

POETRY SLAM: THE NEXT LEVEL

(...in the opinion of its retiring and humble servant, Scott Woods)

As of December 28, 2011

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Introduction

As I type this the Executive Council (the EC) of Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSi) is poised to lose between two and five of its seven voting members next March in elections. Depending on who decides to run again and who comes on board, that could mean a huge shift in ideology, experience and priorities for the organization. For most people in the Slam community, this means nothing. It simply doesn't have enough of an effect on their degree of involvement to warrant placing any stock in the matter. *Doesn't affect anything in my local poetry reading*, they think, and many of them are right. But having served on the EC for almost a decade, I can tell you that while no two EC members can determine the course of PSi, five most certainly can.

Some people worry about that much leadership changing in one fell swoop: what its implications are, what kind of things such a body might vote into existence, how many things might change (or not) under a mostly new regime. Until about a month ago I was one of these people, the worriers. That changed somewhat when I made a pretty big decision in my life.

A few months ago I decided I would not run for PSi's EC again when my term ends in March 2012. That makes me one of the two people whose term is ending next March that isn't running again (as far as I know). I'd thought about this decision for at least a year, weighing the pros and cons. After about six years in any job you have to start thinking about where and how it might end. At least, you do if you care about the organization more than the position, and I always have. But there was a lot to consider: how long I should stay? Am I doing the right thing by staying so long? We're so close to where I think we should go... shouldn't I just stick it out another year?

I've written elsewhere on that decision so I won't rehash it now save to say that while it was a difficult place to arrive at, it was the right decision for both myself and for PSi. I think I've been a decent president (some would say good, some would say not good enough, so I just split the difference). I think I was certainly the right guy for the times, with one foot in the last great explosion of Slam and one foot always mindful of the old ways and values of the people who came before me. But now it's time for a really solid president and EC working in a really solid PSi. It's my hope that I've laid enough groundwork and shored up the levees enough for a new group of leaders to step in and be those good leaders without having to plug a lot of major holes in the hull. A lot of people on a lot of ECs before now worked to get the organization where it is: worrying less about some things, no longer worrying about others, looking for new worries with the potential for better rewards for everyone. So I'm not as concerned as I used to be about what will happen after I leave because I know that things are in a much better place than how I found them. I also know I won't be very far away from the fight. I just won't be largely responsible for the outcome of whatever fights remain.

I have not created this document in response to coming EC changes. I have created it in part because I've had a really great front row seat to Slam in the last eleven years and think I might have something to offer on my way out the locker room and back onto the field, as it were. But most importantly, I've typed these many pages because, while my work in PSi at the

executive level is coming to a close (for now), Slam's work is never done, and it is work that appreciates earnest stewardship, but adores *informed* stewardship even more.

Stewardship is important. In the world of PSi it is how things that can't yet make their own way in this world stay alive until they can.¹ I tried a long time to achieve a balance in my life between organizer and artist, but mostly struggled with the choice. And while I don't regret having been an organizer/MC at any point in my life, I try not to think about how many poems never saw the light of day because I was giving a lot of time, energy and focus to someone else's problem or agenda. It's not a job you do for the money (there isn't any), the attention (it's mostly negative), the friends (you'll make more enemies than friends), or the power (you're more powerful as an individual member than you think). It's a job you do because you can't stop yourself from straightening the Big Picture of Slam hanging on the wall every time you look at it. That's why I do it and in some way I'll keep doing it. That picture isn't going to straighten itself.

I've seen a lot of things go down in Slam, things that a lot of people didn't stay around to see, didn't even know happened, or didn't know all the sides to before they suggested what I should be doing about something or other. Some of those things were heartwarming and gratifying and made me feel like I was doing what I was put here to do. Some of those things were sensitive in nature, some stupid, some bordering illegal. Some made me want to punch a baby in the throat. All of that comes with the job. And while I don't think one should receive undue adulation for doing your job unless your job is saving lives, I have to say I've seen and done a LOT of things in Slam. Those experiences have helped me forge a number of impressions and theories about what Slam is, what community is, what poetry's job is, and what the next level for all of those things can be. Slam is a great thing but it often needs to be handled like a shark in a tank: always needing fed, always needing room to swim, always needing to remind you that it's a beast, not a pet. I believe Slam has great things in store for those of us who keep its best flame alight, not just the part of the fire pit that warms us. And I think it would be wrong and stupid not to share some of that insight with the people who have to carry it forward...in other words, with you.

Note: this isn't a treatise for the newbie to Slam or to PSi. If you don't know what a slam is or who invented it or what a *SlamNation* is, you will struggle with parts of this document. There are a thousand primers and press quotes – many from myself – about that stuff. This one is for the people already here looking for another way to see and do this thing we do, looking for a way to take all of this to the next level or at least make some informed decisions about what they should do next. Some of it will be obvious. Some of it will come off like sacrilege. If you want

¹ To this end, some advice: I think the best thing you can do for yourself and for poetry at large if you suffer from what most artists would call writer's block (I don't subscribe to it on principle, but whatever) is to serve, to become a steward for poetry, to find a job you can do well in your poetry community on behalf of your fellow artists. (Please note I'm saying "serve" and not "start your own show" on purpose.) Eventually you'll find you either have a strong enough facility and desire for it that you stick to that, you run screaming back to being an artist only, or you spend a LOT of time and energy trying to find a balance. Anyway you go, it beats taking up space waiting on your muse to strike.

help on your local night this diatribe might help you a great deal philosophically but not so much in implementation. Again, other sources do that in far greater detail than I will attempt here.

