



KUALA LUMPUR

MIC'S *THE WORD*

A dynamic spoken word scene is boldly reverberating in Malaysia's capital. **Barbara Woolsey** takes a seat in the audience and tunes in to the melodic strains of Kuala Lumpur's poetic underground



Co-founder Melizarani T. Selva hosting the *If Walls Could Talk* poetry event.



Selva at the launch of anthology *When I Say Spoken You Say Word*, a book compilation of 100 poems by 61 local poets.

Thursday night in Kuala Lumpur. Crammed at the back of a commercial high-rise, a café inspired by the 1960s beatnik scene is filled with 200 people. It's a special night: a pre-hiatus edition of the *If Walls Could Talk* poetry open mic night. Before long, an eager audience is sitting on the edges of their retro chairs and leather loungers, devouring rich morsels of oral performance packed into three minutes or less.

The underground spoken word scene in Malaysia's capital has grown dramatically since it started about a decade ago. *If Walls Could Talk* has welcomed almost 400 performers since it began in 2015, becoming Kuala Lumpur's longest-running poetry event. There are now at least four regular open mic nights every month, as well as one-off events and performances at literary fairs and festivals at indie-spirited

venues across the city.

"There are poets in the scene who are as young as ten years old, and as old as 66," says *If Walls Could Talk* co-founder Melizarani T. Selva. "There is one poet who has short-term memory loss and performs off-the-cuff, so once he recites a poem, he doesn't remember it anymore. There is huge appetite for this kind of diversity at poetry gigs. While there's a lot of powerful storytelling, there's also stories that most people can relate to."

Poems – spiced with wordplay, intonation, and vocal inflexion – can take audiences on a wild narrative ride. They are often deeply personal, based on anecdotes or experiences. The storytelling can be lighthearted and funny, or blunt and bold, often tackling society's more profound and taboo issues such as patriarchy, mental health, and sexuality.

"I am an openly queer boy ... and for me [the poetry scene]

has always been a safe space," says Dhinesha Karthigesu, the 2018 winner of the National Poetry Slam in Malaysia. Karthigesu will go on to represent the country in the world competition. "I've never felt the need to hide or say something that I don't want to say, or the need to censor myself."

Evenings are often filled with surprises, with performers that come from all walks of life. The line-ups are formed organically without pre-selection or curation. Some of the performances Karthigesu remembers the most were from migrant workers and refugees.

"I remember a Nigerian student going up and talking about the racism he faces in Malaysia," he says. "I just felt all that suffering. Once, someone did a diss track about her ex, and the ex was in the room. It was fire! People just go up and allow themselves to be vulnerable; they get angry, they tell jokes. It's a rollercoaster of emotions."



Dhinesha Karthigesu's winning moment at the 2018 Malaysia National Poetry Slam.



Karthigesu performing his piece "I Am That I Am".



According to Selva and Karthigesu, the scene exists thanks to Malaysia's multicultural and multi-ethnic landscape. In addition to the country's Malay and indigenous populations, there are also large Chinese and Indian communities, and over a 100 living languages spoken nationwide. About 60% of the country is Muslim, and Islam is Malaysia's official religion. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and traditional Chinese religions are also practised here.

"Malaysia is multicultural yet conservative, so there are a lot of taboos within our respective cultures," says Selva, who is a poet herself as well as a journalist and poetry educator. "These cultural practices can be quite stifling to an extent, so poetry is very liberating as it

enables you to talk about these issues with the help of metaphors and imagery."

She adds that when *If Walls Could Talk* started, the same coalition had ruled parliament for over 60 years, and citizens were seeking to express themselves in spite of government censorship.

When a May 2018 election delivered the first regime change in Malaysian history, that made people want to speak out more, says Karthigesu.

"If we can change the government in a day, imagine what else we can achieve," he explains. "It has helped a lot of people speak up more."

Spoken word events are all-inclusive by nature. They are predominantly run in Malaysia's official languages, English and Bahasa Melayu, but poets are encouraged to



PLACES FOR POETS

Whether you're a spectator or a performer, these platforms are safe spaces for lovers of the spoken word.

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Jalan Dalam

Jalan Dalam, a creative collective based in nearby Melawati, drops in monthly to host an "anything goes" open mic.

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An open-air event where poetry is accompanied by live improvised music.

Catch it:

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▲ Malaysia-based poetry competition *Slamokrasi* crowns Dhabitah Zainal as its first champion in 2016.

get on stage and perform in their mother tongues, regardless if anyone will understand or not. Karthigesu says that he has been at events where works were recited in French, Romanian, and Hindi.

Sometimes, translators come along, or audience members and other poets jump into the fold to help communicate meaning.

“There’s a lot of heart and safety in our scene,” says Selva. “There’s a lot of effort put into doing this. There’s a real sense of community.”

Poets and spectators mostly keep up with events via Facebook. Aspiring performers are welcome to message organisers via their pages to set up stage time or introduce themselves in person before the show. It creates a warm, friendly atmosphere where everyone is tingling with the nerves and excitement of doing something new, expressing their creativity, or hearing something that inspires

them or that they can relate to.

The 27-year-old Karthigesu, who studied theatre, says he fell in love with Kuala Lumpur’s intimate spoken word scene for two reasons. First, it’s more engaging, and second, it’s easier to seek mentorship in this industry compared to theatre. At the end of each performance, the audience cheers, claps, and snaps their fingers, before mingling with fellow poets.

It’s a brilliant way of meeting people in a busy city populated by 1.5 million, he says. “Especially if you’re a tourist.”

“You’ll get to experience a side of KL that’s not in your travel brochures,” he goes on. “You’ll get to hear what people are actually going through. You’ll see the community, and find out where the best places are to eat. You’ll never have to worry about getting around the city because we’ll guide you. That’s one of the best things about poets; we’re all incredibly friendly!” 



BARD RAPS

Malaysian verse-makers to keep on your radar.

Wani Ardy

A spoken word artist and singer-songwriter, Ardy began performing in 2002 but started donning a hijab on stage much later. She has published several books of her creative writing.

 [waniardy](#)

Jamal Raslan

This poet has won several poetry slams for his impassioned verses on growing up in modern-day Malaysia. You can watch him speaking at TEDxKL, an online conference platform.

 [jamalraslan](#)

Jack Malik

He performs the spoken word in both English and Malay, and has competed in international poetry slams.

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