

# *Preparation and Approaches for Critique*

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For many directors, staffs, and judges, the 'art' of a productive critique is a mystery. There are no definitive guidelines that give participants the tools to clearly communicate their concerns in a positive and professional manner. Teachers with years of competitive experience have learned how to present their concerns based on past successes or failures, while younger directors/ instructors feel their way in the dark until they get to know judging systems, judges, and begin to feel comfortable expressing themselves and their opinions. Hopefully, this article will give everyone, young and old, some insight into thoroughly preparing for critiques. This is not the total answer. Personal styles and approaches will always have a place in the critique process, but utilizing time effectively and professionally is a goal that all teachers and judges should strive for at every competitive event.

This article is based on my own trials and errors as a director, instructor, designer, and adjudicator. These approaches have consistently worked for me over the years. As a result, I usually achieve 2 very important things as a staff member in a critique: I have presented my program to adjudicators in a way that facilitates building credit as the season progressed; and I made sure that judges, coordinators, and my peers felt that I approached them in a professional and respectful way. These 2 points will come up regularly - sell your program, and treat everyone in a professional manner.

One major point that many designers and teachers miss is that critique preparation is a season long process. It starts in the preseason when the music is chosen, the first drill set created, or the opening choreography is taught. Staffs must continually evaluate what elements of their show warrant positive credit from adjudicators. Why are you doing what you're doing? What is it about your program that will result in success at the end of the season? These answers don't appear as you listen to tapes outside the critique room, they are developed as you put the design pieces together before the season begins. Being aware of your strengths and weaknesses as you put the show together is your biggest asset in critique. What you do well shouldn't be an after thought, but the reason you pick your program, design it, teach it, and help your students bring it to life.

## **I. Show Construction** (Giving you and your students the tools for success)

It is essential that you are aware of the variety of elements that go into a successful production. The most talented groups don't always win, and sometimes those with limited experience and ability achieve lofty goals that far exceed their

potential. Why? Did they present their strengths effectively through design and execution? Did they maximize the abilities of their members to the fullest? Awareness of the elements needed to succeed, and the abilities of the given performers the show is designed for shouldn't be ignored as you design and teach your program.

Let's look at a possible list of positive credit builders that could go into an effective show:

- \*Variety (musically and visually)
- \*Technically intricate music, (rhythmic difficulty, meter changes, range, etc.),
- \*Physical demands
- \*Effective motion and color, (both musically and visually),
- \*Creativity (uniqueness of design)
- \*Audience appeal (effective, interesting flow of designed elements)
- \*Emotion (appropriate, well-paced peaks and valleys)

Of course this list could be longer, but you get the idea. When in doubt, look at some judging sheets used for the shows or festivals that your group participates in. What 'credit builders' are judges looking for at your competitions? Very few groups have the ability to excel in all areas. Successful groups, however, understand the abilities of their members, and design these into their 'credit building' moments. This approach to design is most likely to lead a group to the highest achievement possible when performances begin. They choose music and construct a visual package that will highlight their strengths and make their weaknesses somewhat irrelevant.

## II. Making a 'Credit' List

*Knowing which elements you are going to use to build credit is crucial to being able to present your strengths and sell your program in a critique. As you realize your strengths, and design them into your show, **write them down.*** (For instance: We utilize our strong trumpet section; the rifles are very experienced and featured prominently; our snare line is the musical and visual focal point of our program at a few key impact moments; we don't have great musicians, but generate musical demand through varied meters and noticeable velocity throughout the program, etc.)

List specific areas of your program where you have intentionally constructed unique or demanding segments. These should be noticeable enough to be recognized by a judge. (If you put two measures of 3/4 in the middle of your opener, don't list that you do varied meters!) Use the list under 'Show Construction' to get an idea of the elements that could be included into a successful design. Do you do any of these? Where? How often? Is it noticeable? As you progress into the season and start receiving feedback about your program, it is essential that you receive credit for those

elements that were designed into your program. These areas are your chosen paths to success if you perform them with clarity, and communicate them effectively. It is helpful for judges to be made aware of these focal points early in the season. For this to happen, you must plan them at the beginning stages of show design and present them as unmistakable assets to your program from the start. What are your strengths? What do you do well? Why is your design and talent level a perfect fit? Before entering a critique, the staff should also be able to answer the following questions:

\*Why did you pick your program?

- Did you pick it because it would highlight the student's strengths and not overly expose their weaknesses?
- Did you pick this program to help the students to raise their potential as performers, even if it may take a while to achieve desired results?
- Did you pick it because you liked the music and thought it would be educational, even if it doesn't allow for high content or observable variety?
- Did you pick it for its halftime appeal, competitive elements, or a little bit of both?

\*Can your students perform this program effectively and cleanly by finals?

- Do the students understand the design concepts and the shows intent?

\*What portions of your program do you 'stick your necks out' a little bit?

