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From the lecture hall to the Edinburgh Fringe: Professor Albert Mortiz

Gavin Au-Yeung

Victoria College Professor **Albert Mortiz** is the author of more than 15 books of poetry and the Canadian winner of the 2009 Griffin Poetry Prize. This summer Mortiz had the opportunity to read from his latest book, *The New Measures*, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and at Canada House in Trafalgar Square. Writer **Gavin Au-Yeung** caught up with Mortiz upon his return.



Writing in *Quill and Quire*, reviewer Mark Callanan said *The New Measures* "articulates with great artistry its author's profound concern and abiding love for the human race". (Photo by Steve Payne)

Tell us about your latest book: *The New Measures*.

I wanted this book to be explicitly about the tie between the joy and dynamism of living

and the joy and dynamism of poetry. The general conception of art is that it is abstract and meditative, but poetry is not separated from life. In fact it is in continuous dialogue with life, its open to life and it constantly deepens and sharpens your appreciation of the moment and your awareness of how the past feeds into the moment and is still living in the moment and thus you hunger to adventure into the future – that is the substance of all great poetry.

Read the *Quill & Quire*'s book review [here](#).

How does poetry allow you to convey such a message?

Poetry tends to be the art that combines most of our life. You can argue that the word and language is the most important thing that makes us human. Poetry is the deepest and most comprehensive and sophisticated use of language. So it is the deepest point in what is very likely the deepest stratum of the human being.

What was it like to speak at Edinburgh Fringe Festival?

It was wonderful, Edinburgh is a beautiful and somewhat strange city – very modern, but with medieval and renaissance features. The festival was just vibrant; streets were swarmed and the night lights were vivacious. There were about 90 venues at the festival, almost all busy simultaneously. The festival is very open to the city, there are all kinds of different people and they just come off the street.

My reading was at an independent art venue used during the festival called Summerhall. I read with two other Canadian poets (Ian Burgham and Catherine Graham) and the great British poet Douglas Dunn. The organizers had done a great job so we had a very large and knowledgeable audience. All together it was a very distinguished and interesting event – it went off really well.

How did that compare with Canada House?

Canada House was lovely. It's a completely different experience. It's very exclusive and there are security people who escort you when the doors open. The reading followed a strict schedule; everyone is shepherded to where they need to go. We read according to our schedule, then sign books and chat for a while. But then when the event ends – we're all forced out (laughs).

Within that, the audience was very interested. There was a fine spectrum of people: British people, Canadians who just so happened to be there, people from universities – professors and students, all kinds of people of all ages. We had a great time, but the difference in tone of the two events was just amusing to me. One was more of a festival and the other like a diplomatic event.

What does it mean for your students to have a professor who works in the arts – not just teaching it?

Students should be engaged in what they're studying, it's not about just reading a book or having the basic

information presented. One of the chief ways students are engaged is through their teacher; a teacher who himself or herself is a researcher or practitioner in the discipline.

The benefit is that students are in direct communication and participation with the people who are actually working in our culture and civilization and answering the vital questions; whether it is anthropology, philosophy, physics or poetry.

What's up next for you?

I've been a translator for the great Spanish poet Ludwig Zeller since the late 70s. So I've got two new books of translations coming up this fall and I'll be reading from those books to celebrate him. I might go down to the Guadalajara International Book Fair.

And now that the fall is rolling around, I'll do readings around town at various venues to present my book. Most people don't know one of the most vivacious things about Toronto is its poetry scene. You can attend two, three, four different poetry events every night of the week from September through May. To just read your book around town is a very fun thing to do.

Why poetry?

One of the glories of poetry is that people just keep doing poetry more and more every year despite the fact that it is marginalized by a highly technical and economic society. People simply discover it, there's no doubt that poetry is one of the primordial human activities. Wherever there are people there's poetry.

It's a necessity – not in the sense like you need it to breathe or eat – but it's a necessity in the sense where there's never a human group around without poetry, it's automatically produced. Poetry is very healthy today.

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