As president, EC member, SlamMaster, competing poet, touring artist, nationally-recognized poet, Slam polemicist, published writer, artistic-stunt artist, and internet god, I welcome you to a lecture on the next level of Poetry Slam. It primarily covers two areas: The National Poetry Slam and PSi. It is collectively The Big Picture as I see it; the things that I believe will ultimately, done right, put a big fat check mark in the win column for Slam. I maintain that the next level for Slam, whatever it looks like, will be led by PSi utilizing NPS. Simple, no? I have never labored under the hope that everyone will agree with everything I have to say. I do, however, hope that everyone agrees with enough of it that it will compel them to do something more than blog about it. I mean, nothing against blogs and forums and discussion threads, but at some point you have to introduce your ass to the seat of a chair and put in some work. Otherwise you're just this season's troll.

Enjoy, or at least have fun dissecting it, trolls. I don't care; I'm out of a job in three months anyway. So what THAT!

Scott Woods
December 2011
Columbus, Ohio

Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSi)

“Everybody has opinions: I have them, you have them. And we are all told from the moment we open our eyes, that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. Well, that’s horsepuckey, of course. We are not entitled to our opinions; we are entitled to our informed opinions. Without research, without background, without understanding, it’s nothing. It’s just bibble-babble. It’s like a fart in a wind tunnel, folks.”

- Harlan Ellison

How it works

Poetry Slam, Inc. is a non-profit organization whose job is, in a line, to oversee the interests of Poetry Slam as a movement. While this sounds very lofty and professional, PSi isn’t anywhere nearly as vast a conglomerate as it sounds.

Poetry Slam, Inc. was created by a unanimous vote of members at a Slam Family meeting at the 1997 National Poetry Slam. There was talk about creating a non-profit that would oversee all things Slam at the 1996 NPS meeting, but it didn’t become official until 1997.

Something people always confuse PSi with is their experience with other non-profits. No two non-profits are the same, and there are few hard and fast rules that run through all of them. For instance, being non-profit doesn’t mean you aren’t in the business of trying to make money...you’re just supposed to be doing so for a higher cause. It also doesn’t mean beg for grants every month. It’s just a tax thing (he says as if it’s just a couple of pieces of paper needing a signature). Plenty of huge organizations with multi-million dollar budgets are as non-profit as PSi is. My day job is as a librarian (“not deigned, but by deed” as we desk jockeys put it) at one of the largest library systems in the country, if not the world. It is an organization that has a budget numbering the tens of millions. At the same time, there is little legally that distinguishes it from PSi by any textbook definition of non-profits.

I’m giving you this lesson in Finance because it’s important for the next section specifically, but in the general sense as well. People think that because PSi stands for some pretty awesome things and has been around a while that companies and organizations are just jumping at PSi to give us resources (mostly money) and somehow PSi is finding a way to shoot itself in the foot every year. This isn’t true.

What is true is that what we do – poetry – is the sort of thing that has to make its own way before anybody throws any real resources at it, and Slam is still struggling with that. Yes, even 25 years later. It’s not the easiest thing to sell to a fund-granting entity, what we do. *Hey, Company X, why don’t you give us \$10,000 so that we can better go into bars and curse loudly at people for five days every August? Or, Hey, ESPN, why don’t you broadcast our highly unusual and completely un-tactile sport, and mind the bleeps?* I remember one year when we were trying to log a bunch of footage from an NPS finals show to determine if we had enough poetry to create an educational video with. Out of about twenty or so poems, only one didn’t

have any cursing in it, and even that one still had subject matter issues. What we do is hard to sell for big or easy money, but it's far more important to me and just about everyone I've ever served on an EC with to ensure that we keep doing exactly what we mean to do as artists, even if that costs us many, many possible avenues and rewards. So keeping this thing growing productively is always a grind.

Now, personally? I could care less about grants. That's why I'm always in favor of hiring Development Directors and letting them loose on companies and grants. I don't want to do that type of work. I'm a builder not a hustler, and I believe in building with what you got. What PSi's got is members and audiences, and as far as I'm concerned that's the best currency you can stockpile in almost any organization whose goal is almost anything. I'm telling you this now so that later, when you read something like "grants can bite me", you know why. When they come through they're great, but the amount of attention and stress that can go into obtaining one is not energy I'm interested in spending personally. So I hire people for the dirty jobs who like dirt. I operate that way in PSi and I do operate that way at my local venue. Want a really nasty example of how "awesome" grants are? At the end of NPS 2010 in St. Paul the whole affair was being lauded as a big success all around. Money was made at venues, poets performed, audiences came out, all was well. And when you counted the grants on top of the money that was generated by our seed investment, it looked to be the biggest profit margin in NPS history. But then we had to wait months for grants to actually appear...even a year for some substantial monies. By then we were in different modes and holes...and this was largely money that came from legit state sources for legit event needs.

So how does PSi actually survive? you're asking me now. Simple: butts in seats.

