

***This is how it was* (Victor Dlamini, Javier Perez and Sindiwe Magona)**

So. How was the Franschhoek Literary Festival? I would be flippant if I used superlatives to describe this engrossing panel discussion on “The rich traditions and global origins of fiction in oral story telling”. I had expected something rather bland, but the reality was far different. This was both entertainment and Oral Lit 101 rolled into a convenient package. Victor Dlamini’s masterful guidance of the discussion ensured that everyone got their money’s worth and left the hall both cheered and informed.

Dlamini opened the discussion by remarking that it is a fallacy that oral literatures have been replaced by the craft of writing. I raised my eyebrows, initially, but my interest was piqued when Javier Perez, a performance poet, explained in careful detail that spoken word as a genre can be traced back to the oral traditions of Africa. He broke one of my own misconceptions into tiny pieces when he affirmed that spoken word ‘works’ across language barriers, that in the act of performance, the musicality and artist’s delivery skills combine to transcend any language and/ or grammatical barriers. How right he is. Prompted by an audience member, he gave an impromptu spoken word performance and the piece, mixing hip-hop rhythm, English and Spanish, was a delight to witness. More was to come.

Sindiwe Magona is well known as a writer of pedigree and experience. When asked to comment on the genesis of her new novel, *Chasing the Tails of My Father’s Cattle*, she distilled her art into a single, potent sentence: “I was just telling a story”. I had known this, of course, but the truth of it sunk home and humbled me slightly. The simple elegance of this was reinforced when Magona read an extract from her book (she reads beautifully)

and it became abundantly clear that the story was the work's engine and needed few literary props to sustain it. She explained, too, that one of the reasons she writes (so prolifically and successfully, I might add) is to inspire others, particularly those who might consider themselves somehow disadvantaged to craft their own stories and tell them too. Encouraging words, indeed, for the pleasing number of younger people sitting in the audience. It was left to Perez to complete my initiation into the potential of spoken word though.

I was intrigued to hear Perez explain that spoken word is driven by social media – that platforms like Twitter and You Tube are the performance spaces of choice for young spoken word artists. Immediately I began thinking how this effectively bypassed the difficulties of 'getting published' that aspirant writers face. That is not to say that he (or I) believe that 'conventional' publishing is redundant, far from it. Instead, Perez pointed out that Gen Z (today's young people) integrate social media into their lives so fluidly, that they both respect and exploit the potential of social media to drive cultural projects forward. I know of a local poet (Hugh Hodge) who has made the 120-character limit of the SMS the perfect framework for pin sharp poems, so it makes sense that these new media (well they are new to me – I'm 55!) will inspire many. I'll certainly trawl YouTube for spoken word performances, starting with the work of Perez.

So, that's how it was. A delightful hour that passed by far too quickly. Informative, inspiring and uplifting. I had much to think about as I threaded my way down the street in search of a good coffee and a chance to soak in the experience.

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