

## Queer Writers Explode!

Bent Writing Institute's 2005 Showcase Ignites the Weekend

-by Beau Burriola, [www.sgn.org](http://www.sgn.org)

"I've attended spoken word events for a couple of years," said a guy calling himself Tim sitting in the seat next to me before the show began. When I asked what it is about spoken word events that attract him, he assured me that I'd understand when the show started. "I can see you're a virgin." I was.

This last weekend, Seattle queer writers exploded unabashedly all over Broadway Performance Hall in fits of emotion, anger, political frustration, love, and the soul-igniting realities that define queer life today. For two relentless nights, queer artists, poets, orators, and activists took to the mike and highlighted why the art known as "spoken word" is finding a growing following in Seattle's gay community.

In their own words, Bent students performed their art courageously in the intense glare of a spotlight and a sea of unfamiliar faces with only a lone microphone and their own creativity. One Bent student described her love for Seattle in humorous, orgasmic syncopation. Another is an ex-drug addict who credits her involvement in Bent with staying clean and whose prose carried the weight of heavy insight. Another described the burning anger at his father for his homophobic Kansas upbringing. Yet another made love to her own poetry, causing the audience (and this queer reporter in particular) to laugh until our dimples hurt. Super-persistent Bent student, Ken Bowman, who came prepared to perform in new shoes he bought for the event, forgot his piece midway through and ran off the stage, but then bounded back out cheerfully just a few minutes later to finish his piece to the audience's energetic approval, reminding the audience that this type of performance is anything but easy.

Spoken together, these stories do much more than entertain; they paint an extremely powerful picture of "real" queer people -- who we are, where we come from, what challenges we face, and how we eventually persevere or lose -- and by doing that, Bent creates a unique, crystal clear and interwoven view of a sometimes murky and loose-fitted gay community. The power of the Bent students' performance lies in their ability to make us see things the gay community isn't always used to seeing when given a spotlight: the humanity that is sometimes brushed over, the small imperfections that are infinitely more attractive than the perfect gay image we are fed every day, the very real emotions that drive sometimes emotionless sex, the confusion and purpose toward life and family, and perhaps most powerfully, the way we look at ourselves.

"In the last ten years, it's swept the country," says Tara Hardy, Bent founder and mentor, about the art of spoken word, "and I want the queer community to be a part of that." Bent started in her living room as a way for LGBTQ queer writers to share work and has since grown to a fully operational non-profit writing institute with over 200 students, featuring the annual student showcase fundraiser, writing workshops for the curious, and even plans for a "touring" spoken word show.

"It's a movement for social change," Tara proclaims proudly. Performing in the showcase, Tara leads the charge for change with a couple of fiery foot-stomping, arm-pumping pieces of her own. As the founder of Bent, she now works full time for the Institute developing LGBTQ writers.

Bent does have the face of a movement for social change, if not always the feel. With the exception of three outstanding performers of respectable experience, most of the performers seemed younger than average and their work reflected that. I asked Tara why Bent was such a draw for younger queer writers.

"I think spoken word is in style right now and what I mean by that is that it's swept the country. Poetry was oral in its first form and a lot of cultures have re-birthed that. We're doing that here in this country and it's so exciting."

However, "poetry" doesn't begin to describe what the audience experienced Friday and Saturday nights -- at least, not the sort of poetry I'm used to snoring at. Instead it was every bit a top-notch performance of original queer work (poetry, prose, oratory, even some singing) spanning the whole spectrum of experience, from the deeply personal (love, loss, sex, self-esteem, pride) to the overtly political (racism, Hurricane Katrina, war, capitalism, homophobia, insert just about any cause here). No emotion was left unstirred in the audience: laughter, anger, tears, frustration, warm-fuzzies, excitement, shock, and even the occasional, unexpected arousal.

Bent student Patch Avery, whose poem about being a father caused the audience to over-extend their usual ruckus of roar and approval, doesn't pause a second before agreeing that Bent is a movement for social change, even if some of the stories are more personal than political. "Definitely, it's a movement. There are personal agendas and political agendas and collectively we are pretty f\*\*cking awesome."

If you missed this year's performance, don't worry; the Showcase is an annual event and will be back again next year. If you'd like more information on Bent Writing Institute (as this queer reporter and no-longer-spoken-word-virgin did) check out [www.bentwriting.org](http://www.bentwriting.org) <<http://www.bentwriting.com/>>.

"I just wanted to create a space," says Tara about founding Bent, "where people could say what's on their minds publicly."

For anyone who happened to be in the audience for this weekend's performance, it was so much more than that.

*(Beau Burriola's column, "Tour de Life" appears weekly in the Seattle Gay News.)* RLS SGN101505