

EXTENSION 2 ENGLISH

Reflection Statement

Sponge Cake for Vultures



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Performance Poetry

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‘Sponge Cake for Vultures’ is a Performance Poetry piece that memorialises Australian twentieth century social history and various characters and personalities of that time period. It is ultimately an exploration of the depth of experience of the elderly and the difficulty of navigating the contemporary world, as well as an indignant response to the attitude that they should be institutionalised in nursing homes as a means of making ‘things easier’. Through the use of different voices and perspectives within the one poem, the audience is intimately involved in the life of Nell, the character representative of my own grandmother.

The poem highlights the importance of reverence for the storytelling of those who have come before us, and features my voice as I attempt to unravel or make sense of ‘*borrowed memory*’ and my own place within the narrative of her life. Like Seamus Heaney, ‘*I rhyme to see myself, to set the darkness echoing*’, I attempt to understand the reality of her life by looking at her past as she reaches her mid-nineties and assume her own voice, amongst others, in responding to pressure from within my extended family for her to inhabit a nursing home. In adopting this voice, I am also asking the audience to heed my pleas for them to not dismiss the value of the experiences of our elders.

Initially, I was rather reluctant to create a piece that was at all biographical or overtly personal, believing that my work would be far more interesting if I attempted to write and deliver something that was predominantly objective. My initial drafts, however, were reliant on abstract language and were predicated on the misguided belief that for performance poetry to be effective it had to be layered with obscurity and phrases that were so ambiguous that I would be able to confuse the audience into thinking that what I was saying deeply profound.

This style, however, seemed excessively contrived and detracted from the subject matter that my piece was centred on. The umbrella concept of ‘The Treatment of the Elderly in the Western World’ was therefore dispelled and I became aware, after I visited the Mayflower Aged Care Centre, that my criticism was wrongly directed at a system rather than an attitude.

George Orwell’s ‘*less is more*’ principle thus served as my basis for writing, and abstract terms were replaced, upon the advice of Marc Kelly Smith, with ‘*concrete*’ ones¹. Consciously, I began to write in a less-structured format, using a free-verse style to allow me to focus more on writing the poem for the purpose of performance, which is distinctively different to writing poetry that is exclusively written and read. This was particularly evident after thorough independent investigation into the medium and its form and features, which was a process that began by attending the NSW Poetry Slam in November 2012. Miles Merrill’s mantra, that ‘*rules should be disobeyed when it comes to performance poetry*’, instilled in me the confidence to initially write without inordinate concern for structure².

In order to write convincingly and with flair from a time period and social context which I hadn’t experienced first-hand, I conducted research into Australian social history from the period of 1922 to 1992 using the book ‘Australia Through Time’³. This was invaluable in terms of being able to question my grandmother on specific aspects of her past as I interviewed her, and allowed me to support the integrity of my work through references to Bully Beef, ‘Dad and Dave’, Harold Holt and so on.

The intended audience for my performance poem is predominantly those aged above forty-five years old, and primarily those with parents or grandparents who have grown up in Australia. This target audience is best able to identify with the nostalgic tone throughout

¹ Smith, Marc Kelly. 2009, *Take the Mic – The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam and the Spoken Word*, Sourcebooks Inc., Illinois.

² Peake, Jacqui. 2007, ‘*Poetry According to Miles Merrill*’, ABC News, 2 Aug.

³ Cheers, Gordon (ed.). et al. 1993, *Australia Through Time*, Random House Australia Pty Ltd., Adelaide.

much of the work, which serves to intensify the climactic and concluding moment of criticism – during the repetition of ‘*Let’s Talk*’ – as they are often reminded of personalities from their past through the various voices and perspectives of characters. Whilst the Major Work can still resonate with an audience that is not of this specific demographic, it is the target audience who are more likely to be in a situation in which they have to make a decision in relation to the welfare of their parents, and thus it is this audience who I’d prefer to heed my message of the value of the elderly and their right to self-determination.

Although the dominant tone of ‘Sponge Cake for Vultures’ is nostalgic, it is not exclusively sentimental. For instance, the ‘She’s from a different time’ argument, in relation to racial discrimination, is one that is expected to be controversial among the audience, particularly as the young persona decides to ‘*settle with the guilty defence*’. Furthermore, the notion of nostalgia as often being ‘gilded memory’ is explored through the alcoholism of Nell’s father, reflecting the concept that memory is selective and sometimes omits specific things, as is a key point of understanding in the elective ‘History and Memory’ of Module C in the Advanced English course. These concepts were discovered upon reflecting on a lengthy interview and transcript of my grandmother.

