



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

The POEMobile Dreams of Peace

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

The Brooklyn-Queens Expressway (BQE) is bumper to bumper. Up in the cab of the POEMobile, I can see a clear and beautiful view of nighttime Manhattan on my left, but curving ahead for miles along this crazy, twisted excuse for a highway, traffic is at a standstill. I'm returning home from the POEMobile's celebration for the Muslim holiday of Eid at Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights, Queens.

The POEMobile is a magnificent, brightly painted, poem-bedecked art truck with painted iron wings arching above its roof and poems in a two dozen languages emblazoned on its side—beneath which hides a dilapidated 1988 Chevy Step Van, which could conk out at any moment.

The name POEMobile is inscribed in cut metal above the cab above the Pablo Neruda line:

Llegó la poesía a buscarme / Poetry came in search of me.

The POEMobile, sponsored by Bowery Arts + Science and City Lore, projects poems onto walls and buildings in tandem with live readings and musical performances in neighborhoods in New York. As poets perform in their native lan-

guages from the street or plaza, the words float above their heads, often several stories high. The projections open with an animated, feathered wing brushing words onto the building, inspired by a Martin Espada line: "God must be an owl, electricity coursing through the hollow bones, a white wing brushing the building"

With the POEMobile stuck in a classic late night New York City traffic jam standstill, my mind wanders back to our recent programs—a Russian/Ukrainian Yevgeny Yevtushenko tribute on the Bowery; a Persian Norooz/New Year celebration in DUMBO, and both a Korean and a Chinese New Year celebration in and around Flushing Town Hall in Queens. Specially designed software enables poems in their original language to morph into English and vice versa. The community experiences the impact of the poetry in their spoken tongue, while the English-speaking visitors and neighbors grasp the deep poetic experiences of the foreign language poets they live among.

As traffic inches forward, one car length at a time, my mind muses on this guerilla poetry, set up in diverse urban neighborhoods, creating momentary beauty in words and music and light, and traveling under the radar of both news

outlets and, for the most part, the authorities.

Under the radar. This contraption travels under the radar. That's what sparked the traffic-induced dream. . . .

World War III breaks out, and the allies are under attack from all fronts. The crew of the POEMobile is out of work, as all funding for the arts has been summarily axed. The new AXIS powers of Iran, Iraq, Korea, China, and Russia move to take over the world. It's a scene right out of a cheesy Hollywood movie. The Allied powers are on the verge of collapse. Our Nighthawks, Raptors, and drones can't penetrate their missile defense systems. Our counterattacks are continually repelled.

Hey," I say to my partner in crime, the poet Bob Holman, director of Bowery Arts + Science. "Remember? This thing flies under the radar."

Without warning, jet engines appear on the POEMobile's iron wings, and this crazy contraption takes flight. Bob adjusts his helmet, electricity coursing through his veins.

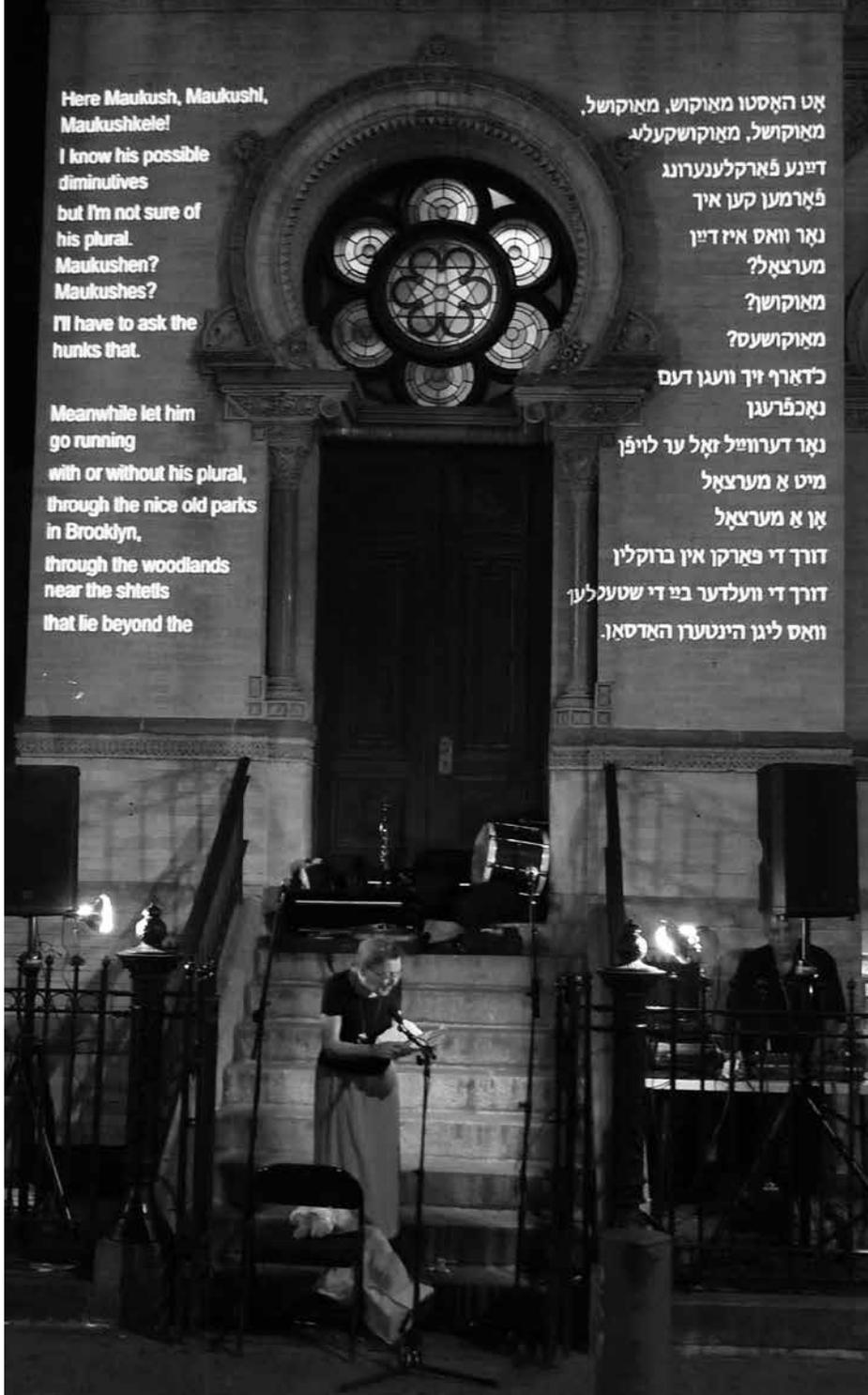
First stop, the peace rally in Washington Square. We need CJ, our projection maven. We find him fiddling with a projector lens inside a DUMBO warehouse where an Occupy War peace rally is forming.

