

Words on fire

LEAF competition accents a re-ignited poetry-slam scene

by Pete Zamplas

Punch lines snap out like yo-yos – this isn't coffeehouse verse.

Poetry slams have crept back into the downtown scene following a long hiatus since their mid-'90s heyday. But they've always been an important part of the biannual Lake Eden Arts Festival. This popular form of performance art is ultra-dramatic, dynamic – and often much-more provocative than regular poetry readings.

Another jammed Eden Hall crowd is expected for the LEAF poetry-slam finals on Oct. 19; poets start speaking their minds at 8:30 p.m. and won't let up for some three hours.

The audience is often part of the show at a slam, participating in routines when asked – for instance, a poet might goad the crowd to say certain words on cue for a chorus effect. Poet Carrie Gerstmann adopts such a call-and-response format – during one of her recent performances at downtown's Area 45 Theatre, she urged the crowd into the fun canine-style, making them growl, bark and whimper.

Slam poets are judged for the content and performance of original material up to three minutes long; judges, in turn, base their scores on audience reaction. There are typically six rounds at LEAF poetry slams – plus an improvisational round – producing about a dozen finalists. Once chosen, the champion acknowledges his or her honor with an encore poem.

Styles range from haiku to hip-hop, and delivery can fluctuate from whispers to shouts. Whatever the tone, however, dramatic voice, gestures and movement are crucial to a slam poet's performance. But connecting with the crowd can be tough, especially for newcomers.

On her first try, AnnaBeth Watts "just lost it," she recalls. "It was horrible." But in the past year, she has developed into a respected slammer.

Getting the first laugh is the major challenge, says Wendy Loomis. "You listen for them laughing. You don't ponder it, but you play off it."

Watts, Gerstmann, Loomis and Nick Fox, all slam poets based near Asheville, point out that LEAF is unique among big slams in featuring individual competitors over the standard four-person team format. Teams, though, have traveled from as far as New York to appear at LEAF, where members split up to perform solo. Gerstmann herself sometimes performs with a Winston-Salem squad, though she hopes to start a team closer to home.

It was an Asheville group, in fact, that scooped the competition in Ann Arbor, Mich., to win the

National Slam Champion Team Award back in 1995. Then-Asheville residents Kim Holzer, Ted Vaca and Danny Solis have since gone on to lead slams in other cities. (Pat Storm, that team's fourth member, passed away two years ago.)

Gerstmann, 40, is herself a slam champion, having twice won at LEAF, including for her first performance there and then for the one last fall. Her 2001 CD, *Transcendental Floss*, features a blend of music and spoken word in which she seeks "spontaneity and fluidity," expressing a range of emotions reflecting life's "layers."

The poet, who works as a nurse, comes late to the slam circuit; most local slammers, she points out, are in their 20s. But Gerstmann's seasoned outlook seems to have served her well: She's been hailed for her wording, precise vocal delivery and bold, continuous hand gestures.

Wendy Loomis, the touring director of local poetry-and-theater group Poetry Alive!, helped start the local slam scene here in the '90s. A professional actress, Loomis is another highly visual slam performer whose stage tactics include surprise entrances from out in the audience.

Poets frequently come to slam events prepared with extra poems, switching styles to suit the mood. Though the performers' basic movements are rehearsed, many improvise details, playing off their own emotions and crowd response. The improvisational round, in fact, is Gerstmann's favorite part of poetry slams. During this segment, audience members choose the poem subjects, which poets draw from a hat. At LEAF, Gerstmann has had to produce on-the-spot verse about everything from sex to tangled hair.

Hitting close to home

Topics in slams run an emotional gamut, frequently touching on sensitive social issues. Gerstmann believes such material works best if it is both lyrical and "beautifully executed in language."

Local poet DeWayne Barton offers brisk verse on racial inequality; one piece paints the experience of "driving while black." Barton, used to speaking before groups in his work as a youth counselor and substitute teacher, spurred his poem by evoking a highway surveillance camera. He recently won his first poetry slam at Area 45 - which is, according to poet A.J. Geil, currently the only year-round local venue holding slams sanctioned by Poetry Slam International.

Stacie Boschma, who also attends Area 45 slams, uses poetry in counseling the developmentally delayed. Writing and delivering verse can be a great emotional release, concurs AnnaBeth Watts, who attempts to turn confessional work into what she calls a "collective experience." Watts has written about an abusive former romance that left emotional scars on herself and her child, turning those poems into odes of triumph.

"You will never gain power over me again," Watts proclaims in one line.

Her 17-year-old son, Christopher, first heard the poem from the audience. "It brought back memories," he says somberly. "I was the child she mentioned. I remember feeling I didn't know at all what was going on."

Interestingly, though, Watts finds it more therapeutic to write rather than to perform poetry.

Nick Fox, who's done slam poetry for two years, would probably agree. "It's harder to be a good writer than a good performer," he says.

Fox started writing poems about sports and travel, then delved into weightier concerns. His love poem, "Dreams Away," written for his girlfriend Lucy Amderton, is about "how imperfect humans could find perfect love." The couple met at last year's national slam in Seattle, and Amderton is now moving from Chicago to Asheville, Fox says.

"She's my editor," he continues. "She's a brilliant writer and critic. She'll push me, without being harsh."

At LEAF, however, he'll be on his own.

Poetry schedule

Poetry abounds at LEAF: The main slam's first round begins at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 19, with finals starting at 8:30 p.m. in Eden Hall. The poetry tent will also feature musicians and poets including Poets in the Round, Jim Wolf and *Xpress* Managing Editor Cecil Bothwell. Children can try slamming beginning at 11:30 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 20. Call (828) 68-MUSIC for details.

Fall 2002 Lake Eden Arts Festival

The Lake Eden Arts Festival happens Friday, Oct. 18 through Sunday, Oct. 20 at Camp Rockmont in Black Mountain. The weekend offers more than 40 healing-arts workshops; camping; contra dancing; a juried arts-and-crafts show; and dozens of regional, national and international musical acts.

This year's main-stage highlights include Fruit, an Australian all-women acoustic-pop band that won last year's Australian Live Music Award for best emerging live act; major bluegrass players IIIrd Tyme Out; New Orleans' Wild Magnolias; Celtic sensation John Whelan; and the tireless party known as Alex Torres and the Latin Kings Orchestra.

LEAF admission ranges from a full-weekend pass with camping (\$100/adults, \$80/youth) to one-day passes (Friday, \$25/\$20; Saturday, \$35/\$30; Sunday, \$25/\$20). For performer schedules, directions and more information, call (828) 68-MUSIC or visit www.theLEAF.com.