Sarah Kay Performs with Wonder
by Nathan Scolaro

Nathan Scolaro on Sarah Kay

For over a decade, 28-year-old Sarah Kay has touched millions of people with her exquisite spoken word poetry. Her TED Talk, “If I should have a Daughter” has had over 9.5 million views, showing us the power of poetry in an often-cynical world. Whenever I watch Sarah perform, something remarkable happens. My heart rate quickens, I want to be more present. I want to feel more, love more, because she holds up a mirror to the deepest parts of our humanity—highlighting life’s nuances to make us taste, touch and feel the moment.

Growing up in New York City the daughter of two photographers, Sarah was encouraged to “always look for the light.” Every day at school as a child, she would open up her lunchbox to a poem among her snacks, a small gift from her parents that taught her to pay attention to the world and find joy in it. At age 14, her heart bursting with poetry and chutzpah, she performed at the famous Bowery Poetry Club, uncertain of the work but compelled to share it anyway. It was a defining moment: in the dimly-lit space before a roomful of adults, she discovered the magic that happens when we listen to and share our stories. By the end of her teens, Sarah was performing her poetry around the world, becoming a powerful role model with her vitality and message of hope.

While in high school, Sarah founded Project VOICE, an organisation which uses spoken word poetry to improve literacy, promote empowerment, and encourage empathy and vulnerability in the classroom. Through workshops and performances, she and her colleagues instil in the students a desire to share and listen to each other’s stories, while showing them that it’s okay to be affected by emotion. “I think the only way people become willing to be vulnerable is if it’s modelled to them,” she tells me.

When we speak, Sarah is enjoying a rare period of “downtime”—she’s not touring Europe or teaching in remote parts of Nepal. Instead, she’s at a residency in New York processing her experiences and wrapping words around them. I find a familiar voice on the other side of the line, someone who is thoughtful with her words and genuinely navigating the world with wonder, reminding me that listening isn’t just a role we have to play in our lives. It’s a privilege.

This wonderful photoshoot took place at the Sheen Center in New York.

NATHAN SCOLARO: So I wanted to begin by telling you that I teach a class called “Storytelling as Therapy” for The School of Life in Melbourne, and I actually play your poem “Hiroshima” in it. And every time I finish playing it there is this beautiful kind of

stunned silence in the room. It's like everyone's been hit with something real and human. It's the same feeling every time and I love it. And I was thinking about what that response is and I realised that your poetry, certainly for me at least, gives us permission to feel. Suddenly we're all like, "Oh yes! It's okay to express joy and pain and confusion about the world." Because you feel that so much when you're on stage, through your body language and in your voice and of course in the poetry—an intensity of emotion, which in turn gives us license to feel I think. Is that something you're conscious of?

SARAH KAY: Yeah. I mean first of all: thank you. That's a deep compliment and I appreciate it. And I would say yes, that is something I'm conscious of. And I think what you're talking about is more to do with the choices I make in the way I exist in the world, as a performer and as an educator and really just as a human. I am a real champion of vulnerability. Champion, as in, I like to champion it, not champion like, "I'm the grand winner of vulnerability."

[Laughs]. Yes!

The verb "to champion." By which I mean there is something really unhelpful about the way vulnerability is often equated with weakness. And it's so important now for us to correct that misconception.

We need to be vulnerable with each other in order for empathy to exist and in order for growth and understanding to happen. I think the only way that people become willing to be vulnerable is if it's modelled for them. And if somebody else either explicitly or implicitly gives them permission by showing them that vulnerability is not something to be ashamed of—but rather something that can be respected and honoured—then that's amazing. So I'm very cognisant in the work that I do of trying to model vulnerability myself. And then I also make a real effort to hold and protect other people's vulnerability in a classroom or mentorship setting.

And I always want to honour the courage that it takes to bring that vulnerability into a space with strangers, or even not strangers. When I'm performing in a school for Project VOICE—maybe with Phil Kaye who's often with me during the performance—often we'll perform for maybe 45 minutes, and then we will stop and ask if there's anybody in the audience who has a poem they would really like to come up and share. We always check in with the teachers first and we say, "Hey, do you think it would be okay if we asked the students whether anybody wants to come up and share a poem?" And often the teachers are like, "Oh sure, you can ask, but I don't think anyone's going to want to do that." Or, "They've never seen spoken word poetry before so I don't think anyone knows about it yet." Teachers are often more sceptical, though supportive. I've been doing this work for 10 years, and I think the number of times that nobody has volunteered to come up is maybe three.

Wow. They're so inspired by what they've just seen that they want to give it a go?