‘Sponge Cake for Vultures’ also explores the duality of the notion of ‘the parent becoming the child and the child becoming the parent.’ Australian Story’s ‘In Her Father’s Eyes’, which was used as a related text for ‘Area of Study: Belonging’, captures the selfless and caring aspect of this relationship⁴. Alistair MacLeod’s short story ‘Clearances’, which can be closely linked to the rubric of ‘Navigating the Global’ of Module B of the Extension 1 English course, however, features the condescending and impatient demeanour of some, particularly in light of the fast-paced technological change that characterises modernity⁵. This research

⁴ Fleming, Deborah. 2007, *In Her Father’s Eyes*, Australian Story.

⁵ MacLeod, Alistair. 2002, *Island*, Vintage, London. (Clearances – 1999).

influenced my decision to navigate this dichotomy through an exploration of the members of my family, and this is most evident in the critical tone directed towards the ‘daughter-in-law’, who tells Nell ‘*You just let me handle it.*’

Written poetry, despite being distinctively separate from Performance Poetry, was an important part of individual investigation as there were a number of resources which contained concepts that enhanced my own. For instance, John Tranter’s anthology, ‘The Best Australian Poems 2012’, featuring Michael Sharkey’s ‘Ancestors in Nineteenth-Century Albums’ and Tiggy Johnson’s ‘Photograph’ particularly impacted upon the reflective manner in which I articulated my thoughts in the section in which “*I finger framed sepia archives of expressionless ancestors*”⁶. This research was then coupled with the relentless and perpetual process of researching performance poets in order to understand how to use performance techniques effectively - HBO’s ‘Def Poetry’ series was particularly useful in providing access to a range of different styles and subject matter⁷. Moreover, Australian Slam Poet, Omar Musa, performed ‘My Generation’ on ABC’s ‘Q&A’ (2011), and his spoken-word style influenced the subtly cynical tone I used to comment on family members – “*I only eat organic foods*” – as did American poet Taylor Mali’s sarcasm in ‘Like, Y’know?’⁸.

The structure of the Major Work is slightly unorthodox in that it is much longer than the typical performance poem, making it difficult to sustain a single voice or tone for the entire duration of the piece. After analysing the Young Writers Showcase works of 2003, 2005 and 2007, I realised that the one that I enjoyed most, ‘Lyrics for Mr Percival and My Old Man’

⁶ Tranter, John (ed.). 2012, The Best Australian Poems, Black Inc, Collingwood.

⁷ Def, Mos. February 3, 2012 [last update]. Def Poetry: Season 2. [Online]. Def Poetry HBO (2003). Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY68jSm0O4I>. Accessed 4th June 2013.

⁸Musa, Omar. 30 August 2011 [last update]. Slam Poet, Omar Musa Talks about his Generation. [Online]. Q&A – ABC. Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pMN6BPgSZ4>. Accessed: November 11th 2012.

(2003), was a single extended poem rather than a collection⁹. This gave me the confidence to do the same, although I wanted to maintain originality in my structure and thus decided to do so through shifts in character and perspective, as is indicated through the use of sound effects and alterations in voice, tone and pitch. In addition to this, I used sub-headings of particular years in order to make shifts in character and time more apparent. Making these transitions clear has been a challenge, but is something that has been revised and edited numerous times in order to ensure that the audience is aware of the structure and the characters.

‘Sponge Cake for Vultures’ is the result of judicious editing, independent research and investigation. It fulfils my ambition to create a major work that articulates my value of the stories of my Grandmother and communicates my perception of the unwarranted lack of appreciation of the elderly in certain circumstances. This major work has matured as I have explored different concepts in greater depth and has evolved along with my thought process. Performance Poetry is a truly liberating medium and one that I am thankful to have discovered, examined and employed as a means of conveying the purpose of my major work.

⁹ M. Billing (ed.) et al. 2003, 2005, 2007, Various Works, *Young Writer’s Showcase*, [CDROM], New South Wales Board of Studies, Sydney.

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