



Ariane von Graffenried with Robert Aeberhard

'Sometimes you understand what is said, sometimes you don't'

Swiss author and spoken word performer **Ariane von Graffenried**, talks about the roots of oral literature, its popularity in the present time and marrying spoken word with music

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For Ariane von Graffenried, neither the medium nor the language has ever been a barrier when it comes to expressing her thoughts. She glides from one form of art to another, from one language to another and sometimes, creates a mélange of all of them. This Swiss-born writer and performer will be in Pune to read a spoken word text about the shogun dame Calamity Jane and multilingual texts of her recently published book *Babylon Park* on Sunday at the sixth edition of Pune International Literary Festival (PILF).

Graffenried is a member of writers' collective called 'Bern is Everywhere'. She also collaborates with musician Robert Aeberhard, and together, they perform as the duo — Fitzgerald & Rimini.

At PILF, you can listen to Graffenried between 11.10 am and 12.10 pm at YASHADA, Baner Road. Over to Graffenried...

Despite the popularity of spoken word, there is not much awareness about the genre. How would you define it?

I define spoken word as a performative form of literature. It's written to be read aloud in front of an audience. Spoken word is not a new phenomenon, it was the major literary form of the ancient world, performed by Greek bards who recounted their epics to the accompaniment of harp music. Poetry existed long before printing press came.

Spoken word is strongly rooted in African American culture and was influenced in the 20th century by jazz, hip hop, spoken word texts and rap.

attention to the sound. The characteristic features are rhythm, repetition, reduction and innovation.

While performing spoken word, you also combine it with music. How do you connect oral literature with musical expression on stage?

Combining spoken word with music gives you the possibility to expand your literary repertoire, to enhance it with music. I perform by embellishing it with another art form. Having a background in theatre studies, I've always been interested in oral literature, the materiality of language and story-telling. Also, I have a penchant for crossover art and hybrid forms.

That's why I started to work at the interface between literature, music and performance. In close collaboration with the musician and sound artist Robert Aeberhard, some of my texts became spoken songs published in books and recorded on CDs under the name Fitzgerald & Rimini. Sometimes I write on a musical composition, sometimes Robert composes the music on a text. The music is a separate art form that can support, contradict or merge with the sound of the spoken text. This expands the possibilities of reception for an audience.

What is the history and legacy of oral literature and how is your group Bern is Everywhere (Bern is everywhere) reviving it?

In Switzerland, we have four national languages — German, French, Italian and Romansh. But

of course, there are much more languages spoken by big diaspora communities from Kosovo, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and other countries. In the German part of Switzerland where I come from, the spoken languages are depending on the region, different Swiss dialects.

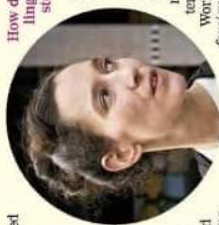
The group Bern is Everywhere (Bern is everywhere) that I'm part of, is a collective of writers and musicians from different parts of Switzerland. We write and perform in different languages such as German, French, English, Italian and Swiss dialects. In our manifesto, we proclaim that all languages are worth the same. You learn a language to belong somewhere.

How does being multilingual help you tell stories better?

Mixing different languages gives me the possibility to experiment with the musicality of languages, to find new combinations, rhyme patterns and assonances. Working with different foreign languages also creates a distance with your first language. You may make mistakes.

Great art was often caused by mistakes.

I use multilingualism as an artistic technique but it's an everyday phenomenon. Many people speak more than one language, they switch from one into another, sometimes within the same sentence. Languages flow into each other and communicate with each other. Sometimes you understand what is said, sometimes you don't. When you don't, you get the feeling of the music of speech. And the feelings that are behind the speech.



How are social media and literary festivals helping make spoken word popular?

In my country, social media is a platform to advertise your literary work. In countries, where the freedom of speech is controlled or the possibilities to publish are limited, it is a very important publication organ for all art forms, I guess. Festivals, however, are very important to make spoken word not only popular but also to establish it as another literary form.

You write text for radio, stage and newspaper. How is each medium different and how do you decide content for each?

Most writers use different techniques and publish their work in different media — It's not always a question of choice. I like to write in different media but I don't decide on the content and form, usually the medium does.

Can you tell us what can Pune audience look forward to your session at PILF?

I will read a spoken word text about the shogun dame Calamity Jane, who wore leather pants and killed Indians, which was uncommon even for a woman in the Wild West at the end of the 19th century. The epic poem about Calamity Jane reflects American history — a history of slavery and land grab — that was for half a century glossed over by the arts, entertainment shows and Hollywood films.

The myth of the Wild West is today still re-narrated in Donald Trump's idea of making America great again. Furthermore, I'm looking forward to read some multilingual texts of my recently published book *Babylon Park* in original and English translation to the Pune audience and hope they will both disappear on their chairs.