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Tony Award-Winning Poet Lemon Andersen Teaches Master Class on Spoken Word Art

As part of the President's Distinguished Speakers Series, the poet, playwright and performer explored his craft in an intimate classroom discussion



Lemon Andersen (right) gives Dillon Stambaugh, a journalism major, feedback on strengthening his performance for the April 14 Poetry Slam on campus. Image Credit: Oggi Photography

March 24, 2016 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – From writing powerful stories to techniques for dramatic performance, Tony Award-winning poet, playwright and performer Lemon Andersen shared his tips for hooking an audience with budding spoken word artists, poets and actors in a master class on Tuesday.

Before taking the stage later that night for a packed-audience presentation – “Breaking in the Door to Have Your Voice Heard” – as part of the President's Distinguished Speaker Series at Roger Williams University, Andersen revealed his tricks for creating critically acclaimed spoken word art with dozens of students from creative writing to performance studies, journalism and other majors. With many of the students vying for title of champion “slammer” in the highly competitive bi-annual Poetry Slam on April 14, Anderson held a captive audience ready to absorb his teachings to advance their artistry.

To capture an audience, Andersen said, a performer must play to their ears – it's not just about the words you choose or the story you tell, but how you tell it. Hit the right tone for each poem, inflect the words with emotion and employ dramatic pauses and spacing, and, above all, vary the delivery for each piece to "snap the audience to attention." Think of spoken word artists as "campfire crooners," he said, and the audience as "a roaring fire in front of you."

"What kind of an effect do you have to use to make the fire bigger – to keep the fire lit? And sometimes you've got to pour water on the fire in the middle of the show," said Andersen, a veteran of Russell Simmons's "Def Poetry Jam" on Broadway, where his performance earned a Tony Award for Best Special Theatrical Event and a Drama Desk nomination for his writing.

Turning to storytelling, Andersen emphasized the importance of using poetic language that paints a picture for the audience. For example, he said that in the commercials he wrote for Nike, he depicted LeBron James as a mythic hero through language that dramatically heightened the basketball star's story from poverty to celebrity.

"Poetry is not in the words, but in the emotional ride that you take with it," Andersen said. "I take the audience's ears on a journey."

Since he had noted that every spoken word artist should have a "developer" – a director or teacher to help shape the artistic concept and delivery – Andersen invited upcoming slam poets to perform a few verses at the end of his lecture. As each student ran through lines of original poetry, Andersen suggested different approaches to rhythm, volume of speech and affecting stage presence.

"Most importantly, you should remember that spoken word is a performing art," he said. "Approach it as if you were a performing artist."