PSi's income is largely derived from memberships, registrations of teams and poets to our events, and whatever profits can be made off of our events, usually by way of ticket sales/admission to our events. We have much smaller streams of income by way of merchandise and online sales of products, and an infinitesimal trickle of donations. I'd have to pull one of our annual budgets up and look at it to make a firmer calculation of how much comes from where, but know that when you pay for a membership or register poets for NPS/iWPS/WOWps, you are paying for not only what you get at an event, but for everything that makes that event possible year-round: staff salaries, phone lines, insurance fees, video material...everything. More on this later, but for now understand that this is how it works. It would be nice if it worked a little differently (say, with more income streams), but this is how it's been working for a long time, and while it's not perfect, it keeps the lights on. There were many years when it didn't do that much.

Does it work?

Yes, but it could work better.

PSi is practically the embodiment of domino theory. Everything is connected to everything else. When we lose money in one area it will inevitably and without mercy show up somewhere along the line in another area, one that might not seem even remotely related to the source of the original loss. Much of this occurs because most of the work of the organization is focused on the implementation of events (NPS, iWPS and WOWps) and our events have only starting reaping anything resembling a profit for PSi in recent years.² So almost everything we do is in aid of an event, and conversely most of the resources we generate are aimed at that agenda.

For PSi to break this cycle – and it must if it is to survive another 14 years - PSi could do a number of things but I'll only present four possible options here. I think 99% of what could be considered falls under one of them:

1) Expand the potential for existing events to generate more revenue or revenue-generating interest;

2) Add events/projects/product to the table outside of these events that generate revenue or interest that generates revenue;

3) Both 1 and 2;

4) Stop putting on these events and get in another line of poetry work.

For obvious reasons, I'll remove #4 from the table. It's a dick move that does nothing for anyone and kills whatever momentum Slam has at the national and international level. Slam showcases performance poetry whether it's a competition or not. So we need events.

#1 sounds good when you see it, but it's a new organization's agenda, not the agenda of an organization with 25 years of poets and work behind it. It is the agenda of a group striving to stay in the pocket. There were a lot of hard lessons while utilizing this agenda alone.

#2 also sounds good by itself by I know from experience that by focusing on expansion while maintaining meager resources and manpower means you will be spending almost all of your energy and time on the expanding things, not on the core elements that truly sustain the whole machine. PSi handled this okay when we created iWPS, and it practically nailed it when we created WOWps. Now we're potentially moving into an era that isn't just about events, and

² And depending on whom you ask with access to the books, many past profits remain up for debate.

that expansion is exciting to me. We need to do what #2 asks, but we need to be able to make sure we can do it without hurting #1.

This Big Picture of mine is all about #3.

“Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

- Winston Churchill

What PSi Needs (...and What It Doesn't)

There are things that PSi could use that would make its job easier. In no particular order but of arguably equal importance:

Money

This is pretty obvious. The more money you have, the more you can do. If I have to explain why this is important to you, then you shouldn't be reading this document at all.

Dedicated staff

I mean this in the literal sense, not the philosophical sense. What staff we have ever had believed in the mission of PSi and did hard work well below their worth. Their dedication to the ideal of Slam – the philosophy – is undisputed. What I mean by “dedicated staff” here is people whose only job is what PSi needs them to do; people who don't have to do all of the things PSi needs AND still work a day job, or what PSi needs to do AND some other thing that PSi needs at the same time. I'm talking part- and full-time positions that work anywhere from a real 10-40 hours a week. We have one right now, with at least two on deck. We could use about 3-5 more.

*“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”
- Henry Ford*

More background support for dedicated staff

Staffs need budgets, resources and means to communicate quickly and without losing steam in red tape. They need autonomy with just the right amount of oversight. They don't need to be bogged down in what other hands are doing or community flame wars. They need to be able to take on a job, have everything they need to realize that job to the degree that PSi requires, and then be able to maintain that effort without undue stress for a long period of time, preferably some years.

Sponsorships, not grants

While I have a love/hate relationship with grants, I'm all for sponsorships. I like them simple, with as few strings as possible, and coming from sources as notable as can be garnered. We don't need a company telling us how they want their money spent. We need to build a thing that they can look at, see how their money is most likely to be spent, and then let them give us the things we need (some in kind computer hard drives would be nice) or the money to get them. Grants are okay if you have dedicated staff (see above!) to mess with that stuff to such a degree that you, as a builder of things or as a visionary or an executive, don't have to. Sponsorships, however, have the potential to cross-promote, and suggest a sharing of audiences. Grants don't do that, and that's why I don't place a premium on them. If you give me a thousand dollars I'm going to use it to try to put 500-1000 people in a venue for a show. If, however, you give me part of your audience and promotion in areas I might not normally be in, or if you give me the

resources to produce the kinds of shows that generate 500-1000 people on their own, or both, then your sponsorship has given me something far more useful in the long run. If I don't turn off your audience, we could keep flipping that headcount from event to event.

What PSi Doesn't Need

Transparency

Honestly, this trait in organizations is vastly overrated, and in the PSi community it is remarkably imbalanced in terms of need versus desire. Even its actual need versus a genuine communal interest is imbalanced! The handful of active members who genuinely believe PSi should have more transparency could probably be counted on two hands. (I tend to count those people based on who posts about it in the forums or who generally suggest it in some other public platform with any consistency, and not just on the coattails of someone else's platform.) Those dozen or fewer people should run for EC or sign-up for a working committee or apply for one of our posted jobs and get all the information – and work - their heads can hold. Some portion of those people should just leave and seek an organization that does what they like. The reality is that the vast majority of members could care less about how the sausage of our events is made. And of the haystack-buried few who regularly say we should have more transparency, they are largely only concerned with the level of transparency that concerns their particular gripe or issue that month or year.