Well, more often than not, the kid who volunteers to come up and share is not the kid anybody expects to. There are usually two different categories. Either it's a kid who is typically very shy and doesn't like performing and doesn't speak up in class, in which case all the teachers are shocked because they are not expecting this student to present in front of their whole school. Or it's a kid who is a boy child—a boy who is known for being a troublemaker class clown. And they raise their hand and we call on them and immediately everyone's like, "Oh man, they're going to pull something!" All the teachers are biting their fingernails in the back.

And the troublemaker kid gets onstage and shares something incredibly heartfelt and thoughtful. And the reason why those two things happen, I believe, is not because we're magic or that we have a secret key. It's because we spend 45 minutes modelling vulnerability and carving out a space in which that vulnerability is respected and is necessary and is vital.

We're physically creating a space onstage that says, "Here's a circle that you step into, that we step into, where that vulnerability is protected."

And when kids get to see that happen over and over again, all of a sudden this tiny seed is planted. They go, "Oh if that is possible, maybe it is possible for me also." And that's how you have these kids who are generally a little more quiet get up there. Or a kid who everyone expects to be an asshole actually taking the opportunity to share something personal and deep. And it happens over and over again in many schools to the point where it doesn't feel like an accident any more. So this is work that I am both cognisant of and work hard at. And so I appreciate the fact that it carried even through a video in a classroom. That means a lot to me.

What do you think it is about spoken word poetry, as compared to other art forms, that lets us tap into our vulnerabilities and really open up and share in this way?

Well, it's certainly available in other art forms too. It's not like it's exclusive to poetry by any means. But the thing about spoken word poetry that I've always responded to is that there is immediacy built in. So there's a person standing in front of you saying the words they have created. A lot of times when we engage in art there's a little more distance between us and the artist, right? So if we're looking at a painting, usually the painter's not standing next to us while we're looking at it. Or if you're watching a dance, even if the dancer is the creator of the dance, because of the abstraction of dance there's a little distance built in there too. Which is not to say that you can't have incredibly vulnerable painting and dance that is deeply moving. But I think the advantage that spoken word poetry has is that the artist is sharing the exact same breath and space as their audience, which I think is a particularly powerful thing.

Yeah it is. And you know, as well as being vulnerable, your poetry is also very hopeful I think. It's certainly not ignorant to the hurt and pain in the world, but it points us to the light. I think of your poem, "If I Should Have a Daughter." That beautiful line: "She's gonna learn this life will hit you hard in the face, wait for you to get back up so it can kick you in the stomach. But getting the wind knocked out of you is the only way to remind your lungs how much they like the taste of air." I think your poetry is always seeing the hope in struggle, which is an important message.

Yeah. I think a lot of my hopefulness is very connected to my mum. My mother has lived in New York City for something like 45 years. So she's a deep New Yorker, loves New York. But so has my dad, my dad was born and grew up there. I was born and grew up there. You know, we're a family of New Yorkers. Now, every New Yorker I know has a jaded edge to them. And I can guarantee there will be a day, at least one, for all of us where we're like, "Man, fuck this city, the subways are gross, look at these rats, life's too crowded, there are all these tourists in my way! Stupid New York, I hate this city," right? Every single New Yorker I know has that except my mother.

Every day my mother goes out, she comes back in love with this city anew. Doesn't matter how gross it is, it doesn't matter how crowded and it doesn't matter how shitty her day was, she loves New York. And the fact that she can find joy and wonder in the same shitty city that everybody else goes outside in is really fundamental to who she is. And I think really fundamental to who I am. I can walk out into the same shitty world that everybody else is in and I'm looking for wonder. And I'm looking for joy. And I'm looking for pockets of magic. And my dad does it through photography—actually they're both photographers. And so they're navigating the world looking for light, literal light. My father likes to say, "Follow the light" when it comes to photography. I do the same thing but it's not literal light, it's metaphorical. So I'm looking for the light regardless of what kind of darkness I seem to be navigating at any given moment.

Beautiful. Can you share the story of your parents and how they introduced you to poetry as a child, because I think it was such a gift that they gave you every day.

Yeah, it was. So when I was a kid, from kindergarten through fourth grade, every single day my mum or dad made me lunch to take to school. And every single day when it was lunchtime I would open my lunch and there would be a poem. One of them would write a poem on a piece of paper and fold it and put it in my lunchbox. Neither of them are "writers" per se, and neither of them would consider themselves poets. It was just a thing they did. And the poems were short and they sometimes rhymed, sometimes didn't, they were "Doctor Seuss-y" sometimes. But they were just little poems. And obviously without realising it, what they were doing was cementing my relationship to what a poem is. Because it meant that a poem became something I looked forward to. It became something that was intimate and special and mine, something that was a surprise. I didn't know what it would be about; it was like a gift. It was something that I expected but not something I could predict. And all of those relationships are still how I feel about poetry, that intimacy and unpredictability, it still feels that way to me. And perhaps more than anything, it felt like a small celebration, a small gift. And that kernel of celebration is a huge key, because now the act of writing a poem is akin to the act of celebrating something.

