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UTAH 2026

POETRY OUT LOUD



POETRY OURSELVES

USE
YOUR
VOICE

READ,
RECITE,
WRITE

PRESENTERS

Melissa Salguero

Host

Victoria Panella Bourns

Director, Utah Arts & Museums

Donna Law

Executive Director, Utah Cultural & Community Engagement

Lisa Bickmore

Utah Poet Laureate

GUEST PERFORMERS

Chacho Valdez

Crew Coordinator/DJ

Flavakids

The School of Dance

POETRY OURSELVES

Congratulations to the Utah winners of Poetry Ourselves, an original poetry-writing competition offered in conjunction with Poetry Out Loud.

1st Place: Poetry in English

Elli Douglas | Liberty

University Online Academy

"They mock poetry"

Runner up: Poetry in English

May Obermark | Rowland Hall

"WHAT SIGHTS"

1st Place: Poetry in Spanish

Nicole Guzman | Olympus

High School

"El idioma de las lágrimas"

("The Language of Tears")

Runner up: Poetry in Spanish

Andrea Vallejos | Olympus

High School

"Como me dueles, Perú"

("How you hurt me, Peru")

POETRY OURSELVES JUDGES

Claudia Benavides, Manuel Aaron Garcia, Jayrod Garrett, Abraham Smith, Lina Vega-Morrison

TONIGHT'S CONTESTANTS

Lilly Wilkinson | Box Elder High School

Round 1: "Longings" by Nellie Rathbone Bright

Round 2: "A Dream Within a Dream"

by Edgar Allan Poe

Round 3: "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest

Lawrence Thayer"

Katie Bell | Independent Education Program

Round 1: "The Star Spangled Banner"

by Francis Scott Key

Round 2: "The Protected Sex" by Alice Duer Miller

Round 3: "After Apple-Picking" by Robert Frost

Jessica Black | San Juan High School

Round 1: "She Walketh Veiled and Sleeping" by

Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Round 2: "Incurable" by Dorothy Parker

Round 3: "Elegy Before Death" by Edna

St. Vincent Millay

Ivy Jensen | Karl G. Maeser Preparatory Academy

Round 1: "My Grandmother's Love Letters"

by Hart Crane

Round 2: "Why We Oppose Pockets for Women"

by Alice Duer Miller

Round 3: "The Fish" by Marianne Moore

James Ware | Olympus High School

Round 1: "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

by Robert Frost

Round 2: "Chicago" by Carl Sandurg

Round 3: "Blues Fantasy" by Langston Hughes

Cecilia Tucker | Judge Memorial Catholic

High School

Round 1: "Chicago" by Carl Sandurg

Round 2: "The Protected Sex" by Alice Duer Miller

Round 3: "Songs for the People" by Frances Ellen

Watkins Harper

Ozalyn Gardner | Utah Arts Academy

Round 1: "Song" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Round 2: "A Nation's Strength" by William

Ralph Emerson

Round 3: "My Grandmother's Love Letters"

by Hart Crane

TONIGHT'S JUDGES

Jayrod Garrett, Abraham Smith, Jean Tokuda Irwin, Dr. Naomi Watkins

JUDGES

Jayrod Garrett is a storyteller and poet with a creative writing MFA from University of Nevada-Reno. They are a nonbinary, Black, atheist U.S. veteran with PTSD and AuDHD. They serve as a health science advisor for SLCC and educate their community on history and belonging with RISE Virtual Academy and as the belonging coordinator of Superstars Writing Seminars.

Abraham Smith is associate professor of English and co-director of creative writing at Weber State University. His recent poetry collections include *Surgencies* (2026), *One Warm Morning* (2025), *Insomniac Sentinel* (2023), and *Dear Weirdo* (2022). Away from his desk, Smith improvises poems inside songs with the Snarlin' Yarns: thesnarlinyarnsut.bandcamp.com.

Jean Tokuda Irwin served as the arts education program manager for Utah Arts & Museums from 1991-2025. During her tenure, she led Utah's Poetry Out Loud activities.

Dr. Naomi Watkins is the secondary English language arts specialist for the Utah State Board of Education. Dr. Watkins provides statewide leadership in adolescent literacy through strategic oversight of standards, policy, and professional learning. With more than 20 years of experience in education, she has spearheaded critical initiatives, from founding statewide women's history curricula and community-driven storytelling projects to integrating somatic resilience into systemic leadership.

