

Calendar

Slam a Sonnet

Poetry Competition

'Some people who signed up for the last slam had never been to one, and I told them, 'If you're looking for a poetry reading, this isn't that,' says Robert O'Sullivan Schleith, who runs San Diego's only certified poetry slam.

"Certified" means that those who win points here may have a chance to compete in the National Poetry Slam, the so-called Super Bowl of the competitive performance-poetry scene. "We sent a team for the first time ever from San Diego last August. We competed in Seattle against 55 other cities. Some of them have been doing it for 15 years. So we didn't make the semifinals or anything like that. I had no expectations. We just went for the experience."

LOCAL EVENTS

This year's team will compete in Minneapolis. They'll be chosen in a final competition on the night of Cinco de Mayo. Between now and then, there will be eight qualifying rounds. "We just had our first one," says Schleith, "and 20 people slammed."

Poets are scored by five judges chosen from the audience. Getting people to judge isn't easy: they may not relish being booed. "First, we ask for volunteers. We'll get maybe one. The last slam's winner is obligated to judge. So are those trying to qualify, because, in addition to earning points by performing, they have to have judged two slams. Part of the four-person team going to Minneapolis could end up being judges there, so they must prepare. To fill the other

slots, I say to people sitting alone, 'If you're going to hang out all evening, why not become part of the show?'"

The scoring runs from zero to ten, but, says Schleith, zeroes are rare. "You hardly see anything below a four." Is grade inflation a problem? "Yes. It's called 'score creep,' which I try to discourage."

The audience, on the other hand, is free to express its unofficial opinion hyperbolically, even while the poem is in progress. "I tell them to click their fingers as long as it doesn't interrupt the poem." The judges should ignore the lobbying. Still, says Schleith, "it puts out a message."

What if people bring an entourage? "So be it." There's no rule against it. "But the judges are smart. Somebody who doesn't captivate the room could have 50 friends there, and it won't make any difference."

Asked to define a "slam," Schleith says, "It's a poetry competition where entertainment and audience participation are the primary focus." The work must be original to the poet performing it. "There are lots of poetry readings around town, where you can just get up and read out of your little journal, with your face up against the page. A slam is good for poets who want to try writing in an extremely dramatic way that gets their message across to a large audience."

Schleith insists there is no such genre as slam poetry. Rather, it's a style of delivery. "You can slam anything. You can slam a sonnet. You can slam haiku! It's not about what you do as much as how you do it."

And you'd better do it fast: a maximum 3 minutes, 10 seconds is the national standard. No bell sounds. But go beyond the limit, and you lose points.

Schleith's own "slammin' with jennifer" goes in part:

she does the ghost of mr yeats
proud,
she trods the ould sod/under
moon
white flame
montrose of houston or by any
other name,
this sunflower sutra of fate &
fame has blossomed;
she treads a road of rhyme &
gleam
she is the waking dream of mr
james joyce
sushi-voice in a wilderness of
fish-&-chips
a slipstream of consciousness...



Jennifer Burton at the December Pajamaslam

Schleith has one piece of advice for would-be slammers: "Memorizing your work frees you to interact with the audience and engage them through eye contact. That will score high with the judges."

He also reviews the three taboos: "No props, no costumes, no accompaniment. If I'm the poet up at the mike, and I click my own fingers, maybe to put out a rhythm, that's okay. If I ask the audience to click their fingers or to bang on the tables, that becomes accompaniment, and it's disallowed."

Marc Smith, the acknowledged founder of the poetry slam — 17 years ago in Chicago — made those rules. "He knew that otherwise it would be all about showmanship and flash. And that's okay as long as it's within just that one human voice. He wanted the poem to stand on its own."

The 48-year-old Schleith's slams are open to everyone. "I've been running this from day one [three years

ago], and it will always be an all-ages venue," he says. "I love seeing the kids. We get lots of high school students. We had a 14-year-old girl slam; she brought her parents."

He suggests, however, that those who want a less intense slam experience or a less intimidating time to debut wait until September. By then, the national competition and all the local preparations leading up to it will be over.

— Jeanne Schinto

Poetry Slam
Sunday, January 27 (monthly on the last calendar Sunday)
Friday, February 15 (monthly the Friday closest to the 15th)
Sign-ups: 7:00 p.m.
Slam begins: 7:30 p.m.
Urban Grind
3797 Park Boulevard, Hillcrest
Suggested donation, \$2
619-294-2920
poetryscenestealers.tripod.com



Adam, May 2001 slam

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