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TV

Aging, bald rap fan battles slam-poet stereotypes in doc



By: [Brad Oswald](#)

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CBC

Ilan French, a.k.a. IF the Poet, onstage.

Middle-aged. Middle-class. White, bald, gainfully employed, happily married, proudly parental.

These aren't the attributes one would expect to attach to a slam-poetry performer whose work is fuelled by outrage at life's injustices. But in the case of Ilan French, the subject of the new

TV REVIEW

IF the Poet

-- Written and directed by Kim Saltarski

documentary IF the Poet, the idyllic day-to-day reality and the artistic onstage anger have found a way to fruitfully coexist.



CBC
French rehearses in a Paris cemetery,
preparing for the World Cup of Slam Poetry.

IF the Poet, which was written and directed by Canadian filmmaker Kim Saltarski, offers a fascinating look inside the competitive world of slam poetry as it follows French, a 52-year-old Torontonians who has little in common with the art form's mostly young and often disenfranchised practitioners, as he rants and rhymes his way to the world championship of slam poetry.

The film, which has its TV premiere Thursday at 9 p.m. as part of CBC's new Firsthand documentary collection, opens with French expressing concern his relatively favourable position on the demographic hierarchy will lead to instant dismissal by the slam poets whose company he seeks to

share.

French explains his unlikely journey into the slam-poetry world, which began with his teenage interest in writing and singing songs on his guitar and then shifted toward spoken-word expression when his son grew up and took an interest in hip-hop culture.

French describes his introduction to rap, motivated at first by a simple desire to understand his teenage son's inclination and perhaps cultivate a shared interest, as transformative; intrigued by the power of hip-hop lyrics, he began writing his own raps, but abandoned the effort after attempting to perform them and realizing he was a flat-out terrible rapper.

But then, quite by chance, French discovered slam poetry, which offered a free-form opportunity to express all the ideas his hip-hop dalliance had set spinning inside his head. His early concerns about not fitting in were quickly laid to rest; French had found his niche, and three years after entering his first slam-poetry competition, he qualified for the national championship in Vancouver.

Saltarski's camera accompanies French -- who performs under the moniker IF the Poet -- as he prepares for his big trip to the West Coast. In the weeks leading up to the contest, he meets regularly with former slam-poetry world champion Ian Keteku, who has become a friend, mentor and coach.

"IF is unique due to the fact he's not apologetic about who he is," says Keteku. "He's over 50, he's a father, he has a partner, he's a white guy with no hair. He believes in love as the paramount thing that will get us out of anything, and there's an eternal joy that he has about going about his life, which I've never seen before.

"He works the hardest that I've ever seen a poet work."

Indeed, poetry as performance art has become an all-consuming passion for French -- while at home in Toronto, he walks to and from work each day, a stroll that takes an hour and 10 minutes, and spends the time creating, reciting and memorizing the poems he takes to the competition stage.

His range of subjects is wide, from surviving an ADHD-fuelled adolescence to trying to protect his son in a city where cops shoot teenagers in the street. The precision with which he prepares his performances is impressive to behold.

"At the end of the day," says French, "I write because there's something I want to say."

If you're inclined to think of poetry as a quaint reminder of a mostly forgotten literary past, IF the Poet will shake up your understanding of verse and meter and show you how, in one heated corner of the arts world, poetry is alive and well and angry and, in its most intensely competitive moments, maybe the most relevant thing in the entire universe.

And when that's true, IF proves he's a whole lot more than a middle-aged, middle-income, bald white guy with a job, a mortgage and a life that might be the target of those other, younger poets' wrath.

brad.oswald@freepress.mb.ca Twitter: @BradOswald

-- Thursday at 9 p.m.

-- CBC

-- 'Ö'Ö'Ö1/2 stars out of 5