Example: When I first got on the EC someone told me, “You know, PSi never releases its financial information to the members at meetings. I've never seen a PSi budget. That's a lack of transparency.” So I went to the EC in my freshman year and railed against our secretive ways, wrecking a little havoc, and basically trying to push this item through because, dammit, a member asked us for it. At the next SlamMaster meeting a budget was provided for every member present to see (and many who weren't even present to ask for later). The person who asked to see it – in the name of transparency, mind you - looked it over for a couple of minutes and promptly shoved it into his bag. Everyone else in the room just kind of shrugged at it or wrote poems on the back of it and mentally went about their merry way. No one cared, almost unanimously. I was kind of pissed! It had been a lot of work to get that budget together for public consumption, only to have it dismissed. Maybe one person since then has asked for such information to be released publicly. These days it's an item on every public meeting agenda PSi has, usually listed as “PSi Financial Report”. It is the least time consuming item in almost every meeting (about 1 minute) and almost no one ever asks any questions after it's shared. Many people don't even listen to the numbers.³

Please understand that I am not saying the budget isn't important; I'm saying the request for the budget was unimportant. I'm not suggesting people should become more concerned about

³ It bears pointing out that, without exception, every PSi budget is boring, not because it's made up of numbers, but because there isn't anything salacious in them. There isn't anything TO hide. There isn't a stash of money somewhere in Steve Marsh's house, and what money PSi does have is being spent on exactly what it should be spent on. Also, it doesn't handle enough money from year to year to even be moderately interesting. It's kind of like auditing an old lady's coupon pouch. This was the linchpin, the magic bullet, the Big Secret that was so important that it required me to stop progress on other, more important things to resolve a non-issue for one member who barely had an axe to grind in the first place.

what the numbers are (or issues on the level of the numbers); I'm saying people don't largely care and that's perfectly okay except to the handful of people for whom such information is for some mysterious reason important to possess, but to actually do nothing with. Every organization has these people to deal with, I know, but it's almost never productive.

Bottom line: if you – YOU - want that level of transparency you generally have but to ask, but I would much rather you just emailed the Executive Director for it or better, signed up to do some of the work and satisfied your curiosity that way. Members have a right to know what their organization is doing, and how they arrive at certain decisions and processes. It is a right that should be exercised with extreme prejudice in areas of law or politics. It is a right that should not be exercised to the degree to which it is in Poetry Slam, Inc.. Save it for something important, Agent Mulder.⁴

More to the point: the way some people use the word “transparency” is either wrong (which is sad when you consider we are an organization populated to the rafters with wordsmiths) or disingenuous (which is worse than sad; it's sinister). What many people mean by transparency isn't what transparency actually is. What THEY often mean by transparency is, “Let me see the work you've done so that I can see why what I want to happen isn't happening.” Seriously, much of the stuff that people demand in terms of transparency doesn't change anything once it's been revealed. And let's be clear, nearly everything that has ever been asked publicly of an EC in terms of information has probably been provided at some point. This means that what generates these asks are largely based on a lack of information, which I would agree shouldn't be a problem, but which you must in turn agree makes us lose enormous amounts of focus to address when we should just keep our noses to the grindstone while you do what you're really here to do: write and perform poems well so we can put on bomb-ass shows together. If the daily work of PSi were a democratic process I might feel differently. But it isn't a democracy, and personally? I like having people be responsible for things that I don't need so that I can do the things I want to do the way I want to do them. And if it ever gets to the point that I am being put in a position of doing something I don't want to do the way I don't want to do it WITH MY ART? Then I will not stay in that place very long, and neither should any of you. None of us have to or should. That means that if after a reasonable and productive discourse about what you think should happen - if common ground genuinely cannot be found - go find the place where you can do what you want the way you want (or create it) and let the people who like things that way have their party.

A final word on transparency, its overwrought usefulness, and its chest-thumping sense of entitlement: PSi provides an alarming degree of transparency right now and has for years. Due to the fact that EC members are lobbied, nominated and elected by and from within the active

⁴ Or better, tell me what you think of this deal: How about we tell our staff not to respond to any requests for information that are unprofessional or could be construed as rude or without purpose? How about we require professionalism and some modicum of respect out of the people doing the asking, and not hamstringing our workers with charges of failed leadership when they respond to bullshit in kind? Hell, we'd get twice as much done as we do now if we didn't have to defend ourselves and dig into old forum threads to make points that have been made a dozen times before in the interest of “transparency.”

Slam community, people have a constantly revolving open door of access to the highest levels of our organization. If I showed you some of the things people have requested of me via email expecting not only a response, but full-blown action, you would think I didn't have a family, day job, poetry career or hobby to my name. In the past I have had so many poets mysteriously end up with my cell phone number (for any assortment of reasons, from registration deadlines to rule determinations) that I eventually swore off of the device entirely. There exists a more than reasonable degree of access to the people who make PSi possible. I would go so far as to say it is too much access for a professional organization the size of PSi. You might disagree, but then no one is calling you at 11:00 at night (because it's only 8:00 in their time zone) to ask you about a Win & You're In Bout ruling right before they start their show.⁵

In short, if a staff member spends a day digging in forums for your solitary request in the name of transparency and you haven't spent ten minutes doing the same, don't ask for more transparency.

