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Young Bards Rhyme and Roar at Poetry Slam

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Tuesday, April 29, 1997

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Teenagers are pouring out their souls under hot theater lights in the Mission District. The first Teen Poetry Slam is off and running with plenty of ranting and the occasional teary rhyme. Metaphorically speaking, it's open heart surgery.

``You bring out the ghetto in me,

``You bring out the gunshots in me,

`` . . . the power in me,

`` . . . the Cherokee in me,

`` . . . the Egyptian queen in me," chanted 18-year-old Sharonna Caractor of International Studies Academy, a San Francisco public high school.

Caractor recited with the charged rhythm of a rapper hitting a groove. She spoke of anger, family, a proud sense of belonging even if life was tough, dangerous, a little bleak.

At slams, the poets compete for points. Writing is judged on the spot, and delivery is crucial. Knock off three points for a muttered inflection, add four when the fist punches air for dramatic effect. Audiences can get raucous.

With teens, reciting for the first time is a way of taking wing as a new out-loud voice.

That's what happened to Taz Shiota, 17, a husky George Washington High School senior with an oversized shirt and sullen urban swagger, who participated in the first of three teen slams last week. He was new to the slam game.

Shiota's ``My Mission Til Death" was filled with urgent images -- some about his own edgy appearance, others likening his anguish about an uncertain future to a virus he can't shake. The poet confessed thoughts about suicide that were turned around by a pivotal family event -- the death of his grandfather, a war survivor and beacon of old-fashioned wisdom.

In a voice trembling with emotion, this tough-looking kid said:

``I'll be the man you want me to be, Grandfather --

``Poke a hole through the clouds and you ``Watch!"

Stunned silence, then a roar of approval from the audience. Suddenly Shiota wore the wide

grin of a liberated man -- he had actually read a poem to a theater full of strangers and lived to tell about it.

The Teen Poetry Slam at Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia St. -- tomorrow night is the second in a series leading to a final competition May 7 -- was organized by a volunteer writing project called Youth Speaks. Any teenager is welcome to participate.

The upstart Youth Speaks project sends poets from San Francisco State University to work with high schoolers in workshops throughout the city. There are no fees. The only prerequisite is an interest in the art.

"We want to give young poets a feeling there's a community of writers," said Youth Speaks founder James Kass. "Writers need to be in touch with each other, to share work, to find the inspiration of others creating poems, stories, feeling similar ways."

The slam seemed a serious adventure for the teens, but 21 poets braved the stage and hot spotlights. More may show up tomorrow.

"It is competition, but we want it to be fun," said master of ceremonies Russell (Gonzaga), 28, a veteran of slams who's a two-time San Francisco Poetry Slam champion. To fill time while judges tallied scores, (Gonzaga), who uses parentheses in his nom de plume, read his own work, a powerful poem about gangs and other issues in the Latino community. His emotional style brought tears and gave the younger poets a taste of a more big-league slam delivery.

"Competition is a lure," (Gonzaga) said after his reading. "Poets are up for it, and nobody's out to hurt anybody. But let's get real, competition is part of life."

Though some poets look down at slams as akin to game shows, the teens at Intersection for the Arts seemed anything but put off. Five judges -- two practicing poets and three chosen randomly from the audience -- had a daunting task.

With a three-minute time limit, the verse ranged from a confessional lyric by Jasyn Kemppainen, 19, of San Francisco State, who spoke of "shredding externals" and becoming "nameless and faceless," to the strident intonations of Lowell High senior Johnny Nagai, 18, who shadowboxed for a moment before launching into a hard-edged look at the performance mentality driving his Japanese American family.

"The nail that sticks up/ Must be hammered down," Nagai read, a touch of anger in his voice.

A score of 50 was tops, but nobody reached it. Most hit the low 40s. The few scores in the 30s raised the ire of the audience of about 90, which took issue with the judges' evaluations. If there were bruised egos, none raised a ruckus.

One soft-spoken poet, Jenny Lau, 16, of Wallenberg High, got only 37 points for a poignant lyric on a theme of "Mourning for the Death of Humanity." The poem was filled with haunting imagery of urban decay. Maybe she was too self-conscious in her delivery. No matter, she took the score in stride.

Another confessional poem, "The Web," by Galileo High School sophomore Etsuko Sakimura II, talked of a woman seduced by a man then left alone to bear his child. The poem, though spoken in a measured way, had an emotional undertow that earned a good share of Sakimura's 43 points -- one could feel people responding, sharing the poet's bitter sense of betrayal. Jared Idelfonzo, 17, of International Studies Academy wrote about homeless Vietnam vets coping with life on the streets, and the audience was rapt.

Another big favorite was Amilca Mouton-Fuentes, 19, a freshman at the University of California at Berkeley. She wrote about the legendary "crying woman" of Mexico who bore children by Cortes, then had to drown them. The poem's sense of loss left the audience speechless for a few minutes. That's the slam the poets strive to achieve.

TEEN POETRY

The first Teen Poetry Slam continues at 7 p.m. tomorrow and next Wednesday at Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia St., San Francisco. Call (415) 626-2787.

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