



Poetry as entertainment

What's On
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Carol Burnes performs poetry the way that Madonna would perform Mass. In fact, there is something distinctly unorthodox about her readings, and it is not difficult to see why some more traditional types disapprove. She describes her writing as a navigation between the poles of the quotidian – jobs, kids, cats – and the outrageous, but it is her readings that really merit this description.

The outrage is to sidestep literary venues. It is to read poetry on television, and to praise the medium as a wonderful way of reaching people. It is to perform at such places as the King's Head, Riverside Studios, Pentameters Theatre, and The Gate to mixed crowds of theatregoers,

sports fans, head bangers, and ladies and gentlemen who look as if their principal form of entertainment is watching the stock market. There might even be a lawyer or two in the audience.

Who are these people? What are they doing there?

Where are the literati, the manifesto makers, the students of Pound and Plath and Ashbery and Hughes?

"Oh, there are always a few of those too," says Burnes. But are there others who might be a tiny bit peeved about this woman who draws such eclectic crowds to her unpretentious entertainments?

The secret to Burnes's success seems to be a kind of literary populism. Burnes cares about reaching her audiences, and she has developed a performance formula which bridges the gap between her rather serious poetry and people who ordinarily might not give a damn about first person lyrics until they are set to rock music – or possibly the *Young Doctors* soundtrack.

Her readings mix elements of drama, stand-up comedy, traditional storytelling and even dance. Though she does occasionally stand on a stage, she likes to keep it simple. Too much elaborate lighting makes it difficult to see the people to whom she is communicating; a very formal atmosphere inhibits the spontaneity which is intrinsic to her kind of communication.

Even though she is reading poetry, her readings have a narrative flavour: stories are told in them. And where poetry readings are in general matters of artistic self expression, Burnes's performances accomplish something closer to dialogue with an audience.

She likes to make them laugh, and she aims to hold their attention.

It is not enough simply to read aloud. Working with professional dramatic storytellers – narrative hypnotists who put spells on audiences to turn them into rapt children – she has developed a fine repertory of gestures to accompany her well-modulated voice.

But what are the poems themselves like? If she is not baring her breasts at these readings, then surely the material itself is very dirty, or very patriotic, or hard-left trendy, or crowd pleasingly sentimental *Poetry Lite* mush?

No, these are straightforward, elegant and crafted lyrics about traditional subjects: love, change and loss – always with a twist, to be sure.

The artistic values at work in them – clarity, economy of language, and an earthbound reverence for the palpable object – result in a spare, direct and concrete style which mirrors her thematic concerns and reflects the operative values of her New England upbringing. She has strong words for poets who do not bring their work to the same level of clarity.

"Much modern poetry is very subconscious and personal. It's hard to understand because it seems to be still in process. The process is a very valid one, but if your audience doesn't get it, I don't feel that it's finished art," she says.

Literary populism? Poetry Lite? Probably neither: Burnes is not so strident or so commercial. But having ditched the idea that the appreciation of poetry requires membership in a private club, she offers the rest of us evenings of entrancing entertainment.

Carol Burnes reads at the South Bank Centre's Voice Box on Wednesday, February 27, at 7.30pm. Admission is £2.50 (£1.50 concs).

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