

PEOPLE

Slam poet Alix Olson announced during a Portland appearance last year that she was born in Bethlehem, and I thought, "Just like the other savior."

It's not as much of a stretch as it sounds. Olson, who makes three stops in Oregon this month, takes the stigma out of modern feminism; as she belts out her anger at patriarchy, corporations and oppression in its zillion-and-one-forms, you can literally see the strength of conviction welling up in the audience.

Her work has been credited for linking generations of feminists. After a performance a few years back for a National Organization for Women chapter, its founder approached her and said, "I feel like I can die now." That, Olson tells me, beaming, "was the best compliment I ever got."

The 26-year-old New Yorker (who hails from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) started slamming just a few years ago at the city's Nuyorican Poets Café, the renowned venue where the art form was born. She was soon on its slam poetry team, helping win the national championship in 1998.

Olson followed that up with her own personal win: OutWrite's 1999 National Poetry Slam Champion. She

now hits the road regularly to entertain audiences in colleges, clubs and festivals the world over.

For slam virgins: Begun by Puerto Rican writers on Manhattan's Lower East Side, it's a mixture of theater and rhythmic speech with traditional poetic forms; particularly good slamers can captivate a crowd in a way difficult for conventional poetry readings. Pieces are often focused on social issues such as racism and the vast American economic divide. Judges of all competitions—big and small—are randomly chosen from the audience.

Olson, the daughter of two political scientists, is slamming her way to grassroots art legend. She's shared the stage with Alix Dobkin, Pete Seeger, Michael Moore and Meryl Streep (a commemoration of the death of Karen Silk-

The feminist savior

Lesbian feminism ushers in a poet for the new millennium. Beware, this isn't your mother's poetry.

BY LISA BRADSHAW



PHOTO BY CALDWELL LINKER

Alix Olson slams in Portland and Eugene this month

wood). In the spring of 2001 she released her first CD, *Built Like That*, which was soon followed by the cover of *Ms.* magazine.

"I think I really communicate best through rhythm," asserts Olson, who's had a love affair with theater her entire life. "I started acting when I was, like, 7. The poetry was something I did on the side, and I always...felt connected to it, but I never really understood that you could perform it."

So she stuck to theater but had, shall we say, a few theoretical issues. "I was performing in so many male playwrights' plays, and I was just so sick of them," she exclaims, noting most of the roles were as the girlfriend/wife. "Oh my God, the girlfriends are always bad!" When a

writer wants a play to "make it and really be circulated," she explains, "then they're guaranteed to have pretty bad female parts."

Then during her senior year at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, she met poet Donna Kate Rushin ("The Bridge Poem"), who described performance poetry. Soon Olson had a women's spoken word troupe put together "so that I could read my stuff and test it out and hear what other women were doing in college." After graduation, she hit the Nuyorican, and the rest is riot poet-grrrl feminist history.

Last summer, Olson spent a few days in the Rose City, along with then-partner Neeve, who co-wrote and co-performs a few pieces, and guitarist Chris Puréka ("our unpaid intern"). The three filled up In Other Words—women were standing in the back, spilling out onto Hawthorne Boulevard. It was practically the lesbian social event of the season. She received an introduction and came forward in shiny red pants, studded belt, hair sticking up all over—then got right to work: *showtime*.

"We're from New York," she begins, relating the story of heading to perform at the Oregon Country Fair, "and we thought it would be pigs and cows." The audience chuckles, fully aware of Eugene's annual hippy-inspired arts and performance festival. "So we're like driving there with the biggest trepidation...I don't know where we're going; it's a bunch of farmers sitting around. We were totally nervous...we were, like, we should just put on our dungarees, you know, and like *call* them that. Like totally nervous. And we show up and there's all these dykes and kids with fairy outfits on. And we're like OK, we're home."

The audience roars while she jumps into that trademark slam with the confidence of a heavyweight fighter in a lightweight ring.

I believe misogyny and patriarchy are closet homo lovers

and they screw over their sisters 'cause they're scared to screw each other

I believe Harriet Tubman should be on the dollar bill

We've had our fill of white boy faces, time to change places

I believe Hillary, not Bill, should have worn the crown

They could have learned from Jack and Jill which one would break it and fall down

Although familiar with the material, Portland audiences continue coming back. Sometimes



you'll get a poem you've never heard before, but mostly they want to hear the same ones—over and over. Being democratic by nature, the artist asks for requests. Invariably, there are cries for the Olson anthem "Cunt Cuntry."

I've decided to start Cunt Cuntry with our own Cuntstitution let our liberated clit bells ring out the cunts are coming it's the cunt revolution!

...I'd declare the independence of clitoris to shining clitoris proclaim the emancipation of all cunts and tell dicks this: You're being drafted for the big solution stand erect, be proud you're part of the cunt revolution

"I have a specific identity as a feminist lesbian," Olson says. "Therefore, I have a very strong audience to tap into." She's probably the only full-time traveling slam poet, which she ascribes partially to this niche—there's always somewhere to stay and always a supportive audience.

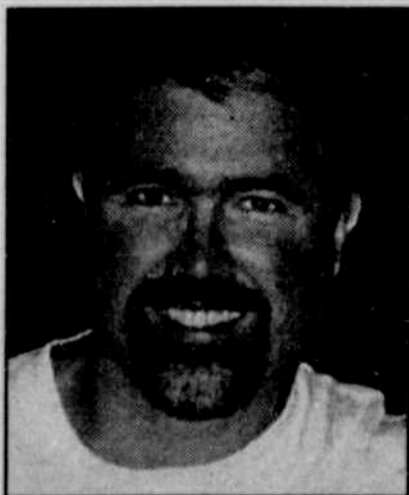
She's also fully aware of her own status and abilities. "I have access to media probably because I'm white and because I learned how to work media... I came out of an established class. I went to college and learned how to work the system. Most [poets] have full-time jobs that hinder them. I have a lot of support from my family...I've gotten grants; I know how to write grants because I've been privileged."

Regardless of class, a lot of traditional poets out there refuse to acknowledge slamming as poetry. "I love what I do, and I love the art that it is, and I don't care what it's called because I love it so much that I would defend it no matter what," Olson contends. "So many art forms are dominated...by this understanding of what art is by the upper class...just because it's not highfalutin tootin' and because people can understand it doesn't mean it's not good art...the definition of art needs to be extended in our culture." ■

ALIX OLSON appears with Doria Roberts and Turiya Autry 9:30 p.m. July 10 at Berbat's Pan, 231 S.W. Ankeny St. Olson and Roberts present Queer Stock, Queer Soup, a benefit concert for the Sexual Minority Youth Recreation Center, 7 p.m. July 16 at 2100 S.E. Belmont St. The pair can be found 9 p.m. July 12 at Eugene's Café Paradiso, 115 W. Broadway.



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