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Slam poet Jesse Parent makes it up

Profile • A big winner at the World Poetry Slam, Jesse Parent blends improvisation and storytelling to engage his audience.

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BY BEN FULTON THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

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"Do you guys want to hear something kind of heart-wrenching, or something kind of funny?" poet Jesse Parent asks the Sunday-night crowd.

The fresh-faced young kids sitting on the floor of Greenhouse Effect Coffee and CrÃªpes would probably take anything Parent offers. Like the vast majority of Salt Lakers under 21, they're tickled to be anywhere near excitement without having to offer forged ID.

Parent, though, wants the anticipation dialed up a notch.

Glaring into the crowd with nostrils slightly flared, eyebrows arched almost toward the tips of triangles, Salt Lake City's award-winning slam poet delivers the first stanza of his poem "Pez" like a hand grenade thrown across Afghanistan's Korengal Valley.

It's a stanza too ribald for citation in a community newspaper, and explosive enough to draw a slap on the hip, if not an extra bead of steam dripping from the coffeehouse windows.

"Oh! My! God!" says one girl in the audience.

"Pez," Parent's poem about his warring grandparents, starts with his grandfather's eulogy after the death of his grandmother. The verse turns a tight corner into their "hard love," references Fabio novels and an aircraft landing with no gear, then turns right into a hard stop into the title reference of a Pez dispenser.

"This was not abuse/This was sparring/This was the joy of combat/That always ended in hugs/As the referee raised both their hands," Parent recites near the end of his poem. "This was hard to explain."

Â—

Unlikely poet • If angst-ridden struggle wracked by political injustice is your idea of a slam poet, Parent's success may be hard to explain.

The 36-year-old computer programmer and native of Somerset, Mass., didn't come to poetry through the usual suspects. Not William Blake. Not Walt Whitman. Not even Allen Ginsberg.

Raised in a family of car mechanics and tattoo artists, Parent wrestled his way through college at Worcester Polytechnic as part of the school's team. Drama was a steady love, soon to morph into comedy improv.

Parent joined two college acting groups, attended summer theater festivals and even wrote a play with an artsy-sounding title, "All the Non-Conformists Are Doing It."

Parent and his wife Julia, a stay-at-home parent and art student, came to Utah in 1997 for what they thought would be a temporary stay. They liked it so much they ended up staying.

Delving deeper into improv, Parent studied speech patterns and beat through the comedy styles of Larry David and "Seinfeld." Two Trolley Square Live performances with the Knock Your Socks Off (KYSOFF) troupe led to competing in improv festivals in Chicago and New York City.

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"I've heard him say he's not so much of a poet as an engaging monologist," said Joseph Kyle Rogan, Parent's friend and partner in the JoKyR & Jester improv duo since 2003. "Where some slam poets focus on refined language, he focuses on story, engagement and metaphors. His drive has really rubbed off on the slam community."

—

The math of poetry • Parent's first slam performance came in December 2006 at a downtown Salt Lake City coffeehouse. One year later he made the city's slam poetry team for national competition.

Not bad for someone brave enough to admit reading Poetry for Dummies and Slam Poetry for Complete Idiots in preparation.

"I came to poetry from a theatrical angle, and love them both because they're forms you can't replicate on a recording. They represent the pure emotional distillation of words," Parent said.

That distillation wasn't lost on the rounds of judges panels chosen from the audience at the Individual World Poetry Slam, held in December in Charlotte, N.C. Parent withstood 72 international competitors over competition spanning three days to place second.

Winning second place felt like a victory, Parent says. He placed less than half a point behind winner Rudy Francisco of San Diego and earned the most overwhelming "physical feeling of good will" from an audience ever in his performing career.

"There's a part of me that still doesn't think of myself as a poet," he said. "I'm just an improviser trying to figure out the math of poetry."

—

Sweetness of fatherhood, vigor of improv • Parent's slam poetry friends and colleagues back home were less surprised.

The medium that brought poetry off the page and onto the stage found its way to Utah within months of its 1986 founding by southeast Chicago native Marc Kelly Smith, according to Jean Howard. Howard, a Salt Lake City native, got to know Smith and other slam poetry progenitors during her 20 years in Chicago.

In Utah, slam poetry got its first firm roots at nightly readings hosted by Cup of Joe, a coffee house at 353 W. 200 South, now occupied by Uptown Cheapskate clothing. The scene has been nurtured through the years by Howard and local poets Melissa Bond and Michael Dimitri, president of the Salt City Indie Arts nonprofit.

"Slam poetry is usually accomplice to a lot of anger and politics," Howard said. "What's so refreshing about Jesse is the other human qualities he brings to slam. He's got the sweetness of his fatherhood and the vigor of an improv talent. It's lovely, and it's also very Salt Lake."

Cody Winger, a 21-year-old slam poet who frequents Greenhouse, said what sets Parent's work apart is his emphasis on structure and story in a poem.

"Plus, he's animated," Winger said, smoking outside on the Greenhouse Effect deck the night of Parent's performance. "It's taken for granted by most people here that we have a lot of great poets, but that we typically get overlooked when it comes to competition time."

—

Compressed little stories • Parent follows the maxim of wordsmiths everywhere: "Write what you know."

In Parent's case, that would be friends and family. It's not just his grandparents who've provided material, but his three children in the poem "Grounded From Age," and Catholic high-school crushes on girls in plaid uniforms. Then there's the good friend who was burned to death at the infamous 2003 Great White rock concert at the Station Nightclub in West Warwick, R.I.

That prompted the poem "Gallows Humor," which weaves his friend's death at the music club to the funeral of his grandfather, who requested that a gag box reciting "Hey! Hey! Let me out of here!" be inserted in his coffin.

Even before that black punchline, the poem introduces a dark nut of laughter over one person's online joke Parent read about how 100 people could have died inside a club hosting an '80s metal band.

"How could that building have gone up in flames that fast? 'Hairspray,' " he jokes in the poem. "And with that/I laughed loudly in breakbeats of sobs/And to the sick song of Gallows Humor/That inappropriate joking that I so desperately needed/The clinging to comedy to explain away tragedy/Making one mask out of two."

"Sock Puppet," about schizophrenia, landed Parent in the second round of international competition in Charlotte. It follows the noise inside a person's head as he reaches for a kitchen knife, only to put it back and then check into a hospital for treatment.

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The dramatic atmosphere a poem invokes is one of Parent's chief concerns. He eschews DVDs at home, but watches movies in theaters solely to soak up audience reactions at pivotal moments in the story-line. Of course, he's even more tuned to audience dynamics during his own performances, relishing the crescendos he can draw from a crowd. It's all person, much like the real-life stories of his family that form his narrative delivery.

"I like to see when people stop laughing to move into different reactions," Parent said. "Every moment must have purpose. That's when words take on a clarifying power."

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Catching up with the slam poetry scene

When • Sundays at 8:30 p.m at Greenhouse Effect Coffee and CrÃªpes; and the last Monday of the month 8 p.m. at Mo's Neighborhood Grill.

Where • Greenhouse Effect Coffee and CrÃªpes, 3231 S. 900 East, Salt Lake City; Mo's Neighborhood Grill, 358 S. West Temple, Salt Lake City

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Great job Jesse, Congrats, great article!!

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I've had the pleasure of working with Jesse. A fine man and very talented.

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