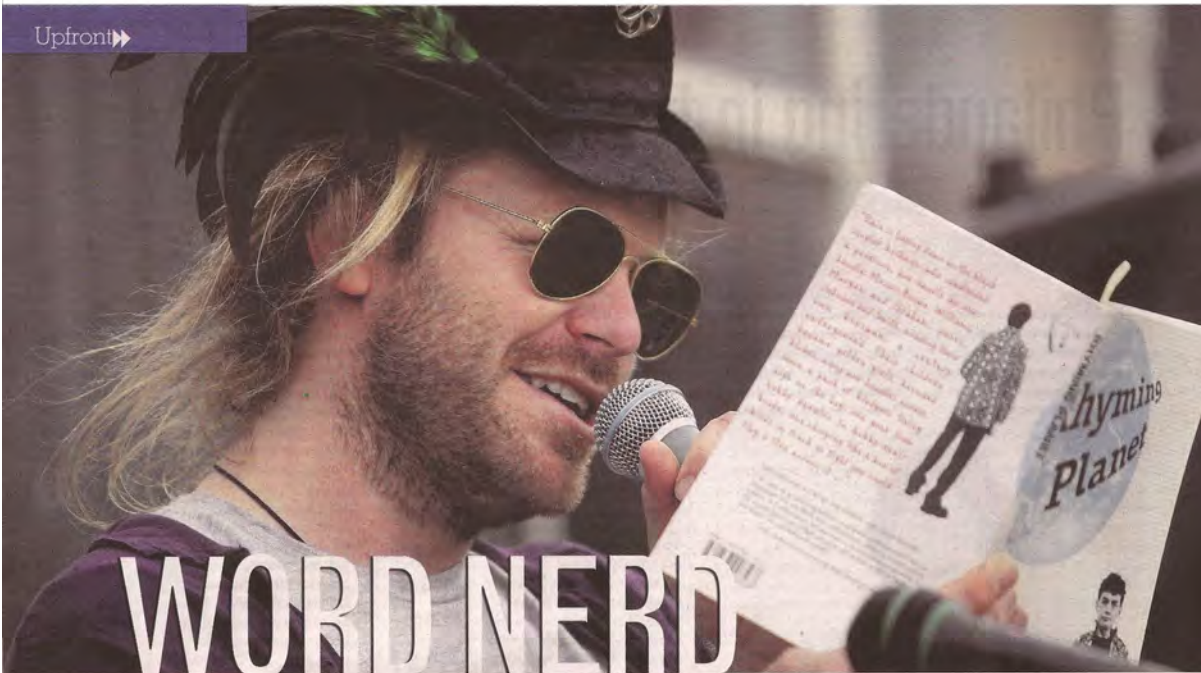


WIN
An Avanti bike and helmet

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2014

your weekend

Upfront▶▶



WORD NERD

Ciaran Fox is part of a slow but steady spoken word revolution, writes Liz Breslin.

What on earth would possess someone to stand up and share the crafted workings of their inner soul? For a long lens on that question, ask Ciaran Fox, who has been running open mics with Doc Drumheller in Christchurch under their "Catalyst" brand: spewing literary lava since 2003.

Their invitation for "writers to come and sharpen their performance skills and learn how to communicate their poetry to a live audience" is perhaps one of the longest standing in the country. And yet, over the 10 years they've been going, Fox is yet to work out what motivates some people to get up and share their stories.

"After all these years I still have no idea. I'm just glad they do. It is the oldest form of publishing – public presentation of your work and ideas. It's a great way to see if something flies... or not. Some people just seem compelled to do it, even if it makes them uncomfortable – I really appreciate that kind of courage."

Fox himself enjoys performance for the challenge of conveying the essence of a moment to an audience.

There's a real art to telling a good story; who doesn't love being read to? All you need to be transported is the listener, the teller and the tale.

While the spoken word tends to emanate from behind a microphone, that simplicity is still a good guideline to the fine line between storytelling and acting. Got props or a costume? You're acting, darlin'. There are no smokescreens in spoken word. That's part of its raw appeal.

For some, spoken word is a new thing

'I like having to win an audience over, communicating with them. I like the thought of people surprising themselves at being entertained by poetry.'

CIARAN FOX

Photo: DON SCOTT/
FAIRFAX NZ

and a now thing. There's a lot of it going around on YouTube and trendy daily internet digests.

Many people date the rise of capitalised Spoken Word and the flowering of the Slam to the civil rights movement in the United States. The ground covered between Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, Gil Scott Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* and on to the present day. Audience-wise, there are more analogies to be made. It's got a gospel atmosphere – "praise the Word!" – rather than an upright, white church gathering.

Fox admits that "readings that are done in quiet, acceptable settings where everyone listens politely make me nervous. I like having to win an audience over, communicating with them. I like the thought of people surprising themselves at being entertained by poetry."

In the beginning was the word, after all. The ancient Olympics in Greece included oratory contests. Word nerds would have you believe these were just as important as chariot racing and other ancient preoccupations.

Bardism, in the Druid tradition, is another long-standing storytelling tradition. Top bards studied for 10 years, learned over 350 stories and travelled with a gold stick with bells on the end. They rang these as they came into a gathering, so that people knew to get into quiet, receptive listening modes. A bit like making ourselves a cuppa to sit down for our favourite telly shows or with a friend.

Back to the present day. Fox and

Drumheller are proud of the 10th anniversary edition of their internationally-read *Arts Journal*. Over those 10 years they've published over 200 writers from more than 15 countries – including Croatian, Japanese, Spanish, Bengali and West Saharan works in translation. They have seen the growth of individuals as well as the scene.

"We've watched as regular performers moved from shy to confident to compelling."

They were the first in New Zealand to provide spoken word and music CDs along with their journals. They keep their open mic sessions alive and entertaining.

As they ease into their 11th year, with Drumheller at the helm of the journal pages and Fox co-ordinating the stage presence, Catalyst are taking their talents further afield: last week they performed at the Outspoken Festival in Wanaka, and next month they're off to Wellington's Newtown Festival.

Fox says Catalyst is outspoken about making poetry relevant to contemporary audiences – even people who don't consider themselves to be the target audience.

"We're big fans of Phantom Billstickers' Poetry on Posters project, putting real, contemporary poetry right in front of people in everyday situations."

"We've been passionate advocates of spoken word and performance poetry. Getting poetry out of bedrooms, studies and dusty old (or new) books and onto stages, into bars, out on the streets."

Out the spoken word, indeed.