Grants

PSi has been awarded a handful of grants in its 14 years. It's not for lack of trying. I don't think the amount of all of our grants to date combined totals \$100,000. I'm not knocking PSi or its development corps by pointing this out. I'm actually trying to make a positive point: that we have been able to do everything that we do largely without the existence of grants at all.

Grants are great if you can get them. They're not easy in general, and advances in information sharing in the last twenty years has made the field more competitive. Nowadays anyone can research how to set-up a non-profit, how to apply for grants, and how to apply for those same grants at a speed and depth that was impossible just five or ten years ago. More people who share our interests are vying for the same – or fewer – available dollars. Also, there are fewer dollars because, in case you missed out on the last seven or eight years, the economy is in the toilet. So we're all fighting for a much smaller pile of cash in an exploding field of agendas. If you thought Slam was hard to get funded before, try going up against a thousand more art organizations than a decade ago, many of whom have no problem insuring a funder that they won't spend a penny of their grant extolling the virtues of people screaming curse words in bars.⁶

⁵ No less than 50% of the things I have ever been asked about in this manner were things that I had no idea about, not because I'm stupid, but because it's not my job to know them. Go figure.

⁶ See, just then someone thought, "Well if you, as our leader, didn't go around talking about slam that way maybe we'd get some money." Calm down. I have zero say on what goes on the applications. Smarter people than I have seen fit to keep Scott Woods and his callous and grubby fingers away from any of the respectable parts of the Slam machine. This is just us talking... family talk.

SlamMasters are more powerful than everyone

SlamMasters don't get enough credit, but this isn't because anybody has it out for them. It's because most SlamMasters don't care to do much more than register a team for NPS. That used to be a put-down but anymore it's just a fact of life and as an organizer I treat it as such. I don't get down on SlamMasters (anymore) who only want to be as involved as it takes to send a team to NPS every year. People got lives and it is written nowhere that poetry has to be an all-consuming part of it. It takes all types of people to make the Slam world spin. (I will, however, dump on any SM who complains a lot but whose actual record of communal work is meager if it exists at all, and let me be clear here: arguing is not communal work.)

But let's not focus on the ugly parts, yes? Let us look at the fun part, the part that too few SMs acknowledge...the part that concerns POWER. I believe the SlamMasters – not the EC – are the most powerful body of people in the Slam world. If you want to know why NSP looks the way it does it largely hinges on the use – or lack thereof – of SlamMaster power. Don't believe me? Fine. But know that if you disagree it is probably because you are measuring their power with the wrong stick. For me it comes down to two determinations:

= If you measure power in what they CAN do then yes, they are the most powerful body in PSi and in Slam.

= If you measure power in what they ACTUALLY do then no, they are not the most powerful body in PSi and in Slam.

EC members largely come out of the SlamMaster pool. It is extremely rare over the dozens of bodies that have sat in EC chairs for them to be occupied by non-SlamMasters. SlamMasters even have it set-up so that the decision to determine who gets nominated occurs at their meeting alone, so the likelihood that the nominations for EC members will be anything other than SMs is markedly reduced. So the EC isn't traditionally comprised of people who weren't SMs first. The EC used to almost exclusively BE SlamMasters, pound for pound. That's not only an exercising of power...it's practically a monopoly. And just for kicks, the bylaws have always empowered the SMs to remove, at will and without cause, an EC member from their post. Most SMs don't even know they have this right. It is a right that has never been exercised by the SMs. It has only been exercised once from within the EC itself...and we had to create a method and justification for doing so!

On top of all of that, SlamMasters are the only body afforded say in what key elements of a NPS looks like. They are, in fact, given the power to determine the most important factor of all: where the event will be held from year to year. Only when they are not offered bids is this power

then shuffled to the EC.⁷ They also get exclusive rights to determine the rules from year to year. The EC has never had that right.

Finally, an observation I shouldn't have to make at all but will out of kindness and utter completeness. SlamMasters ARE Slam, in a very frontline sense. They run the venues and create the shows. They build the mountains that poets climb, oftentimes at great expense to themselves financially, socially and artistically. Through the weekly and monthly work of their communities they bring Slam to life. Slam is not NPS or iWPS or WOWps or PSi. Slam is hundreds of readings all over the world, holding up numbers in the air after performed poems, every week of the year, perhaps every day. No other level of PSi could do that even if they wanted to.

So in three key areas – determination and oversight of the EC, determination and oversight of NPS, and the actual execution of public art en masse – the SlamMasters have an enormous amount of power with which to determine the course of PSi and conversely, Slam.

On paper.

The temptation to attribute the power in PSi to the EC and staff is understandable, but only possible in reality through a lack of SlamMaster action, or knowledge of same. If a farm has no farmer on it, you might very well assume the pigs run the farm in their absence. That would be remarkably Orwellian of you, but it is what it is. PSi is similar. What should be a multi-pronged action plan attacking goals in multiple ways at once ends up being a single-pronged spear because the other prongs don't work.

