

Penticton poet helps welcome the world

**Shane Koyczan an overnight
sensation after delivering his
We Are More monologue at
opening ceremonies for Olympics**

By NICK PATCH
The Canadian Press

VANCOUVER — As Shane Koyczan stood obscured behind a curtain atop B.C. Place's centre stage on Friday, only then did it hit him.

The opening ceremonies. The Olympics. The billions of people who were about to listen to him deliver his poem We Are More while preaching from a platform raised high in the air.

For a moment, he had to consider his options.

"There's 60,000 people there. There's 3.5 billion people watching around the world — that's a lot," Koyczan told The Canadian Press.

"That thought didn't really occur to me until I was there and the curtain was about to drop. And I was like, 'Oh, wait a minute.' But then it was too late.

"I was like, 'You either go for it or jump.'"

He went for it, delivering one of the ceremony's most talked-about moments without betraying a hint of the butterflies fluttering around in his queasy stomach.

During an artistic ceremony whose stated goal was to reintroduce Canada to the world, Koyczan's poem did so with both levity and grandeur. He drew rapturous applause for certain choice lines ("And some say what defines us is something as simple as please and thank you" was a particular hit with those in attendance) and ignited much discussion on Twitter.

"Wow wow wow, that speech/rap about Canada was powerful! Tears in my eyes," tweeted Canadian figure-skating world champion Jeffrey Buttle.

The day after the spectacular ceremony, Koyczan was still a hot topic online as links to his speech ricocheted through the usual social networking sites. Even his uniquely arranged facial hair — which sprouts from his jawline and extends down inches below his face — was up for debate.

"The guy doing spoken word looks funny with the neck beard, but his poem was amazing," contributed one user.



Koyczan

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Continued from page A1

Those watching Koyczan deliver the hip-hop-inflected verse with cool aplomb might not have realized how nervous he was.

It certainly wasn't obvious to those at home just how far he has come.

Born to a French mother and a father of First Nations heritage, Koyczan grew up in Yellowknife, where he was raised by his grandparents.

He said he doesn't know much about his mother and has only recently begun trying to forge a relationship with his father.

Growing up, he was bullied relentlessly. He moved to Penticton when he was 14, at which point he says he hadn't really developed social skills, so the bullying began anew.

He first began writing as a way to deal with his social awkwardness.

"Not knowing how to speak to people, I decided it might be best to go home and write some prepared speeches," he recalled.

"Somebody would ask me a question like 'How's it going?' which I realize now is a very benign question, but at the time, it was: 'Oh my god. I can't believe this person just talked to me.'

"So I'd go home and write prepared speeches so when people would be like, 'How's it going?' I'd be like,

'Cheese is my favourite food, and I'll tell you why.'"

He ended up in drama class after a different program was cancelled. He wasn't thrilled but soon discovered a talent. He started doing stage plays, many of which were comedies.

"Before, people would be like, 'Hey, fat ass.' And now they'd be like, 'Hey, you're that funny fat guy,'" he said.

"I guess that's a compliment."

His passion for writing — and soon poetry — grew in university, where professors encouraged him to start performing.

"I think for a long time, being as badly bullied as I was, I was under the assumption that it's not OK for me to be a certain way, it's not OK for me to say what's on my mind or what I'm thinking, because I'm just going to be beat worse for it," he said.

"Living in fear like that, I think one of the things that really turned it around was getting into those writing classes and learning how to express myself in a way that was not only a creative outlet but an emotional one for me."

As his notoriety grew, the Canadian Tourism Commission approached him about writing a love poem for Canada. He happily obliged, though his initial attempts were, um, not quite right.

"My first take on it was that I love to complain about the government," he said, "but I guess that wasn't really what they were looking for."

The piece he ultimately wrote finds him nodding to various stereotypes of Canada (the politeness, the affinity for hockey, the maple syrup, beer and wheat) while emphasizing that there's plenty more that isn't necessarily associated with Canadians — that "more" of the poem's title.

"I'm just telling people, we're more than what the world thinks of us," he said. "We're more than the jokes that are made about us being able to pronounce vowels. We're more than the butt of a joke. We're more than the cliché."

Koyczan said the poem is about what he loves about Canada and Canadian people, and what he hopes for his country.

The genial, soft-spoken 34-year-old said he arrived in Vancouver a week before the speech and that he managed several hours sleep — in total — over those seven nights.

He wrestled with the idea of performing, not simply because of nerves. He has serious misgivings about the current Canadian government, specifically with the decision to cut arts programs.

Ultimately, though, he found he couldn't turn down the chance of a lifetime.

"I just kept repeating to myself what my grandmother said to me: once you say no to an opportunity, it's gone, and so are all the opportunities that could have come with it," he said.