

Barbara Adler

Stories * Poems * Accordion
www.badler.ca

Teachers' Study Guide

About Barbara

In 2002, Barbara Adler was the youngest performer to win a spot on the acclaimed Vancouver Poetry Slam team, at the age of 18. Now a four-time member, Barbara has continued performing to become one of Vancouver's best known full-time performance poets. Her work with youth has seen her perform at events such as *The Vancouver International Children's Festival (2003, 2004)*, *The Vancouver East Cultural Center's Youth Festival (2002, 2004)*, and the *UNESCO Conference for Sustainability and Youth (2005)*. Other performance highlights include *The Winnipeg International Writers Festival (2004)*, *The Vancouver International Folk Festival (2004, 2006, 2007)*, *The Vancouver International Readers and Writers Festival (2007)*, the *Winnipeg Folk Music Festival (2008)*, four *International Fringe Theatre Festivals*, and the two *CBC Poetry Face-Off Contests*.



Barbara has performed and presented workshops at high schools and elementary schools all over British Columbia, and has toured internationally both with the spoken word-music band, **The Fugitives**, and as a solo spoken-word artist. She is a performer and former organizing member of the *Wordplay: Poets in Schools* project, as well as a three-time member of the *B.C. Schizophrenia Society's Reach Out* tour, which brings messages about mental health to high school students using poetry and music. She was a founding member of the *Vancouver Youth Slam*, which is now a popular monthly event, drawing youth performers and audiences from all over the Lower Mainland. Her extensive experience working with young writers led her to be selected as a writing mentor in the Vancouver East Cultural Center's *Ignite! 2009* spoken-word mentorship program.

Barbara has been a Canadian Slam Champion, a CBC Poetry Face Off winner, and the Poet Laureate for the CBC PGI Literacy Fundraiser. She has a major and minor in Art and Culture Studies, and Fine and Performing Arts at Simon Fraser University. Her latest project is the 120-button piano accordion.

"(Adler) writes smart, funny, and often deeply moving poetry around questions of history, identity, and self-image" - *The Georgia Straight, Vancouver*

"Adler's carefully crafted rants are breathlessly precise" - *Uptown Magazine, Winnipeg*

Themes

Storytelling
Self-Image
Family
Nature
SLAM poetry
Truth vs. Fiction
Relationships
Creativity
History
Identity
Gender
Accordion!
Popular Culture
Narrative
Metaphor
Hyperbole
Self-Confidence

Performance and Workshop Outline

Barbara typically performs for one block either in a classroom or auditorium, for a broad cross-section of students (usually English, Writing, Theatre, and Fine Arts classes). This performance introduces students to solo performance poetry, mixed with storytelling and rapid-fire, literary "rap." Barbara's show also features her shiny, 120-button piano accordion, and stories about what it's like to bring poetry and accordion to small-town British Columbia.

For longer sessions, Barbara leads workshops focused on writing for performance in smaller classes (25-35 students). Activities include, "The Box of Doom," "Wild Minds," "Hyperbole Death Match" and "Extended Metaphors," followed by writing time and performance by students. This last activity is one of Barbara's main focuses; by creating an inspired and creative atmosphere, she encourages students to get up in front of their peers and share their own material.

Throughout all these activities, the emphasis is on showing that writing and performance are skills that are relevant and accessible to anyone, and most importantly, that working with words can be fun. Although these activities are designed to be quite basic and non-intimidating, Barbara's extensive experience as a writer and performer means that she can provide more detailed feedback for students who already have experience or interest in spoken word or music, in a manner that remains positive and supportive.

Performance Poetry—A Brief History

The term "performance poetry" originates from an early press release describing the popular 1980s performance poet Hedwig Gorski, whose audio recordings achieved success on spoken word radio programs around the world. In 1984, Chicago construction worker Marc Smith created SLAM poetry with the idea of making poetry more accessible to large audiences. In SLAM competitions, audiences are asked to judge poems on scores ranging from zero to ten. The competitions quickly caught on, and are now attended by thousands at annual competitions like the National Poetry SLAM, held in year in America. In Canada, the Canadian Festival of Spoken word, which includes a nationwide SLAM competition, has been running since 2004. SLAMs now exist in every major city across the country, the most popular being Toronto and Vancouver, which regularly sell out 200-seat venues. Vancouver is home to most of the major names in Canadian SLAM poetry, including Shane Koyczan, CR Avery, Brendan McLeod, Barbara Adler, and the spoken word music groups, TOFU and the Fugitives.

"The effect of the workshop and performance on participants was unlike anything I have previously experienced during my eight years as a teacher and an event promoter...In the classroom I now see students themselves gaining confidence as performers of their own material."

Katy Price,
Anglia Ruskin University
Cambridge

"Ok, so maybe I don't hate all poetry. But I just like the stuff that's performed...with music...and a melodica. Thanks for coming!"

