

SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL POETRY FESTIVAL

A triumph of international solidarity

BY CATHLEEN WILLIAMS

“ENTRY PERMITTED,” the program of the San Francisco International Poetry Festival proclaimed, in print that imitated the rubber stamp of an immigration official upon a passport — here, however, openly rejecting exclusion and censorship in favor of the free cultural exchange. Hundreds of people, hungry to hear the poetry of our common humanity — poems of outrage and affirmation — attended the three day event on July 27, 28, and 29, which featured free poetry readings across the city, in libraries, cafes, galleries, and, the spacious theatre of the Palace of Fine Arts.

This was poetry of both protest and love — the “human poem,” as San Francisco Poet Laureate and festival host Jack Hirschman said, at the kick-off celebration, standing on a make-shift stage in Jack Kerouac alley in North Beach below the festival banner as jazz musicians played and San Francisco’s cool summer fog rolled in across the cobblestones — poetry which takes as its mission the awakening of our society to the possibilities of social change and revolution, which speaks on behalf of the powerless and impoverished, which reminds us of what is essential — humanity and peace and economic security — not militarism and war and capitalist exploitation. The festival was supported by the San Francisco Public Library and its volunteers, and the Mayor’s office; its co-hosts included San Francisco’s previous Poet Laureates, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Janice Mirikitani, and devorah major, each a political poet of national stature.

Since ancient times, poetry has spoken from, for, and to the community, articulating the universal truths of our common destinies — all of us facing mortality, all of us rejoicing in love — both as individuals and social beings. Poetry is a world-wide language that nourishes our souls with anger, determination, and hope.



Banner of the Poetry Festival.

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Manifesto for the Festival

Sabah Yasim, an Iraqi poet, was refused entry to the festival by the US government. His letter, excerpted below, was a manifesto for the festival:

We have come today to bring together our words that struggle for a better world, a world where humanity would truly be free, a world without persecution or discrimination, whether on a racial or national basis.... I believe poetry is a beacon among the arts, a thing of beauty that can help foretell the beauty of the future. It can show us the potential world that can be created if we so choose — it can be the seeds of our hope... What is more beautiful than a free nation? What is lovelier than a free human mind, than the liberty of music, or even that of a simple plant or river? What greater thing can humanity hope for than to live free, free from hunger but also free to express one’s opinion?



Hanan Awwad of Palestine. At left is Sharon Doiubiago of the USA, who read Hanan’s translations.

PHOTO/SARAH POWELL

Quotes from Festival poets

I wanted to create an international festival whose diversity of languages and themes rooted in class content would serve as resistance to the globalizing atrocities of corporate greed and war. What happened is that, to the delight and amazement of all, the “audience” turned into a revolutionarily receptive People, at the cultural level, and their yearning for change became an affirming light that illuminated San Francisco in a way that Poetry hasn’t in a generation.

— Jack Hirschman

What Jack Hirschman did was create a space of freedom and creation, of expansion of the spirit, a place to breathe possibility and revelations, with surprising interactions of images, i.e., “the orange butterflies” (as the trash trucks are called in Baghdad in the poem by Sabah M. Jasim (Iraq), and the “beautiful trash trucks and “beautiful Union of trash collectors” lauded by Aharon Shabtai (Israel). And all the events were free. Every kind of person, of all ages, of all ethnicities and of all income levels was there. People listened on the sidewalks.

— Kristine Brown

It was “a return to that Poetry Renaissance dreamed in the ‘60s by the pacifist poet Kenneth Rexroth in places lived by the ‘Beats’, where social poetry as a poetry of love continues in perennial revolt by sounding out its own uncomfortable truths.”

— Laura Zanetti (Italy)

Poetry is the freedom of spirit and for three days we were free. Free from the brutality of a government that treats its citizens like retarded alien stepchildren. Free from the oppressive psychological terrorism perpetrated on the workers who keep this republic running. Free from the environmental rape the corporate sociopathic, profligate robber barons routinely employ in order to keep themselves and their stockholders entrenched in excessive lifestyles that remain antipathic to a true humanity. Poets from around the world demonstrated the essence of communication with brilliant and moving language that speaks to our collective consciousness. A universal language that stirs human potential, that says, yes we, individually and collectively, are so much more than the sum of our parts. And those who attended were part of the seedling of revolution. What joy! What power! A power that comes organically from within the human spirit.

— Scott Lettieri

Poets who read at Festival

The roster of poets (below) spanned the world and nation. Each brought a special perspective, reminding the audience that in every country there are activist poets, who, with other artists, reject the false and terrible “solutions” of well tailored “world leaders” who speak their lies and advocate the interests of giant corporations.