Part of the spiel incoming EC members receive exists in a thread in their private forum called "So You're An EC Member...". I know it's there because I wrote it. I post an excerpt of it below to make a point:

What does the job REALLY look like, you're wondering. Besides chiming in with your opinions and votes when necessary, the one thing you should keep in mind while serving on the EC is that your job is to generate vision and make those visions a productive reality for our members and audiences. We're not just event organizers - we have people contracted to do those things (Host Cities and Event Coordinators). We are charged with leading the organization in line with the Mission Statement without breaking any bylaws. So your job - and this is the fun part - is to come up with ways that we can propel poetry and an appreciation of it into the world. You come up with ideas, programs, events, merchandise...whatever seems like it would attract people to what PSi offers. You then present those proposals to the EC, get us to vote for them, and develop the resources to make those visions a reality. THAT is the job of the EC: vision work.

⁷ This was changed with the formation of WOWps, which only the EC can determine, and for good reason: it works.

Still gives me chills. I've pretty much lived by this self-directive, though much of my ability to do this kind of work was hampered by the sheer amount of foundation that still needed to be built. As I said before, a lot of ECs in the past worked to build things in such a way that eventually an EC member would only have to step on board, get up to speed, and then commit themselves to that kind of vision work, not debating line items in event budgets or worrying about the color of logos or thinking about how many t-shirts to order every year. We are close to that type of EC than we have ever been, and we have done it at great sacrifice. A lot of people had similar visions of what PSi should do but couldn't even get it on the table because we were always a community striving hard to become an organization. It was always important that the community remained in the process, not just as a consideration, but as determiners of vision.

Which brings me to my ultimate SlamMaster power reveal: the only thing separating a SlamMaster with a great idea and an EC member with a great idea is a title. There hasn't been an EC I've ever been a part of in ten years that wouldn't listen to what a SlamMaster had to say, weigh it, then let the SlamMaster participate in the formulation and execution of that idea once it was agreed that it was an idea worth pursuing. In fact, any MEMBER could do it. It's the one thing I can say about PSi that I can't say about most of the other organizations and businesses I've seen or know: if you're willing to do the work of your idea, your idea can grow here. It is how iWPS was created. It is how WOWps was created. It is how our websites and newsletters get done. It is how Slam Camp was brought into the world. PSi remains a springboard for your ideas, but nothing hits the board until we can see the grease on your elbows.

SlamMasters secretly rule the Slam world. Or rather, they would if they saw themselves the way I see them and acted accordingly.

Little Known PSi Facts

A few choice bits of info that not everybody knows, remembers or has bothered to tabulate.

Number of Presidents

To date there have been five presidents of PSi:

- Marc Smith (twice)
- Mike Henry
- Deb Marsh
- Taylor Mali
- Scott Woods

The Female President

For a brief period of months PSi had a female president: Deb Marsh. Deb was installed as the President in January of 2004 when Poetry Slam founder Marc Smith stepped down (for the second time, and permanently) because she was Vice-President at the time. One of the duties of the VP is to step in as acting President. Thus, for about 2-3 months, PSi had a female president.

PSi is Woman-Owned

In recent years the EC has experienced a huge influx of women than ever before, and last year women held a controlling majority of votes: 4 out of 7 (including 2 of 4 current officer positions). Also, our current Executive Director – Abigail Ehn – is only our second ED ever. Per the bylaws the ED is a de facto member of the EC (albeit non-voting). Women are integral to PSi at the highest and most active levels. We need to start putting that on our grant applications!

PSi is Black-Owned

I especially like this stat. For some time, blacks have had a controlling majority of votes on the Executive Council. As of this writing, three of four existing officers are black, while blacks hold a majority of EC votes: 4 of 7. Happy Kwanzaa!

The National Poetry Slam

Why other events aren't NPS

NPS is the largest poetry slam competition in the world. It is five days long, hosts over 400 performing poets and over a dozen side events, comprised mostly of opportunities for communities that host the event to partake in even more poetry than the competition can afford. At 25 years, Poetry Slam is one of the longest running active art movements in the last 100 years. Without Slam there is no NPS, but without the sharpening stone that is NPS there is no Def Poetry Jam, no Brave New Voices, no dedicated school units to performance poetry, no resurgence in poetry open mics the world over, and no overwhelming interest in poetry at large by its many audiences, who have never been more aware, diverse or compelled by poetry in any circle or institution.

While there exist many poetry festivals, none of them looks or feels like a NPS. It is an event still owned and run at every turn by the artists and supporters who have created it. To its success or detriment it caters only to the will of its constituents, and because of the size of its community this separates it from many other events that look the same on the surface, but ultimately are very different.

Basically.

Death by Slam: The Competition and How It Will Kill NPS & Slam

Having for many pages now extolled Slam's many virtues and its necessary albeit dirty business underbelly, let me now tell you how we, the Slammers, the people who do it, the wind beneath the wings of Revolution and the drinking buddy of Everyman, will fuck it all up.

I've been spreading this particular gospel very casually in recent years - a smatter of snide over dinner, a choice and cryptic one-liner in an online forum... whatever seemed contextually supportive to my idea. Let me go on record here fully and state, without snicker, smile or remorse that while Slam as a artistic phenomenon is at little to no risk of going anywhere soon, the same cannot be said of PSi or NPS and should that happen it will happen in no small part to the fact that we allowed the competition to rise above not only the principles of Slam, but the marketing of Slam.