Even when I'm writing a poem about something sad or angry. It's still an act of celebration because I've taken the time and energy to look at that thing and to hold it up to the light and say, "This is what I want us to spend time on," and I want to find the right words to wrap around it and I want to hold space to share with a reader or listener. So in that way I'm really celebrating that thing. I'm relishing in whatever that topic is. I think the fact that for me poetry exists as an act of celebration is probably where a lot of that hopefulness also comes from.

I'm conscious of the fact that a lot of people also find poetry challenging. I think for some it comes from that place in high school when you're given a poem and you think you have to understand it in a certain way but you don't, and then you don't want to admit you don't understand it. What are some of the lessons you share or the approach you take in your work with young people through Project VOICE?

So in a lot of education models that we're used to, there's the figure of authority who's the teacher and they have the knowledge, and they're going to take that knowledge and give it to the student. So much of what we try to do with Project VOICE is to reverse that and say, "You, the student, already have so much of what you need. You already have stories, you already have a voice, you already have a style of communication, you already

have language that is vibrant and yours, and what we want to do is hear it. And we want to give it space and room to breathe and be honoured." So I think that's a pretty fundamental guideline in how we enter a classroom space. And then really what we're trying to do is be an assistant to those existing voices and to help be a conduit for that work that they already possess. So it's a subtle nuance in how we think about it, but it makes a really big difference in the philosophies of teaching.

It can be hard though, to find your voice. I still struggle with that now. I think we all have a voice, but to tap into that and embrace it and then use it in the world effectively is a really challenging thing. Is it something you see other young people struggle with?

I don't know, it's quite an abstract thing: to find your voice. I've been doing this since I was 14 and I don't know if I've found it. I think that's a hard thing to define and to fixate on. I think it'll drive you more wacky than it will help you. More fundamental was something I learned when I was a teenager, which is the really simple premise that it's just as important to listen as it is to speak. But those two things have to exist in a balance. So if you are the type of person who loves to hear yourself talk, you're missing out on everybody else's narrative and everybody else's perspective. And that's really critical: you've got to listen more. If you're the kind of person who is eager to hear everybody else but doesn't want to write because you don't know if you're "good" or you're not convinced that you've found your voice yet, then that's also not good because when you don't tell your own story typically somebody else tries to tell it for you. And usually they don't do a very good job. It might be detrimental.

And so those two things need to exist in balance: the listening and storytelling. That's why one of the things I love about spoken word poetry is that you get your turn onstage to share your poem, and then you sit back down in the audience with everybody else, and you pay attention and you clap. And that's built into a lot of the fabric of the art form, which is nice.

So in terms of panicking about finding your voice, if you're just doing an equal amount of writing and listening, it's going to work itself out. You're going to be informed by all these other voices while you're also working through your own work and discovering where it feels right and where it doesn't—how it sits today and how it sits tomorrow. So that balance is really what we try to support in a community of young people.

You have a line in "Hiroshima" that always strikes me. You say, "The impossible is trying to connect in this world… It's what I strive for every time I open my mouth: that impossible connection." I wondered, given that connection is really at the heart of what we're talking about here, what it is about connection that seems impossible for you, but worthy of striving for?

It's so funny because there are many pieces to that. It's changed for me over the years. I think when I wrote that poem it probably meant something different to me than it does now. When I first started falling in love with poetry I was super young, and in fact I wrote "Hiroshima" when I was 18.

Incredible!

So that is a solid decade ago [laughs]. But I think everyone is always looking to try to make a connection, right? I think that's where the human loneliness gene is built in.

Spoken word poetry came at a time in my life that was really critical, which is to say immediately following September 11th. I grew up in lower Manhattan, and so September 11th had a really profound impact on my world, and it's not an accident that I fell in love with spoken word poetry immediately following that event.

So while all of the adults around me were trying to keep the world from falling apart, I was a 14-year-old trying to understand how I fit into that, and here was this incredible community that allowed me to stand onstage and work through all of my 14-year-old feelings and thoughts. And that community saw me and honoured me by listening and applauding when I was done. And that very simple gift is not to be underestimated. I think for a lot of young people that's still a huge part of what attracts them to this art form.

