

Getting the Most Out of Your Judges' Tapes

by Shirlee Whitcomb

There is ALWAYS something of value to get from a judge's commentary. Avoid the pitfall of getting so emotionally caught up in where they ranked you or the score they gave you, that you don't allow them the opportunity to talk through the show and account for what guided them to that score. It is far too easy to let emotional tension of the moment color what should be a useful tool.

You have more in common with the judging community than you realize. Every tape a judge makes, every score a judge gives is scrutinized by the entire community he/she serves, and countless instructors and fans are "judging" what they do. They are as much "on the line" as the students and all of you.

They are given 5 minutes to process some 6000 bits of data within each show. They are expected to see everything, mentally record it, speak encouragingly about it, offer solutions to problems and remain as alert and vitalized with the 30th performance of the day as they were with the first. They don't have a "warm up" time. They must be "on" from the get-go. They have 2 minutes to reference the curriculum and assign a score and as the show progresses, they must make comparisons to each other performance they have processed. By the time the 30th group of the evening has performed, the judge has processed over a million bits of information and assigned a total of 60 scores (2 per score sheet). Furthermore, he/she is expected to remember everything in order to hold intelligent and informative dialogs with the instructors at a meeting which is held following a 6 hour contest when both judge and instructor are drained. Still, they remain committed, they continue to work, they continue to care and inevitably they get better and better. They certainly aren't perfect, but God love them, they are important and valuable to our process.

Remember, you've had intimate involvement with every count for 4 months or more, they've had a 5 minute exchange with your creation and your students. Be realistic in what you expect from them in this time frame.

The best way to get the most information from any judge's tape is to be organized in your preparation for listening to tapes and preparing for critique.

I'm going to reference this approach using GE as an example. You should know each effect in your show and how you hope your audience will respond to it. The judge is a member of the audience, and his/her response should be measured in the same way.

- Make a chronological list of your effects (or in the case of EA, list design events or in equipment/movement the vocabulary) in a vertical column, leaving space either next to or following each effect/event/vocabulary notation for you to note comments
- Review each judge's response to your show and make whatever notes you hear next to the particular moment in your show. You're going to measure not only what the judge says, but also any change in their tone of voice or even if there was silence. Here's what you will learn.
- The ideal "read" will provide you with an ongoing commentary of response that includes both positive and negative issues and is well balanced between what the students are doing and how they are doing it. This ideal situation allows you to have a dialog with the judge from a common base of reference, since it's probable that you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses as well. From this kind of commentary, coupled with your own areas of awareness, you will begin to make a "list of things to do" that will start to improve the show design and the performance quality.
- No response from the judge at a key time means that the event either didn't make a strong impression, or the judge didn't see it because they were looking at something

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else. They may have been processing it in the context of what you did earlier or later. This tells you that you might want to look at the staging as well as what was going on around the particular effect or event. It is also an area to highlight for further conversation with the judge.

- The judge's tone of voice changes and there is a gap in the dialog. This suggests that something bothered the judge, that they are watching the process to determine what the problem is, or they may not have enough information to make a comment. Pinpoint this area, look at it to see if you realize it is a "weak spot" and do what you can to improve it. It's also an area for dialog with the judge.

- The judge who gives you a "roadmap" of what you're doing, at least can assure you that he/she is processing everything. The fact that they can read your work as you hope they will, tells you that much, even though it might not give you the information that lets you know if it was successful or not. The success or question of each event is the focus of conversation with this judge.

- The judge pinpoints problems within the show and seems to focus only on weakness. Recognize this and understand that sometimes judges are trying very hard to help you see points that you might have overlooked or which are hampering the success of the show. They may feel that their greatest contribution is through that approach. This is frustrating to you because you want to know if you did ANYTHING right and all you're getting is the negative. Nonetheless, accept the information, note it and try to determine what, if anything, you can do to make it better, or that you can offer the judge to clarify his/her concerns. When you see him/her, you should encourage the judge to let you know when something was successful and when it was not and if it was not, what specifically was the problem. Even if you don't get the problem identified, highlight that moment and re-examine it yourself.

- The judge is totally focused on performance and never talks about the design/effect of the show. Performance is the single most commonly understood aspect of judging. Everyone from the best judge out there to the newest audience member, shares an awareness of excellence (or its absence). It's a secure area from which a person can respond. Sometimes, if the performance is so weak that you can't really appreciate or even process "the show" then that approach to commentary is understandable. Even if this is not what you hope to hear, still, note the performance issues and let them be a basis for consideration during "cleaning". Never negate this information just because you are disappointed that it lacked balance relative to program.

If there is a critique, this process puts you in focus and allows you to pinpoint specific areas about which you wish clarification or about which you wish to supplement the judge's recognition.