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Words Provide the Heat at Young Poets' Event

By DINITIA SMITH

They were declaiming, proclaiming, instigating and proudly strutting about the stage. They were by turns beautiful, exuberant, arrogant and exhibitionistic, 28 teenage performance poets at the HBO studios in Midtown Manhattan on Monday night, competing for eight chances to win \$1,000 each in scholarship money and to warm up the crowd for a taping of "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry" on HBO.

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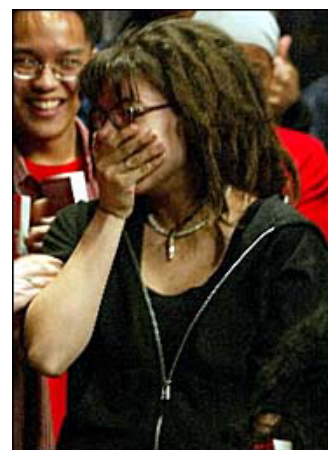
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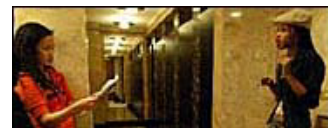
Alynda Segarra, a poetry contest winner.

At times it was as if they were trying to set the stage on fire with the language. "Brooklyn-bound F trains bring freedom no colors, just faces, erases/ all bad memories of hate and rage," 16-year-old Bridget Lopez recited before the audience of judges and her fellow poets. "Don't stop me from writing," she warned. "Don't stop us from fighting and walking war paths to freedom."

The contenders had all taken part in special writing workshops conducted by Youth Speaks NY, an organization associated with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, which has been offering free classes to teenagers in the New York area since 1999. Youth Speaks had teamed up for the event, called "Speak Up!," with NYC Outward Bound and the Rush

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Philanthropic Arts Foundation, founded by the hip-hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons, whose show "Def Poetry Jam" is now on Broadway.

There was Tahani Salah, 16, a Palestinian-American from Brooklyn wearing a traditional Muslim head scarf, who had written a poem about Israeli incursions into Palestinian villages. There was Marc Arena, 17, who said he was half Haitian, half Italian, the son of two doctors from Pelham in Westchester County. Some contestants had just made it to college — the only qualification for entering was that they still be teenagers. And there was Najee Horne, 18, whose mother abandoned him when he was 5 and who was found caring for his infant siblings — triplets. Najee, who was later adopted by a family in Washington Heights, learned about the contest from a school flier.

Twenty-nine finalists — one failed to show up for the contest — were selected from a group of 65, all of whom had the opportunity to sharpen their writing and delivery skills at Youth Speaks workshops. They also received two tickets to the "Def Poetry Jam" Broadway show. The finalists will have a chance to participate in an Outward Bound urban adventure program.

The first competitor was Bridget, who looks white but whose father is black. "I'm too white to have cornrows but too black to sing pop songs," she cried. "Races caught in eccentric hues of blond-haired blue-eyed dark-skinned black girls who tell me I'm too white. But I'm gonna marry a black man, remember?"

As each poet went onstage, there were cheers, whistles, ululations. "You can do it, Ricky!" someone yelled as Ricky Singh, 17, a senior at the Renaissance Charter School in Jackson Heights, Queens, got up to recite: "The poetry is deep/ I'ma let the truth in me speak/ the main cause of death of us is the heat/ but poets keep the flow unique/ pass it to the youth so we can sow seeds."

A girl with her hair shorn in a crewcut who called herself just Naomi and said she was a 10th grader at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan delivered an impassioned political poem. "Amerika — land of the rich girls who choose not to eat," she recited, "and the starving people dying of the minimum wage disease in the street/ and the lawsuits against mcdonald's 'cos you make us obese!"

Some poets got so heated up that they flung the pages of their poems down on the stage one by one as they finished reading them.

Momentarily overcome, Jeanette Caceres, 18, a student at New York University, forgot the words to her own poem midway through. "Work it out!" cried Liza Jessie Peterson, a poet and singer who was M.C. for the competition. Jeanette quickly recovered: "Black man rapes white woman," she continued. "Dominican attacks policeman/ The perpetrators are always medium-built colored men, so that every brother in the hood is just another suspect. Targeted by our own self hatred."

Najee, who attends George Washington High School in Washington Heights, was dressed all in black for the occasion, with what appeared to be a big diamond earring in each ear. As he recited his poem, he jabbed



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Pearl Kan, left, helps Sherrell Pyatt rehearse for her poetry reading Monday in the women's bathroom at the HBO studios in Manhattan.

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at the air: "The good die young. The grimy live longer/ the weak don't live, the strong get stronger/ this is like the bottom of hell."

Keith Nealis, 17, a student at Sanford H. Calhoun High School in Merrick, on Long Island, whose father is a car inspector for the New York City Transit Authority, let rip to a staccato beat: "Disseminate propaganda. Proper copper/ candidate messiah/ midnight reliable on mainline axle tires/ hold me precious."

There was anger in the poems, anger at parents, at lovers, at being poor, at racism, militarism and domestic abuse.

Judith Angeles, a small, thin 19-year-old-freshman at the City University's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, recited a poem about domestic violence. "Caseworkers, courtrooms/ and mom's broken nose," she said. "Lied, and told us she fell down the stairs./ But she was really falling from the steps of heaven to the burned soil, where the man she/ loved was always waiting with balled fist."

Absent fathers were another theme. In his poem, Carlos Young, 15, who lives in Brooklyn, asked plaintively, "Why can't I meet the man who helped create my life?"

He went on: "Pops died when I was four he had time and he knew it/ He had time to visit his boy and love him while he was living/ Sometimes I look at his picture and stare at the ceiling/ and say GOD why me/ Why you broke up my family?"

On a more cheerful note, there was sex and romance. Willie Navarette, 18, of the Bronx had a poem called "The Women Watcher."

"My eyes are covered like I'm ready to say peek a boo," Willie said. "Analyzing you like I have a clue/ Dramatically scared but/ standing here like I'm prepared."

And at the evening's end, the winners were . . . Najee Horne. (Loud cheers!) And Marc Arena; Alynda Segarra, 15; Carlos Young; Judith Angeles. (More cheers and whoops from the seats!) And Kendra Urdang, 17; Pearl Kan, 17; Keith Nealis. There was such glee, so many hugs and kisses among the participants, it was hard to tell the winners from the losers.

After the recitations, Mr. Simmons went onstage and to deliver a short homily. "I'm so proud of everybody," he told the young poets.

It's a lot harder to write a poem than to write rap lyrics to go with music, Mr. Simmons said. "When you write a poem without music, you feel you've got to say something," he noted.

"Jay-Z is more important to young people than George Bush," Mr. Simmons said. And today more and more young people are writing poetry. Ten years ago, he said, if he had visited a New York City public school and asked how many people wrote poetry, there would have been few hands raised.

"This new spoken-word thing is really gonna change the world," he said, to another shower of hoots and shouts, whistles and cheers from the crowd.

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