

MEMORISING PIECES FOR PERFORMANCE

by Inua Ellams

Side stepping the question of exactly what GOOD literature is, I believe the differences between good 'performance' pieces and good 'page' pieces are thin as line breaks. That is to say, a poem on a page fools around with visual tricks, with layout, with shapes, with word spacing, line breaks etc; and a poem on stage is purely audio. If with a voice you cannot recreate the tricks of a 'page' poem, then it has no business being on stage and would make for a poor reading / performance of the poem. When reading a poem from a book or from memory, I try to present the poem with the emotions that gave rise to it. This means simply, if it is a sad poem, speak slowly, deepen one's voice. If it is exciting, one might talk faster; if it is a light and lifting poem, read with air ... etc. These things generally ensure that a poem and its contents are communicated more effectively in a live setting. I'd go as far as saying to read a poem otherwise is to create a false representation of the poem, to do the poem a disservice.

1. EMOTIONS

The first tip to memorising is linked with the paragraph above. In the same way maps are colour coded, I colour code a text by emotions. This helps to create an aura around sections and as I learn the order of auras, I learn the journey of the piece and this helps a great deal in recitation.

2. MEMORY

Guinness memory world record holders once showed a technique of creating a path through their homes and leaving objects along this path. They'd walk it repeatedly until they could map the house by the objects. In this same way, I try to settle on specific objects/images in a poem, and in a join-the-dot kind of way, map it out to an audience.

3. RHYME

My work is peppered with rhymes and half rhymes. And they serve as musical alternatives to 'images' in Tip 2. This technique also works with assonance and alliteration.

4. REPLAY ... AND REPLAY PLUS

Get a small voice recorder and try to record yourself reading the piece, break it into small digestible chunks and listen to it over and over again. In much the same way you repeat a favourite song, after the 10th time, you will find yourself echoing its lyrics. After having a good grasp of the poem, try reciting it to yourself whilst listening to a song. In sporting terms, this would be akin to a hundred meter sprinter running uphill, underwater, wearing flippers. If you can do this and still cross the line in good form and time, a mere stage will be fine.

5. REWRITING

After the piece is finished try hand writing it out over and over again. The rhythmic, repetitive process focuses the mind. Each time, little parts of the text will stay with you until you have everything memorised.

6. CHANT

There are patterns, rhythms inherent in everything. Sometimes you might have to exaggerate or elongate a vowel here, a word there, but try ... most things are chant-able and the more you chant, the more you learn.

I hope these help. Try them in pairs or groups. See what works for you! Inua. <http://phaze05.com/>

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