Poets Theater.

Neil de la Flor is not able to join us because he is meeting his long lost grandmother today, but as for the rest of you: welcome, and thank you for coming.

The art of poetry started as a spoken recital that had to be inherently dramatic or the audience interrupted or turned away. Then there's the Greeks, Shakespeare, Bunraku and the pan-African Badilisha Poetry Radio. In my own practice, I have been enamored of the playwright and poet Mac Wellman's work. Inspired by Gertrude Stein's landscape plays, Wellman is a master of dramatic disorientation with his experiments with bad writing and pseudosolid voices, and under his sway, that is to say, his way with plays, I spent a lot of time thinking about how poetry could do more than perform words with heartfelt presentation or line up in pretty stanzas. In my latest book, *Theatrix: Poetry Plays*, a hybrid of poetry and drama published by Anhinga Press, I try to push beyond the overwhelming prevalence of psychological and moralistic poetry with variations on what theater on the page might be, wanting express multiple registers of thinking and speaking that are mostly stifled under the one-voice model from the 1970s. I also found *Facial Geometry*, Maureen Seaton's collaboration with Neil de la Flor and Kristine Snodgrass, particularly disruptive. Today, to get us started, my dramatis personae

have 8 minutes each to read/performance/play their take on Poets Theater. Then we'll have ten minutes to ponder our questions, quarrel about what theatrifies, and ask how did you do that? followed by Q and A.

Moderator Questions:

1. A play is all about pretend, shrugging off the everyday persona for a transformative experience. How do you teach play?
2. How does your own bodily subjectivity (re)inflect your performance strategies?
3. Are individual poets already an ensemble, and don't know it?
4. What are our thoughts about temporality and event? What about the 'event' of sound in performance? What about the Sublime and subaudible scales and thresholds?
5. How do you regain control of the narrative that you've given away to a character or an idea?

Joyelle McSweeney

My primary interest in poet's theater is not in performance (per se) but in event, and in the way in which, in the event of performance, the brevity and intensity of the lyric as a textual form supersaturates with sound, gesture, costume, etc, and becomes an uncanny material that stretches, distends, and forms a sticky, spectacular assemblage in which the performing body, the audience, the performance space, the city, the planet, and the cosmos adhere. As a hearing-impaired poet, I am also interested in the subaudible and the Sublime.

Rodrigo Toscano

My poetics has always been interested in what I call, The Contact Zone, that uncanny, unstable, and unpredictable space between the speaker and spectator/listener. Becoming aware of that space is where/how the potential for meaning-making happens. Most poets would probably sign off on such a conception, and yet, when you hear their work, it often employs a theater based on the proscenium (a line of theatrical demarcation) where "the audience" is set up to voyeuristically sit back and take "it" all in, at whatever proportions the "performer" is dealing out zingers. These zingers often rely on prefabricated discursive deliverables that the "writer" has hashed out for maximum Aristotelean catharsis. This configuration pacifies all involved. I oppose such catharsis because it emboldens consumer habits. My poetics' aim (every book is a new investigation and run at it), is to get the spectators to weigh each sign that comes into the Contact Zone. This also involves thinking of "the author" as nothing more than a probabilistic pastiche of social attitudes. "What's the attitude of the language here?" is something to be wrestled with (right now) in the reading-performance. What gives, what doesn't.

Douglas Kearney:

I'm interested in the blurry line between banter and the poem itself, which for me manifests in an idea that the poem begins the moment I'm introduced and doesn't end until my time is up. I want the banter to come from the same place as the poems, which is a combination of past experiences, responses to my immediate surroundings, and speculations about a future. When I work this way,

performing poetry incorporates the audience as both collaborators and material. I will present a "paper" describing past instances of banter as poem; this may include running into a cement wall in Arizona, wrestling a water bottle in Alabama, and arguing with a book in Los Angeles.

Neil de la Flor

I'm interested in accessing all of the voices in my head and those voices that I can't access. I'm also interested in "hearing" from the audience. That imagined reader who may be questioning the point of all this nonsense. I want them to shout back at me and keep me on my toes. I plant boobytraps and other oddities in the text to befuddle myself because...why not? Trickery, absurd dialogues, misreadings of scientific and mathematical equations: all of these mind games force a kind of voice out of the chaos that wouldn't exist otherwise. That's where I want to live.