"CJ—get in here—we're flying out—bring the projector—we need 100,000 lumens NOW!

Next, we need Fletcher. Where is she? Getting ready



Dancing to Klezmer music at the POEMobile presentation at Eldridge Street Synagogue. Photo © Abby Ronner 2012



The POEMobile projects poems in English and Yiddish on to the Eldridge Street facade. Photo © Abby Ronner 2012.

Here Maukush, Maukushi,
Maukushkele!
I know his possible
diminutives
but I'm not sure of
his plural.
Maukushen?
Maukushes?
I'll have to ask the
hunks that.

Meanwhile let him
go running
with or without his plural,
through the nice old parks
in Brooklyn,
through the woodlands
near the shtetls
that lie beyond the

אָט האָסטו מאַקוש, מאַקושל,
מאַקושקעלע.
דינע פֿאַרקלענערונג
פֿאַרמען קען איך
נאָר וואָס איז דיין
מעראַאַל?
מאַקוש?
מאַקושעס?
כּדאַרף זיך וועגן דעם
נאַכפֿרעגן
נאָר דערזוייל זאָל ער לויפֿן
מיט אַ מעראַאַל
אָן אַ מעראַאַל
זורך די פֿאַרקן אין ברוקלין
זורך די וועלדער ביי די שטעטלעך
וואָס ליגן הינטערן האַרסאָן.

around one corner after another, towards the people,
going wherever peaceniks gather. Cast on a building in
downtown Baghdad, the words of Forugh Farrokhzad
(1935–1967), translated by Farzaneh Milani:

*Kuş ölü, sen uçuşu hatırla / Remember flight,
the bird is mortal*

Then in Moscon, on the walls of the Hermitage,
through a bevy of aircraft fire, CJ steadies his baby.
Words of a Yevtushenko poem three stories high on
a wall:

I am
each old man
here shot dead.

I am
every child
here shot dead.

Unnoticed by the foreign news departments, shoulder-
to-air missiles explode far above us, the crazy copter
dodging the skyscrapers of power.

In Beijing, suddenly, we crisscross a corner and
project onto the walls of the Forbidden City an ancient
Chinese peace poem:

If there is light in the soul,
There will be beauty in the person.
If there is beauty in the person,
There will be harmony in the house.
If there is harmony in the house,
There will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation,
There will be peace in the world.

The people cheer.

Suddenly, on both sides of the busy street, the tanks
bone in on our position—the big guns roar, the air awash
in missiles. They strike time in its inexorable flight—for
the POEMobile remains in midair, motionless, the
projector still casting poems of peace onto the walls and
buildings of the enemies. Whether the projections brought
peace to the world or the POEMobile was blown out of
the sky remains a blur. . . .

The BQE, on the other hand, starts to
move. The tractor-trailer wreckage has been
removed. The POEMobile is moving again,
beautiful, sublime, projecting a narrow beam
of light under the radar, back here at home
where we need it. ▼

Steve Zeitlin is the
founding director of
City Lore in New York
City. Photo by Martha
Cooper.



to read her poems at the KGB bar in the East Village.
We text her, only to hear back, “But I’m reading my
Supernomen poem cycle next.”

“Bring ‘em with you.”

“What do you need me for?”

“Navigation.”

“Ab, a little program planning.”

“We need peace poems from the Korean, Russian,
Persian, and Chinese POEMobile presentations.”

“Got, it Chief. I guess the POEMobile programs
sought to create understanding with some of the same
groups we’re fighting now. Ironic, huh?”

The POEMobile careens in a flurry of colors and
painted metal, feathered wings down into the capital cities
of the Axis powers. “Head for the downtown between
the tall buildings.”

The brightly colored poetry bird careens and zigzags
between the skyscrapers of the apocalypse, a white wing
brushing the buildings. Hovering outside a downtown
Baghdad skyscraper window, CJ lowers the projector
into place. Perched on the Steadicam, the projector casts
a beam of poetry on to the wall. The Baghdad audience
gathers and grows, stands transfixed by poetry and peace
larger than life. A tank rolls in—the POEMobile darts

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.