State poet blasts political priorities

By Paul Grondahl

ALBANY — It was an afternoon of contradictions Wednesday as Gov. Mario M. Cuomo installed Norman Mailer as state author and Audre Lorde as state poet.

Mailer's impassioned speech received a standing ovation and whoops of recognition from the nearly 300 invited guests and VIPs in the Legislative Office Building. She ripped into national political priorities that place the buildup of weapons ahead of feeding starving children, accepting her award on behalf of "poets who are oppressed, silenced and disenfranchised who write on scraps of paper in homeless shelters, in mental wards, in prisons and squalid reservations.

The normally irascible Mailer, whom William Kennedy described in his introductory remarks as a writer "who has offended just about everyone worth offending," left his bad-boy image down the Hudson and was on his best behavior.

After praising Cuomo as a deep thinker and "great politician," Mailer muttered only an anecdote about Jean-Paul Sartre's refusal of the Nobel Prize and said he wouldn't follow the French philosopher's "puritanical" suit.

Mailer never unleashed the dam of spleen he's capable of, the legendary from-the-hip invective that has made him a target of feminists over the years, saying after the presentation with a wink, "This is the new me.

The ironic juxtaposition of the two award recipients was not lost on the audience, particularly Kennedy, who chaired the panel of writers that selected Mailer. "There was no preplanning, and we didn't know who the poetry panel was choosing," Kennedy said. "These are awards given purely on literary quality. They're not affirmative action awards."

Afterward, Lorde suggested that her selection for the state's highest honor for an author — even though the official citation signed by Cuomo avoided direct usage of the word lesbian — is a crowning moment for lesbians and women of color.

"I see it as historic," said Lorde. "I do not hide who I am. I am a black lesbian feminist warrior mother and if I were not those things, I might be wealthy and famous from my writing today."

Lorde is the author of 10 collections of poetry and seven books of prose, most of which have been published by small, alternative presses. She recently published a book on her fight with breast cancer, a condition that led her to move from New York City to the tropical climate of St. Croix.

On Wednesday, her exotic blue and brown print smock and leggings from Senegal and colorful African jewelry was in stark contrast to the gray slacks and blue blazer of Mailer's Ivy League uniform (he entered Harvard University at age 16 to study aeronautical engineering).

Outside this sartorial schism, there were no clashes between the two honored writers. Mailer praised Lorde's impassioned acceptance speech as "coming right out of the depths of her.

With Cuomo looking on a few feet away, Lorde stood proud at the podium, under the glare of television lights, and pulled no punches about the governor's policies. She decried rising education costs coupled with lowered standards and criticized inadequate health care for minority communities in New York City.

At the same time, Lorde accepted a plaque, a Steuben glass sculpture and $10,000 cash award, allowing that "we live in a world of intense contradictions" and it is the poet's job to "bridge those contradictions and learn their lessons."

Cuomo sidestepped Lorde's poetic gauntlet and, instead, responded with loose, impromptu wordplay aimed at Mailer's suggestion that all 50 states name an official state author and poet who would then convene in Washington every two years as a "shadow government" that might help untangle the federal bureaucracy.

Cuomo also reminded Mailer of the novelist's shellacking in his New York mayoral bid. The old Mailer might have put on the rhetorical gloves after that barb, but the state author let it slide and said afterward he would encourage Cuomo to run for president.