Maram al Masri, Syria
Hanan Awwad, Palestine
Miguel Mendoza Barreto, Venezuela
Bei Dao, China
Ferruccio Brugnaro, Italy
Nicole Cage-Florentini, Martinique
Frances Combes, France
Agneta Falk, USA
Sinan Gudzevic, Serbia/Croatia
Mark Bamuthi Joseph, USA
Anna Lombardo, Italy
Alberto Masala, Sardinia/Italy
Sarah Menefee, USA
Cletus Nelson-Nwadike, Nigeria/Sweden
Sotirios Pastakas
Aharon Shabtai, Israel
Carmen Yanez, Chile/Spain
Sabah M. Jasim, Iraq
and the 4 Poet Laureates of San Francisco: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Janice Mirikitani, devorah major, and Jack Hirschman

IT’S NOT JUST THE POVERTY

It’s not just the poverty
It’s the abandonment
the sorrow in knowing a boy gunned down
dying in the arms of his mother
without its meaning a thing to anyone
without anybody preventing it
poverty looks like a dead girl
raped by all the insects of this world
poverty doesn’t go away from my eyes
my gaze shakes with its rags
and my mouth is torn with its shreds
poverty walks
and leaves my footprints in its path
I can’t squash it like a damned mosquito
that carries all the wailing
of the world in its hate.

BY MIGUEL MENDOZA BARRETO of Marturin, Venezuela. Translated by Jack Hirschman from Spanish, it illustrates how poetry can capture the emotional heart of political struggle.



A small part of the crowd in Jack Kerouac Alley where the festival kicked off. Left to Right: Jack Hirschman, Matthew Fury (USA filmmaker), and Ferruccio Brugnaro (Italy). Behind Brugnaro is Alberto Masala (Italy) talking to Nicole Cage-Florentiny (Martinique) and Sinan Gudzevich (Serbia/Croatian). Next to Brugnaro is Maria Niero (Italy).

PHOTO/SARAH POWELL

IT’S TIME FOR THE KNIGHT TO TRIUMPH

In the shade of the olives
In the lemon leaves
In the eyes of birds
I look for you
On the summit of the red volcano
In the land painted with thyme,
O greatest joy of mine,
O greatest joy,
O home of sorrows, erupt!
O home of sorrows, erupt!
Shall we worship other gods
In the shade of your ashes
And hang on the gallows
Of your branches?
Can we forget
That we belong to the pregnant earth?
Can we forget
that we come from a bigger root?
O home of sorrows, erupt!
O home of sorrows, erupt!
Givara’s approaching.
The revolution kindles its insurrection.
It’s ignited by the tawny face,
Givara kisses its forehead
And perceives unconquerable lions.
Gaza, O my mother,
O Gaza,
The flame of longing grows bright,
Grandfather’s tent holds a song
Made up of the dreams of poverty,
Played by grains of light
And the sickle.
This is my mother, she bears a secret
Drawing me toward the yellow sands
To love, fragrant in my homeland
In a hut on a green mountainside.
April!
Proclaim that my blood exudes the fragrance
Of the land of my ancestors.

HANAN AWWAD of Palestine is an activist for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She translated the poem from Palestinian Arabic.

GLORY FOR TALI

If mother
Won’t send you bananas,
Tali Fahima,
I will deliver you in a poem
Your wings of glory.
Because for people who are used
to militaristic crap-filled mess-tins
You have brought a half a loaf of bread
And a glass of milk
And for those whose roofs
Are being blown off above their heads,
Those whose tiles are taken apart
From underneath their feet,
Those who live under the lynching regime
With pocket money you traveled
And brought a smile.

AHARON SHABTAI is an award-winning Israeli poet. Translated from Hebrew by Adva E. Levin, it was written to celebrate Tali Fahima, a woman jailed in Israel for associating with Palestinians in Jenin.

The People’s Tribune’s website at <http://www.peopletribune.org> has more quotes, poems and photos from the Festival. We regret that we were unable to publish everything. Call 800-691-6888 for more information.



Aharon Shabtai, fighting working class poet from Israel.

PHOTO/SARAH POWELL



Alejandro Murguia, of the USA, who read the poems of Miguel Mendoza Barreto, the Venezuelan poet whose visa was blocked by the US government.

PHOTO/SARAH POWELL

STOP THE WAR

Don’t wait till it’s
too late.
Don’t stay silent, not any more.
The missiles
the bombs
are getting
the upper hand
on the whole universe
on all of life.
Monster animals have taken
the reins
of earth
and world.
The darkening of the mind
and soul
is almost
total.
Don’t clam up, don’t stay silent.
Only war talks
strong and loud
in these hours
spreading blazes of blood
and death
in city and plain.
Don’t be silent, don’t keep still.
The human heart assaulted
by the terror
of darkness

these days
like a defenseless child
flounders
in uttermost weeping.

BY FERRUCCIO BRUGNARO, one of Italy’s leading poets, he called the audience to action, urgent and immediate. The poem is translated by Jack Hirschman.



Nigerian poet Cletus Nelson-Nwadike, who writes in Swedish, with Agneta Falk, the Anglo-Swedish poet who translated his work.

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