Bridget
Student
St. Clements School, Toronto

"Bringing poets into the classroom is always a special treat, but when the poets are also gifted teachers, something powerful happens- the strengths they have are passed on to the students, and the students learn to see themselves as writers."

Katherine Parrish
Marc Garneau Institute,
Toronto

Activities

Instant Imagery

The hardest thing about writing is getting started. One of the reasons for this is self censorship — students often feel that whatever they are writing in a given moment is not good enough. During **Instant Imagery**, the students say the first thing they can think of in response to whatever the person before them has said. Then, in order to release poetic images, the students take a cliché, a word, or concept that everyone is sick of, and place a totally unrelated noun in front of it. An example of this might be: “tombstone love.” This exercise frees the students up, limits their self-consciousness, and is an easy way to get the creative juices flowing.



Box of Doom



The **Box of Doom** is an exercise designed to demonstrate how much performance can change and affect any given text. A selection of random writing, which is anything but poetry (food labels, advertisements, news headlines, manuals), is placed in the Box of Doom. A student reaches inside and pulls out one of the texts at random. They show it to the audience, and read it verbatim, in whatever manner they like. Suggestions are then given by the audience on how the text could be performed differently (with anger; with love; like a penguin; etc.) The students are then asked to brainstorm how the performer would go about meeting these requirements, and the performer reads the text again, this time with these suggestions in mind. The results, of course, are extremely different and always fun.

Hyperbole Death Match (No Actual Death Involved)

The **Hyperbole Death Match** pits students against each other in a battle of exaggeration. Students are paired up and given prompt cards, which they complete with a hyperbole. For example, the prompt, “My lunch was so disgusting _____,” might become: “My lunch was so disgusting, that when I went to throw it out, the garbage can ran away from me.” After each pair has finished their prompt, they stand up and read competing hyperboles. The rest of the class decides by applause which exaggeration was the most outrageous. Everyone wins (silly) prizes, and students see first hand that using words can be exciting.



Filthy Lies or Fiction

This advanced exercise is meant to demonstrate the many meanings of “truth,” and to provide a tool which students can use to approach uncomfortable subjects. After discussing the differences between *literal truth*, and *literary truth*, students pick a situation in their lives which they feel strongly about. They then write on the topic, imagining themselves as a character in a story. Instead of using the first person, students use second person, and write about themselves as “she,” or “he.” Students are encouraged to exaggerate the situation, to add metaphors, and “lies.” The idea is to let the story take them away from the literal truth; after all, they are now writing about someone else. At the end of the exercise, students go through their piece, and change the subject back to first person. After re-reading their work, students are asked if what they wrote about their character might speak to some truth in their lives. This tool can be used to access censored emotions, or to turn personal experience into material for fiction.

SPOKEN WORD SHOWS \ CLUBS IN B.C.

- Vancouver Poetry Slam**, Café deux Soleils, 2096 Commercial Drive: a bi-monthly poetry SLAM held every first, third, and fifth Monday of the month.
- Vancouver Youth Slam**, Café deux Soleils, 2096 Commercial Drive: fourth Monday of every the month.

COOL WEBSITES

www.badler.ca
www.youthspeaks.org

www.vancouverpoetryhouse.com
www.brendanmcleod.ca

www.poetryslam.com
www.fugitives.ca

RECOMMENDED VIEWING

Slam Nation (1998), directed by Paul Devlin, looks at the 1996 National Poetry Slam held in Portland, Oregon. The film is both a good introduction to the weird world of slam poetry and a hip look at who's who for performance poetry insiders. The film crew follows several teams through a week of competition, focusing on the contention for the national title.

SLAM (1998), directed by Marc Levin, was the unanimous winner of the 1998 Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and the Camera d'Or and Prix du Public (Audience Award) at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. Slam is an emotionally charged, uplifting film about a talented young man who discovers himself through the love of a woman and through his extraordinary talent.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Spoken Word Revolution: SLAM, Hip-Hop, and the Poetry of a New Generation, edited by Mark Elevated, Sourcebooks Mediafusion (ISBN 1-4022-0037-4)

Mic Check: An Anthology of Spoken Word in Canada, edited by David Silverberg, Quattro Books (ISBN 978-0-9782806-5-9)

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

The Fugitives, Face of Impurity (2007). In August of 2006, The Fugitives (featuring Adler & McLeod) received a Canada Council grant to develop a live storytelling performance to be toured across Canada to secondary schools. This CD is the result. It was written throughout the fall and winter of 2006, performed and recorded in February 2007, and was toured across the country in March/April of 2007. It is available from www.fugitives.ca.

HOSTING THE PERFORMANCE

Sound: one vocal mic, level set to project the voice crisply; for larger rooms, one mic for the accordion

Lighting: basic lighting for a stationary performance— nothing fancy

Audience: audience should be as close to the stage as possible

Workshops: participants should bring pens and paper

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