Now, I could go on for a great many pages about how poets have dragged NPS and PSi into the bowels of debate over things that, ultimately, have very little to do with what Slam was created to address or that will help PSi profit from their inclusion. There is no shortage of people who can and will be happy to confirm this. I have even argued for many days that what some people see as compounding the entertainment aspects of Slam - meaning competitive - on behalf of an audience are not entertaining, not competitive and not Slam. Too many of us have allowed the gimmick to wag the dog, so to speak. But all of this has been focused on before and frankly, arguing with Slammers about things like score creep and handpicked judges isn't even a dead horse... it's a horse so dead even the flies have stopped landing on it. There is nothing to be gained here by going through the motions again, certainly nothing that will help PSi or Slam overall. Nor has it been the basis for my rabbleroxing about how focusing on it rings the death knell of NPS (and by virtue, Slam). I say it strictly from a business standpoint here.

Let's be clear: it is the rare audience member who comes to a poetry slam thinking that they're going to observe an actual competition of merit and consequence. Doesn't mean there aren't things at stake or that the poets and team might take it seriously... just that the audience largely doesn't. Sure, they'll buy the caprice for a night, but ultimately they are there for something more meaningful than a one-form talent show contest. Many audiences have been sold a bill of goods that states, as novelist Jeannette Winterson describes it:

“The artist as radar can help me. The artist who combines an exceptional sensibility with an exceptional control over the material. This equipment, unfunded, unregarded, gift and discipline kept tuned to untapped frequencies, will bring home signals otherwise lost to me. Will make for my ears and eyes what was the property of the hawk. This sharpness and stretch of wings has not in it the comfort of escape. It has in it warnings and chances and painful beauty. It is not what I know and it is not what I am. The mirror turns out to be a through looking-glass, and beyond are places I have never reached. Once reached there is no need to leave them again.”

Art is not tourism...it is an ever-expanding territory. Art is not Capitalism, what I find in it, I may keep. The title takes my name.

“The realization of complex emotion.”

This is what we're selling with our art even when there isn't a competition, and most people get that. Sadly, too many slam poets do not. Again, I'm not here to deliver a harangue on the mission of Poetry Slam. I but ask that we look at the shoes we are asking the audience to wear whenever we gather in the name of art, particularly at NPS. Any city can get almost anyone to show up for one show out of the whole week an NPS is in town, maybe a side event too if it sounds wacky or intriguing enough. But NPS asks that they consider it for five nights to the tune 7 venues each night to the tune of 50+ paid customers in each, the first three nights of which are straight work nights. THEN it asks that this same audience be compelled by side or late-night events during non-vacation days/nights to listen to the same type of thing they saw/will see at the bouts, just under specific themes. THEN it asks that this same audience cough up for a \$20+ ticket at the end of the week to crown a “winner”. It asks all of this – has the nerve, the gall even - while **offering the same product over and over every three minutes with (when compared to the overwhelming number of poets at an NPS) little variation.** And why is there so little variation in the product?

Because of the overwhelming effect of the competition.

The competition isn't boring per se – it's just a tool. But the effect of the competition – the value we place on it – makes us poets boring as fuck. What is so boring about us? It makes us try to sound like other, more successful competitors so that we may win. It makes us write about things the way our competitors write about them, looking like them, sounding like them, yelling like them, again, so we can win. Very few of us consider at all what effect ten or twelve or sixteen poems that sound and look alike have not only on a slam's scores, but on the show itself, which is what the audience is actually paying to see. They don't pay to see a team they never heard of full of poets they don't know sometimes from cities they've never cared about win a slam. They were told the slam was fun, that it was a mock competition, that it was a gimmick, that we were going to put before them some of the most compelling poets in the country. And how do we frequently fulfill that expectation? By doing 16 poems of three minutes in length without fail back-to-back at maximum volume as fast as possible about some of the heaviest shit to happen to man. Taken individually, we are snowflakes. Put in an NPS bout however, we are a whipping and blinding blizzard of rapes, daddy issues, politics and screaming banshees.

Now, I know “The Show” is a tough thing to ask competitors to consider. Teams spend thousands of dollars to come and read 8 poems (2 poems per individual competitor) for their trouble and most of them will be damned if they “throw a bout” by trying to be funny or reading something they haven't performed into rote skits or monologues at every NPS they ever went to.

There are “careers” to launch and SlamMasters to impress for future bookings. As odd as it sounds, I have long lost faith in the poets to take it upon themselves to actually be the selling point of NPS.

So I say NPS must change around the poets. Also, the predominance of NPS as we know it in the scheme of what PSi offers must also change.

Where NPS Needs To Go: The Next Level

In short: NPS needs to be more like a festival and less like a poetry competition. And because I don't trust poets to do that on their own (or at least not until the festival value system of NPS outweighs the competition value system of NPS), I believe firmly in changing any number or all other elements of NPS to achieve an event that generates what my good friend Steve Marsh calls "joy".

joy

noun \ˈjɔɪ\

1 a : the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires : delight b : the expression or exhibition of such emotion : gaiety

2 : a state of happiness or felicity : bliss

3 : a source or cause of delight

- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

I once asked Steve (PSi's Executive Director at the time) to send me a five year plan laying out where he thought PSi should be. This was about four years ago. In it, he expounded on the merits of a joy-based value system, a system in which PSi shepherded audiences to the joy of poetry, poets to the joy of an audience, and organizers to the joy of being a part of something that generated joy. A great many things would need to change to get us there, he warned. His list was long and daunting. I was overwhelmed by his generosity and vision, but even more by the amount of work I could see it would take if I could be convinced that aiming for joy was something PSi should do. Right or wrong, I didn't pursue the plan directly, but not because I *thought* it was wrong. I spent a lot of time trying to conceive of what joy meant to me and Poetry Slam, what it looked like at an event filled with the personalities I have come to know so well (for better or worse). It has taken me a long time to see it, but I see it as a worthy goal and believe it is something that has real value and meaning in our organizational and communal culture. It's not something I haven't seen before in other places, other organizations or working groups. Admittedly I have seen it in spurts at every PSi event I have ever been to. PSi's capacity for support and joy-giving is vast, as wide as the furthest of our far-flung venues.

