

The Salt Lake Tribune

Performance poet' shakes up stereotype

By Sean P. Means
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

When the average person hears the words "poetry reading," a certain image is evoked that makes the eyes glaze over.

A lone poet, in black turtleneck and beret, recites lines in a droning tone to an audience too polite to respond.

"Nobody applauds, they just go 'ahh,'" said Jean Howard, a Chicago-based "performance poet" born and raised in Salt Lake City. "It's almost like a library."

Ms. Howard aims to smash that stereotype. She will present her blend of words and theatrics Monday at 7:30 p.m. at A Woman's Place bookstore, 1890 Bonanza Drive, Park City. The free performance will feature excerpts from the book *Dancing in Your Mother's Skin*, a collaboration of Ms. Howard and photographer Alice Q. Hargrave.

Ms. Howard's performances combine music, video, dramatizations and audience participation, she said in a phone interview.

Though Ms. Howard's performances and her "video poetry" have many elements of stage and TV work, the poems come first. "The poem and the word is the catalyst for the activity," she said. "The poem is the beginning for everything."

She describes herself as a "poet-activist," one of a group who was "not happy with just being this small hidden art."

Her first full-out performances were in a Chicago bar, trying to reach a clientele that was not exactly attuned to iambic pentameter. "Here's Joe Average, drinking beer, eating peanuts and watching a ball game — there's the challenge."



"Performance poet" Jean Howard will present her works, 7:30 p.m. Monday at A Woman's Place bookstore in Park City. Alice Q. Hargrave

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"Performance poet" Jean Howard

Another avenue to the mass audience is the "Uptown Poetry Slam," a series of competitive poetry readings that Ms. Howard compares to "The Gong Show." A poet reads his or her work, a panel of judges (chosen from bar patrons based on idiosyncratic criteria) rates the work from 1-to-10, then the audience rates the judges with applause or boos. The program, which she co-founded in a Chicago jazz club in 1986, has now expanded to national competitions.

Some poets don't like the "slams," but Ms. Howard calls them just one way of reaching an audience pounded by many images. "It's the world of television — we're trying to make poetry more accessible," she said. "I really don't have any closed doors."

The poets' debate was reopened recently with a TV commercial advertising blue jeans for The Gap. The ad features New York poet Max Blagg, standing onstage in a smoky cafe, reading a poem focusing on the word "fit." Meanwhile, images of a motorcycle and a curvaceous woman in jeans (former "Twin Peaks" waitress Madchen Amick) flow by.

Some poets accused Mr. Blagg of selling out. But Ms. Howard, while acknowledging the poem probably is not for the ages, said the Gap ad gives the art of poetry some much-needed exposure.

The Gap debate also may have revealed an underlying problem for poets: "As a group, we don't have a sense of humor," Ms. Howard said. "They do take themselves very seriously, because no one else does."