In a lot of ways it can feel like the first time you're invited to participate in a conversation that's been going on without you. It can feel like the first time that your experiences and your feelings and your fears and joys are given the same amount of weight as a grownup's. So I think the connection that I was talking about when I was writing that poem was very much about the power of being seen and listened to in poetry. I think now that's still true and still valuable. But now I feel that the work I do when I'm performing onstage is less for me and more for my audience. Does that make sense?

It does.

So I wrote "Hiroshima" at a time when I was going to the Bowery Poetry Club every week and getting onstage and sharing a poem that was deeply connected to whatever it was I was going through at that moment. And I received validation and empowerment from this community who was listening to me and seeing me in this way. So it was like, "Here's what I'm going through and I'm going to present it and I'm going to get this feedback and it's going to help me grow." Now I do a lot of that work before I get onstage. When I get onstage now I'm very, very cognisant of how much of a gift it is that there's a room full of people who have taken time out of their lives to sit and listen to me, and what is my obligation to them? And what is it that I can do to return the gift of their time and energy that they're giving me? So it doesn't matter to me what I'm going through tonight in my personal life. What matters is that I'm onstage and I'm engaged with this room and I'm giving them a show that is worth coming out for. And whatever it is I'm going through is something that I'm going through when I'm in my writing. Which I think is a little bit different. It's like using that stage space less as a therapy bench and more of an invitation for other people to enter that space, wherever they are, to engage with the art from where they are.

Do you get much time to write? Because you always seem to be touring!

Yeah. I travel most of the year. So it's a really special thing for me to be able to be in one place for more than a second. At the moment I'm doing a writing residency which is a real blessing. But it's always tough to remind myself to: A, let my reel slow down and B, not stress myself out about needing to reach a certain level of perceived productivity. Because as soon as I get to a place like this I'm like, "Okay, you only have a month, this is your time to write! Write everything now!"

That's too much pressure, too much pressure!

[Laughs]. Yes. So I want to be slightly more Zen about it.

Good! But how much comes to you on the road I wonder? Because ideas come when we least expect them. And you've got to catch them, right?

Yeah, I use an analogy about fishing a lot. Sometimes I wake up and look outside and there will be fish jumping everywhere. And I'll be like, "Oh shit, I've got to get a bucket! Look at all these fish!" And then my job is to simply get out of the way and get the fish in the bucket. And then there are other times when I look outside and there's nothing and it's totally still. And I'm like, "Hmm, it does not look like there's anything going on right now." And then my job is to set out nets and lines and do the work of looking for where the fish might be. The wider I set my nets, the more places that poetry might be lurking. In my case often that means reading, which is where I can find some glimmer of something that I didn't have access to before. Or going for a walk, or reviewing old notebooks.

What happens when I'm on the road is I do a lot of absorbing, I'm like a sponge. In some ways that's really helpful for someone who is a writer, because when you're travelling your senses are all heightened. When you're at home in your normal life you don't pay attention to small details because everything is normalised. So you're like, "Oh, this is what going to work feels like, and this is the path that I drive, and this is when I walk." But when you're travelling your senses are all going haywire. "What's that smell? What's that sound? What kind of bird is that? Oh my God what is that, what is that?" And since I'm travelling all the time [laughs]…

You're always alive!

Yeah! I'm in that space. So I absorb a lot. And then I have to try to keep track of it so that when I do find pockets of quiet I can start to actually process it, and do the writing. 'Cause the writing takes a lot more time and quiet than I typically have when I'm on the road. So usually when I'm on the road it's very simple record keeping and data collection as opposed to artistry.

Right, so the real deep processing of the observation comes later. That's such an interesting way of thinking about the work that you do. One is being in the moment and observing and taking it in, and then the other is really building space and time to process and recreate or reimagine maybe.

Yeah. And then sometimes it comes bursting forth and just demands that you write it down. But more often than not that's not the case. More often it's really on me to make the time to go and create something.

Do you ever just not want to, or not want to open up that wellspring by going for a walk or going through the notebooks? Would you ever just rather sit on the couch and binge on TV?

I mean, I do that too! But obviously I get the free time so rarely. I get moments of quiet and stillness so rarely that any time I have it, it's such a gift, and something that I'm overjoyed to have. And it's good for me.

The reason I sit down to write a poem has always been and continues to be because there's something that I'm having trouble understanding with my normal brain. I poem

my way through it. I really think of “poeming” as a verb.

Yeah! [Laughs]. That’s great.

I poem my way through it to see if I can get a grasp on it. And so in that way it’s absolutely a service to my own sanity and it makes me feel like I’m in math class where it’s like, “Show me your work on this math problem.” When I’m writing a poem it’s like, “Show me all your work on this heart problem.”

