

Living Arts

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A flush of inspiration, a happy ending

The headline on the press release read, "Storyteller Keynote at Premiere Sewage Facility Gala Opening on Deer Island."

Gala openings are often anything but. This one, though, had promise. "Art meets effluent," the release continued, "as internationally known storyteller-poet Carol Burnes performs a commissioned piece to celebrate a cleaner Boston Harbor."

What sort of poem might be appropriate for the gala opening of a sewage treatment plant? I called Burnes at home in Weston and asked. "Something fun, upbeat, and completely different," she said. That was what the officials at the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority had in mind when they commissioned the poem, she said.

Friday morning some 300 invitees were ferried across the harbor to Deer Island. The Metropolitan District Commission's marching band, horns glinting in the sun, met us and played us past a series of imposing structures — in which sludge is sifted, sorted, deodorized, and digested, among other things — to a big yellow-and-white-striped tent thrown up for the occasion on a point overlooking the outer harbor.

There were small tables full of informational literature and tiny sample bags of slow-release fertilizer, a product of the sewage treatment. A larger table displayed glass bottles of effluent in various stages of detoxification, with labels reading, "Primary Sludge," "Secondary Sludge," "Digested Sludge," "Sludge Cake," "Scum." The largest table of all, and the most popular, was laden with mounds of bagels and muffins, fruit, juice, and coffee.

At noon the crowd settled in under the tent. A contingent of dignitaries, including Representative Ed Markey and ex-governors Michael Dukakis and Frank Sargent, were seated. MWRA executive director Douglas MacDonald welcomed everyone and announced that Father Edward Boyle was supposed to deliver the invocation but couldn't because he's the chaplain of the Massachusetts Organization of State Engineers and Scientists, which is in a labor dispute with the MWRA.

Burnes's poem was the centerpiece of the program. "The Big Flush," the poet said, announcing the title of her piece. She then imitated, convincingly, the sound of a toilet flushing before launching into the poem: "Did you ever think about where it goes? / I have a job, a house, a college degree. / I flush all day long / but I never thought about where it goes."

Saxophonist Stan Strickland played interludes to enhance the poem's changing moods. Burnes lifted her arms and swayed as Strickland played an undulating melody: "I am the ocean. / I roll in and out to my own rhythm, / I rock and sway against the shore. / I've been here forever, / they pump and they dump and they pump and they dump, / and no one cares. I am heavy, dark, I am a shadow / All that glimmered in me is gone. / I am rank. I am clogged. I grow scum."

The poem is too long to reproduce here, but it ends happily, of course, when the \$912 million facility it commemorates is up and working, cleaning Boston Harbor.

After her performance, Burnes said that she wanted to illustrate the magnitude of the engineering feat in a way that people could understand. "The fact that there are bluefish in the harbor, smelts, cormorants, eider ducks, it's really amazing," she said. "People complain about the rates, but they flush every day, they use water every day, they have no idea where it goes."

One place ratepayers' money didn't go, she said, was to pay her fee, which she wouldn't disclose, or Strickland's. They were paid by private donors.