Manuel Aaron Garcia is a poet and cultural administrator who redefines literature as a universal heartbeat. As executive director of Voces en Verso, he spearheads the movement for an identity without linguistic borders, commanding the recognition of Spanish and Spanglish as legitimate artistic languages.

Lina Vega-Morrison is a Utah-based poet and writer and the published author of "Interruptores Rotos" and "Este es un cuento de...." Her work appears in *She Said Anthology CODA 2025*, *We Want to Tell You* (2023), and *Consecrate/Desecrate* (2022). A two-time Utah Arts Festival performer and Sor Juana award recipient, she is an experienced workshop presenter and judge for statewide poetry competitions.

Claudia Benavides was Utah's first Poetry Out Loud state champion and formed a part of Utah Arts & Museums for 17 years. Currently, she's a homeschool mom, cultivating a literature- and arts-based learning environment for her two children.

PRESENTERS

Melissa Salguero is a Guatemalan poet and performance artist. A nominee in 2020 for the Pushcart Prize, her poetry has been featured in publications including *Write About Now Poetry*, *Ink & Nebula*, *Rising Phoenix Press*, and *Crepe & Penn*. As an actor on numerous stages she appeared in "Otherworld" (Delaware Theatre Company), "Go Home Come Back" (Plan-B Theatre) and "The Little Mermaid" (John F. Kennedy Center).

Victoria Panella Bourns has a long career working in government and as an advocate for arts, museums, and cultural organizations, large and small. She has been the director of the Utah Division of Arts & Museums since 2017. Bourns is honored to be recognized by our community and has received the Utah Museum Association Public Service Award (2019), Utah Cultural Alliance's Pillar of the Community Award (2015), and Utah Arts Festival Mayor's Award for Service to the Arts (2000).

Lisa Bickmore is the Utah Poet Laureate, appointed by Governor Cox in 2022. She is the author of three books of poems: *Haste, flicker* (which won the 2014 Antivenom Prize from Elixir Press), and *Ephemerist*



(Red Mountain Press, June 2017). Her work has been published in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*; *Tar River Poetry*; *Sugar House Review*; *Southword*; *Caketrain*; *Hunger Mountain Review*; *Terrain.org*; *Quarterly West*; *The Moth*; *MappingSLC.org*; and *Fire in the Pasture: 21st Century Mormon Poets*. Her poem "Eidolon" received the Ballymaloe International Poetry Award.

PERFORMERS

Chacho Valdez (Crew Coordinator/DJ) is a dancer, teacher, DJ, and cultural ambassador trained in B-boying, hip hop, and house dance since 2000. Utah's Most Influential Dancer in 2019, he became

a full-time professional in 2020, focusing on performance, education, and preserving the spirit of these cultures. In early 2025, he began DJing to keep the energy high and the dance floor moving. His career includes teaching at major universities and performing for the NBA and Olympics.

The School of Dance is a welcoming studio in Salt Lake City built on one belief: When people are taught with love and belonging, everyone thrives. We offer ballet, hip hop, breaking, jazz, tap, acro, and more in a non-competitive space that builds confidence, creativity, and community. Here, happy people dance—and everyone belongs.

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Erin Day, Erica Plummer, Angelika Brewer, Brock Cheney, Adam Bowes, Benjamin Lesue, Greg Bartholomew, Owen Kennington

STATEWIDE SPANISH OUTREACH COORDINATOR

Manuel Aaron Garcia

ACCURACY JUDGES

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STAGE SUPPORT

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VIDEOGRAPHY, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND STREAMING

Kevin Edwards, Lansia Wann, Dustin Khong

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Jenny Duff

LIGHTING DESIGN

Glenn Linder

AUDIO SUPPORT

Doug Parkin

SPECIAL THANKS

Donna Law – Executive Director, Utah Cultural & Community Engagement

Katherine Potter – Deputy Director, Utah Cultural & Community Engagement

Kylie Mimitz – Director, The School of Dance

America250 Utah Commission

And to all the AMAZING Utah teachers, parents, mentors, friends, and others who contributed to making Poetry Out Loud

SPONSORS