But we'll never get there advertising the scores as the REASON for showing up, or allowing poets who enter into Poetry Slam to believe that succeeding at the competition aspect of Slam is where the highest value and rewards of our community lie. The gimmick of the contest has run its course. People no longer need the gimmick to decide to partake in poetry. Slam has accomplished that much. We have generated the work, the poets and the structures by which innumerable institutions and people have been able to create their own sense of what poetry people need, and people have come to them all. They continue to do so. Thanks in no small part to Slam, poetry is no longer something no one has ever seen, so much as they haven't seen the way that would get them to come out every week or month for it (yet). What a wonderful place

and time we have brought our art to, to the land of Art Option, where people know there is an orchard in town...they just haven't stopped by for any of the fruit yet. It is a time that PSi and NPS should be poised to capitalize on and lead. We did it before. We can do it again.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to allow for the failure of my Big Picture. There are plenty of reasons why none of this might happen:

- Too much focus on the competition
- No joy
- Festival vs. Poet Party
- Legacy issues
- Entitlement
- Lack of leadership
- Poor business model
- Forgetting that it's for the audience, not the poets.

That last one is probably the biggest hurdle of them all, which is sad because it truly is the most important piece of the puzzle. That Slam is for audiences more than it is for poets is not up for debate. It is certainly PSi's mission and it's been stated a million times by everybody from the founder to the newest rookie. You don't get to change it. You only get to enhance or execute it. It is my hope that if you want to do something else other than those two things – enhance or execute – that we are building an organization (if not community) that will stop those agendas in their tracks and show them the door. It is okay now for PSi to get a little selfish in the name of its mission, to build a mountain that even a non-poet would want to climb wherever PSi asserts itself with our events and programming and values. A lot of people at every level of our community and organization gave up a lot of time, sweat, relationships, money, credit ratings and art so that we could keep building this thing until it was great.

I believe in PSi. The things I have garnered from Slam would not have come to me any other way in my lifetime. I owe it a debt I do not feel I have come close to repaying even after ten years of trying to. I hope that some of you see the merit in that, and that it compels you to do something beyond create great art...that it compels you to create great joy.

“And truly, there is no other form of writing that feels so good as a lyric poem as it gushes forth in a steady flow. If that metaphor rubs you the wrong way; if you would at once insist that poetry is Hard Work and not a luxury product for intellectual sybarites; if poetry suggests to you rather than the possibility of sheer music – then nature did not intend you for a poet.”

- Thomas Disch

ADDENDUM A

THE BIG PICTURE

Below are things I believe we should – must, in fact – do in key areas of PSi and NPS to make them better, to make them grow, and to make them generate great art that people will love in numbers such as we have not seen to date. This is the Big Picture as I see it, and I think a focus on implementing these things will in fact generate profit, sustainability and prestige for not only PSi and Slam, but poetry itself. We have already taken poetry to the people. Now we should take it to them with 25 years of experience to show for it.

Note: items with the symbol (*) are items I have detailed plans for already but did not include here so that the overall gist of my platform could be absorbed without argumentative details derailing a sound base philosophy. All other items are things that I have worked to get to various stages of development, some more fleshed out than others, but none as completely as the ones marked with the indicant. Nothing on this list is new to me, though some of it may be for some of you. If anything has haunted me in my time with PSi it is not having accomplished more of this list. There were simply too many things that needed to lock into place to build a foundation for this kind of vision work to even be considered. When you have to learn how to do everything a business needs – let alone what the events need - from scratch while still meeting the desires and agendas of hundreds of artists a year, it is difficult to get there without effort that does not set aside a great many important things to make its best case. I believe that PSi is in the best position it has ever been in to take these steps, or steps like them, to ensure future success.

NPS

1. Ground NPS (for growth, strength, re-focusing of energy and resources, building of staff, increase potential for grants and sponsorships) *
2. Attach Poetry Cross-Training Camp to NPS as special track *
3. Members Only programming (lectures, dinner, shows, etc.)
4. Remove a day
5. Expand focus of side events into other styles of writing *
6. Develop prestige with notable authors/poets *
7. Undeniably present Opening Ceremony (possibly ritual based)
8. Attach legacy programming *

PSi

MEMBERS

1. Reinvest members and venues of certain levels with revamped membership perks
 - a. TRULY compelling high level perks at \$100 and above

OUTREACH

1. Touring programming (workshops) (Technically fundraising) *
2. Touring programming (shows) (Technically fundraising)
3. Touring poets * (Possibly awarded from contests)
4. Poetry contests *
5. Publications (Themed anthologies) *
6. Pile on interactivity of website (The new “butts in seats”)

MARKETING

1. Telling our own story via website (history, timelines, FAQs, archival information, etc.)
2. Video – Licensing to poets
3. Video – YouTube channel
4. PSi-specific product (shirts, etc.)

VENUES

1. “Prime” Certified Venues *