

Study Guide For Teachers

Soul Portraits:

...a program by Gayle Danley

presented by

Young Audiences

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Singing one moment, whispering verse the next, her ever-changing expressions and movements enhancing the emotional energy she beams into the audience, Gayle Danley is slamming. Slamming (not be confused with rapping) is poetry written and performed by the poet. In essence, Slam Poetry is what your heart would write if it had hands. Danley brings the best of performance art together with heart stirring, "real life" poetry to create an incomparable literary, dramatic and emotional experience. This unadorned presentation is crafted to encourage a spirit of creativity and self-expression in your students.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

- Be exposed to the power and accessibility of the written and spoken word.
- Improve their listening skills
- Practice audience etiquette
- Gain appreciation for a unique and rich form of cultural expression

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

Slam poetry was originated in 1984 in Chicago by Marc Smith, a poet and construction worker. Looking for a way to refresh the open mike format at a jazz club, Smith began a series of poetry competitions that laid the groundwork for the genre of poetry that would eventually be known as slam poetry. Smith drew on bridge and baseball terminology for the name and created the basic rules of the competition. The first poetry slam was the Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill in Chicago. It continues to run every Sunday night.

Slam poetry tends to be more rhythmic than other poetry. It also tends to elicit a strong response from the audience. The performance of a poem is as important as the writing of the poem in slam poetry. A poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry, usually held at restaurants, bars or clubs. Typically, poets sign up to be part of a poetry slam, and then are chosen at random to perform their work. Poets have three minutes to perform, and may not use any props or music. A few audience members are chosen to be judges, who will score each poem 0-30 points. At the end of the night, the poet with the most points wins, earning prestige, and often, half of the money collected as cover charges. A "slam master" acts as master of ceremonies and organizes the events.

The appeal of a poetry slam is the quick pace of the competition, coupled with the strong emotional content of the poems. Poets write about all different aspects of life, sometimes telling very personal stories, sometimes making statements about society. The live performance of the poems can be very moving.

Poetry slams have grown in popularity since their inception. Most large cities around the United States will have at least one venue for slamming. In New Jersey there are regular slams for adults in Trenton, Montclair and Bridgeton.

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

1) Read several poems to or with your class. Discuss the definition of a poem with your students. Have students read some poems silently.

2) Have students discuss the difference between hearing a poem read or recited out loud and reading it from a book. What things could a poet do to make a poem interesting to an audience? Encourage students to watch and listen carefully during the performance to see what Gayle Danley does to make poetry come to life.

AFTER THE PROGRAM

1) Ask students to discuss how Gayle Danley made poetry come alive for the audience. Consider how she used her voice, facial expression, and body to create drama and emotion. How would the performance have been different if the poet had read her poetry from a book.

3) Explore poetry further with the following poem by David Ignatow:

THE JOURNEY

I am looking for a past
I can rely on
In order to look to death
with equanimity.
What was given me:
my mother's largeness
to protect me,
my father's regularity
in coming home from work
at night, his opening the door
silently and smiling,
pleased to be back
and the lights on
in all the rooms
through which I could run
freely or sit at ease
at table and do my homework
undisturbed: love arranged as order
directed at the next day.
Going to bed was a journey.

Read "The Journey" to or with your students. Discuss the poem with them: What simple images or emotions does Ignatow remember? Why are these images and emotions so important to him in later life? Have students list images or emotions connected to events that they remember from earlier in their lives. Have students combine their simple images and emotions to create a poem reflecting on their earlier childhood.

4) Have your students work collaboratively to plan a poetry slam or a poetry reading in your classroom or school. You can invite the whole school community to participate. See www.poetryslam.com for more information.

VOCABULARY WORDS

slam- a competitive poetry performance

slam poem- a powerful, impactful poem that involves all of the senses and is dramatically performed.

simile- a poetic or literary tool that uses "like" or "as" to create a comparison between two different things

metaphor- a literary device that applies a term or phrase to something which is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance.

rhythm- the innate "beat" of the work

poetic drama- includes dramatic pauses, eye contact, gestures and body movements to enrich a poetic performance.

ARTIST INFORMATION

Gayle Danley is the National Individual Poetry Slam Champion. Danley who holds a B.A. in broadcast journalism from Howard University and an MA in radio, TV and film from Syracuse University. Gayle performs slam poetry around the country, and has been featured on CBS' 60 Minutes. She is also the author of two books of poetry. Naked: Poems that Uncover My Soul and Soulfull: A Study of Slam Poetry.

RESOURCES

www.poetryteachers.com A website created for teachers of poetry. Includes activities to inspire children to write poems, games and exercises to learn how to perform poetry, as well as a wealth of child centered poetry.

Danley, Gayle. Soulfull: A Study in Slam Poetry. New York: Danley, 1996.

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Giovanni, NikkL Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People. New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973.

Janeczko, Paul B. Looking for Your Name: A Collection of Contemporary Poems. New York: Orchard Books, 1993.

Janeczko, Paul B. Poetspeak: In Their Work. About Their Work. Scarsdale, N.Y: Bradbury Press, 1983.

www.poetryslam.com Poetry Slam Incorporated, Information about the history of poetry slams, local venues, rules, etc.