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An evangelist of the rhyme

ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT – It's the evening of Oct. 5, on King Street West. Beneath the whoops of Leafs fans, the come-ons from restaurant servers and the patio-friendly jazz, an unassuming woman is asking the Aroma hostess "Have you connected with anyone lately?"



"No."

"Well, maybe you need to." The woman, performance poet Andrea Thompson, then launches into a poem. It's her second "poeming" of the evening, and for the next half hour, as she accosts still more strangers, snatches of "icy-cold hands," "universe is talking," "realism not nihilism" can be overheard along the bustling restaurant strip.

But unless you slide up directly beside Thompson, you'll have no idea why she's staring so intently at her various companions (or, in one case, whispering into a woman's ear). Or why the waitress, the limo driver and the couple enjoying a pre-theatre coffee are looking at her with that uncomfortable, attentive smile. For a public hijacking of strangers, it's an intensely intimate affair.

Recital complete, Thompson hands the hostess a CD and a bookmark. When she asks why she was approached, Thompson cheekily answers, "You happened to be standing here, so you were stuck."

The bookmark is Thompson's calling card, informing people that Oct. 3-9 is Random Acts of Poetry (RAP) week. Launched by Wendy Morton, an insurance investigator and self-promoter extraordinaire (in 2002, she

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convinced WestJet they needed a "poet of the skies"), RAP is in its second year, with 27 poets across the country and sponsorship by www.abebooks.com and the Victoria READ Society.

Thompson poemed her way through various neighbourhoods for four days last week. She says, "The whole point is to expose a new audience." She's not shy to admit she's looking for "converts" to her art form – ideally, people "with nothing to do, whose heads are empty" of an immediate destination. "This is the most satisfying thing that happens to me as a poet," she says. Is she nervous? Always, which is why she calls poeming strangers a "personal, psychological development project."

Not everyone is a fan of the idea. George Murray, an editor at www.bookninja.com, sees desperation in the self-promotion of poets craving public approval and in the feel-good boosterism. "Poetry is not a charity that requires people on the streets creating awareness," he argues. And contrary to popular wisdom, Murray says the art form isn't endangered. Judging by the steady, albeit small, stream of poetry published by presses large and small, he has a point.

Murray also finds the inherent deception involved distasteful. "Canadian manners will doom hundreds of disinterested people to stand on corners listening politely to poems they have no interest in." While RAP poets might believe, as Thompson writes in an email, that they've "help[ed] get good press for the art form," it's anyone's guess how many of the CDs she hands out will become coasters.

But there's a good chance that Sam, a Salvation Army staffer and limo driver by night, will be listening to his while driving his passengers home. He says poetry disappeared from his consciousness after high school because he got "caught up in the rat race." Thompson's poeming made him think of the psalms. "There's music in poetry. It speaks to you," he says. Sounds like a convert. **LEA ZELTSERMAN**
