

# PoetryHigh

The old-school art of poetry recital makes a glamorous comeback

BY JASON GURIEL

**W**earing an oversized suit, Spencer Slaney sighs and brings a few fingers to his temple. The tall, bespectacled 16-year-old has just begun a careful recitation of Charles Baudelaire's moody poem, "Spleen," and is already in a world of his own. When he reaches the last line, he drops his head, dejected. Then, he glances up and—waiting a beat—flashes a smile. The audience erupts into applause.

This was last April, at the inaugural Poetry in Voice competition, the newest initiative of the Griffin Trust For Excellence in Poetry. A dozen Ontario high schools took part in the pilot project by holding classroom recitation tournaments. Spencer, a Grade 10 student at Sudbury's Lock-

erby Composite, and 11 other finalists won the chance to represent their schools in the showdown at Toronto's Young Centre for the Performing Arts. Top prize: \$5,000, with the winner's school library netting an additional \$2,500. (Spencer finished third, receiving \$500 for his efforts.)

The rules? Recite two famous poems, either in French or English, to a packed house—while a panel of judges scores contestants on their presence, articulation and accuracy. (In the final round, the top three contestants recite a third poem.)

The goal? Reignite young Canadians' interest in poetry and public speaking. "It builds tremendous confidence to stand up and deliver in front of an audience," explains Scott Griffin, whose Griffin Trust also funds the annual \$200,000 Griffin

Twelfth grader Jonathan Welstead recites a classic poem at Toronto's Young Centre.

Poetry Prize, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the world.

Since the event was Griffin's idea, I thought I would see if the 72-year-old businessman—a major shareholder in a publishing company and a manufacturer of shock absorbers for military vehicles—was truly a man of his memory, a magnate of his word.

"Can you recite something?" I asked him. "Yes, I can," he said, and launched into a poem by e.e. cummings about the Depression called "it really must." He had it down cold.

The Young Centre, located in the city's 152-year-old Distillery District, was an inspired choice for the finals. Indeed, the venue was like the Poetry in Voice competition itself: a sleek renovation of a Victorian institution. By the late 1800s, elocution and recitation manuals were all the rage, and general audiences throughout Europe and North America listened eagerly to verse read aloud in home parlours.

Today, memorization is a rare art. (How many numbers in your cell-phone can you recall?) But Griffin and his team hope to change that. They plan to expand the contest to Quebec and, eventually, across the country.

I spot poet and novelist Margaret Atwood and ask her if she's memorized much poetry in her life.

"Yes," she says.

"Would you be able to share a poem?"

"No," she replies, then laughs and goes on to explain that when she was a student, memorization of poems was tested by how well she could recite and

write them down. The punctuation was more important than the poetry.

"The way we did it, it would have to be: 'There's my last duchess painted on the wall.' Pause. Capital L. 'Looking as if she were alive.' Period."

"I think it's really good for the brain," says Toronto poet Damian Rogers when I ask her about the value of memorizing and reciting poetry. Rogers, 39, helped Griffin develop the contest, which was inspired by similar, successful efforts in the States, such as Poetry Out Loud. "I know a lot of older people," she continues, "who still have this huge bank of poetry that they remember from when they were kids, and had to memorize poems week after week."

When I ask Rogers if *she* could recite something, she laughs. "Oh, God, I did [Edgar Allan Poe's] 'Annabel Lee' a couple of years ago, but I don't know if I can do it all." (In all fairness, she'd had a busy night.)

**A**lthough most of the competitors nailed their lines—only a few blanked and had to be prompted—they took different tacks. Suzanna Alsayed kept a hand over her heart as she performed a French poem called "La vie." Others, such as Jonathan Welstead, let their arms dangle at their sides. The 12th grader, from Upper Canada College, did Robert Burns's "To a Mouse On Turning Up Her Nest with the Plough" in a thick

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## Tips for Memorizing Poems

**Be strategic.** Pick a poem with a pattern—metre and rhyme are much easier to learn by heart than free verse.

**Be old school.** Copy the poem out a couple of times—on actual paper.

**Be hermetic.** Turn off your cellphone and close your laptop screen—you need quiet.

**Be relentless.** Say the poem over and over—and over and over.

**Be patient.** Take it one line at a time, and don't get frustrated if you forget lines.

**Be weird.** Don't be afraid to practise on family, friends, mirrors and walls.

**Beware!** Memorizing poems is habit-forming—you'll want to learn more.

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Scottish accent. "Wee, sleekeet, cow-ran, tim'rous beastie," he said gruffly, making us laugh. "O, what a panic's in thy breastie!"

Amelia Druskis, a Grade 12 student from Kingston, came out in a black blouse and white skirt and recited, "I Am," by the 19th-century English poet John Clare. "I am," she began, "yet what I am none cares or knows / My friends forsake me like a memory lost..." She kept her arms at her sides (and up her sleeves) until she got to the line, "And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed," at which point she opened them to the air.

Wearing thick glasses, khakis and a black sweater, David Castillo recited "The Charge of the Light Brigade," a poem by Tennyson based on the true story of a British cavalry unit that

charged to its death in the Crimean War. As he began the third stanza, Castillo held up a hand: "Cannon to right of them! Cannon to left of them!" he hollered, startling us in our seats.

Anna Jiang chose T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," a sad poem about a pagan world about to change. She recited it simply, her hands clasped over her chest, rocking on her heels gently to the poem's subtle rhythm.

"Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel," she intoned, her voice filling the theatre. "Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver..." When she got to the "hard and bitter agony" of Jesus's birth, her voice rose. Anna won second prize, behind Jonathan.

"I just read the poem over and over and over and over," Anna tells me later, "and I googled everything that I could about what the poet might've been trying to say." Eliot would probably be pleased she knew his poem by heart.

Many of the students hadn't been great poetry lovers before the contest, but had become converts by the end. I ask Brogan Carruthers, a 12th grader from Ottawa, if she is planning to learn more poetry by heart in the future. "Memorize? I'm not sure, but read, most definitely."

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