I love that you said that, because I’m really interested in the potential of poetry to heal our hearts, both as readers and listeners, and to raise consciousness. And also to create social change.

Yeah, and you know, I have been stunned over and over again by how poetry and specifically oral poetry or spoken word poetry or whatever you decide to call it, is one that fits and already has a history in so many different societies, and also fills different roles in different places. So what people need and use poetry for in their lives shifts from place to place. I love that people find poetry when they need it and I also love that poetry can serve different needs. For example, in the US, a lot of spoken word has very strong roots in a history of marginalised communities being silenced or not being recognised and respected in mainstream art or media. So it’s about using this art form as a way to find a place that they could redefine their narratives and write themselves out of the margins that they had been relegated to. And so there’s an act of resistance, and there’s a political current that runs through a lot of the roots of the modern spoken word poetry movement in the US. I mean, there are plenty of poets now who exist outside of those themes, but the history is absolutely connected to that.

I’ve also worked with poets in Nepal for many years now. And in Nepal there’s a really fascinating thing where many Nepali people speak multiple languages. So they’ll have an ethnic dialogue that they speak at home. And then there’s also Nepali, which is the official state-sanctioned language, but they don’t usually speak that at home. So they’re fluent in their ethnic language and Nepali, and a lot of them will speak English as well. So a lot of folks are tri-lingual. And what those languages mean and where they’re used is really specific. So when these young Nepali spoken word poets first started writing and performing their work, it was a really big political statement as to what language they decided to write and speak in. And it was an even bigger political statement depending on if they were writing a single piece that combined languages. To choose to do that sends a really powerful message to the older generation for whom that wasn’t a possibility. And that choice of language being political is something that is not the same in other places, which I think is really remarkable.

Interesting. I love this idea that we can tell stories to project a better version of how we want the world to be. In this class that I mentioned at the start, I say something like, “Storytelling is about learning from the past, ownership in the present and becoming in the future.” The last point is this idea that we can live into the stories we are telling about our lives, which I find both difficult to understand, but also compelling. What do you think about that?

Well, as soon as you started, what came to mind is a poem by the poet Anis Mojgani. He has a poem called “Here Am I” and the last line of his poem is: “What made the beauty of the moon? And the beauty of the sea? Did that beauty make you? Did that beauty make

me? Will that make me something? Will I be something? Am I something? And the answer comes: already am, always was, and I still have time to be." Which I really love. "Already am, always was and I still have time to be." So hopeful. Both affirming and acknowledging the possibility in us, and the work that still needs to be done.

But what you're talking about I think is this idea of speaking ourselves into existence. And I think that there are two levels to that. There's who you yourself want to be in the narrative you tell about yourself, and then there's the world you want to live in and how you are trying to make the world a better place. So it's a question of whether you can speak yourself into existence, and whether you can speak the world into existence. And I think both are possible.

Some of the best spoken word poets that I know of are women of colour. And women of colour are historically and continuously marginalised and erased from mainstream narratives and patriarchal history.

Because in doing so, they demand their place and their important role in the world—the space for their narratives to be included. They also make room for someone coming behind them to have representation and to have a model of a path that is possible for them. So they are both speaking into existence their own narrative and their own future, and then also actively participating in changing the landscape of who can come after them. And I think that's revolutionary.

And it makes me think of the word "flux," which you have on your website, with the definition: "the action or process of flowing and continuous change." We are always changing and the world is always changing, it's up to us and nature what that change looks like. I wonder how you think of yourself and your poetry in relation to that word "flux."

Yeah, I mean, man, if we're not in continuous change, like, what is even the point? I'm also a Gemini, which is the worst [laughs]. It means I need constant stimulation and things to discover and adventures, as would be evidenced by my lifestyle choice, which is one of eternal travel and movement. But even if you're someone who's not travelling, I still think to understand that you are in constant change and that the world is in constant change is so immensely important. And also important because it reminds you that at any time you start to become stagnant or start to become confident that you understand things, there's always another question to ask.

The notion that we individually are always changing doesn't mean you have to forget everything you know. It means that you bring along everything that you've accumulated, and that informs the next step forward and the next step, often in surprising ways—ways you didn't think or prepare for, which is really neat. I would say definitely one of the biggest gifts I've been given in my work is the chance to meet a lot of people, because I'm constantly in new environments and in new classrooms. I get to meet so many different people in contexts that are vastly different from the one that I grew up in or the one that I frequent. And that gives me the opportunity to encounter different worldviews and life experiences and environments and cultures and social structures and all of those things that help me to grow bigger in understanding. It's also just a nice way of keeping myself and my smallness in perspective, I think.