\*How often do you 'play it safe', with design and performance being of an average, 'seen it before' nature?

There aren't always concrete answers to these questions. Write down those that apply to your program and your students. All staff entering critique should have already discussed these issues before the season begins. Every group will answer them differently each season, however, being realistic about your programs focus will give you an indicator towards results in an artistically competitive arena. If you are focusing on a great halftime show, don't expect to receive the very top marks for creativity. If you continually play it safe, either to match the abilities of the performers, or because you only get to rehearse twice a week, don't expect the highest marks in areas where "demand is inherent". Putting some thought into these areas while you construct your program, and before you enter competition, will make your expectations for placement, and consequently the critique, much clearer.

### **III. Using tapes to build critique and rehearsal strategies.**

(Doing Your Homework)

The other half of critique preparation happens when you start receiving adjudicators' tapes. These should not only be listened to, but notes should be taken. There are 4 main points you should be considering, with accompanying lists.

**List 1.** What portions of your show received 'positive credit'? Are these areas also on your design list?

**List 2.** List the parts of your show where performance problems were a cause of concern to adjudicators. This list should be used as a rehearsal checklist and assist you in designing specific lesson plans from week to week, and for each rehearsal. If show elements appear on this list that you designed as 'credit builders', you've got some work to do. If these sections aren't clean, you won't get the credit you desire.

**List 3.** Are there elements of your show warranting positive feedback, which the judge didn't even mention, good or bad? **This is the most important list in critique.** You must sell these spots to people evaluating your group. Make them aware that these show areas were designed to get their attention, and as the season progresses, you must get credit for these areas to achieve success. Sometimes, a difficult element of your show can be performed so well that it appears easy, and the judge doesn't realize just how demanding it is. Perhaps they were finishing a comment about the previous phrase and missed it. You need to ask them to look for these spots. This is where the list you made as you designed your program is most helpful. You might have spent 3 months designing this very effective moment, and the judge is talking about a minor performance flaw. Steer them towards your positives – don't assume they notice what may seem obvious to you or a previous judge.

**List 4.** List your progress from week to week. Which things do you feel you've improved on since this judge saw you last? Which of the things from list 2 have you checked off – did they agree? More importantly, which of those things have you spent considerable time on that are still not clean? This list is more for you than the critique, but judges can be valuable assessors of a group's potential. At a certain point, you need to realistically ask yourself: Can our students achieve success with this program by the end of the season? If you're not sure, perhaps your design took too many risks. You will only get full credit if and when these portions are performed accurately and artistically. Good shows always take risks, but the staff and performers are able to achieve the desired results by finals, can you?

If you have designed a particularly difficult passage that you hoped would achieved credit, and the only comments it receives are about performance problems,

you may need to discuss it. Maybe you aren't sure whether your students can handle this element. Should you 'water' the part, or keep rehearsing the original, more difficult material. There have been times when a judge has steered me towards keeping something difficult in, because they knew my group needed these credit-building elements to achieve success. Too much watering can mess with the 'demand is inherent' balance. Other times, they have not only agreed that a little watering is necessary, but have given me suggestions on how and where to do it. Sometimes when a part is made more achievable for the performers, the overall effect doesn't change, but the performance is significantly better. Having someone else verify or disagree with possible adjustments to your show can allow you to move confidently forward with changes.

#### **IV. Other Critique Points To Consider**

1. There are certainly other issues that come into play when considering the dynamics of a constructive critique session. Often times, the critique takes place after a long and grueling day for both staffs and adjudicators. It is important that all parties involved put themselves in the other person's shoes. If a director started rehearsal at 9 that morning, and has been out straight since, emotions may get the better of them. Adjudicators need to understand that and try not to take it personally – this is this person's job. If adjudicators don't recall every small detail of a program they saw for the first time 3 hours ago, instructors shouldn't make them feel like they aren't focused on their groups needs. In fact, introducing yourself by stating your name, the name of your group, the music you played, and even what the group was wearing will save time and allow everyone to immediately get down to business.

2. Be honest and realistic with yourself about your product. Don't try to be something you're not. If you lost the show by 6 points, admit that there is probably some work to be done. Most importantly, don't make promises to your students that you can't deliver. There have been times when instructors have told students that if they do this and fix that, then they will beat so and so. If the students live up to their end of the bargain but the result doesn't come out as expected, the teachers often blame it on the adjudicators and create a very tense critique environment. You can't control what judges do, and different judges implement the criteria in different ways – it is a subjective process. Don't motivate your students by 'predicting' that something will happen in any given situation. You can't guarantee that, and are setting yourself up to lose some credibility with your students. I've had teachers ask me "What am I going to tell my kids?" in a critique. Well, did you promise them results? A lot of variables go into 'winning.' Be as good as you can, maximize your potential, give the students a product that they can perform and be proud of, and see

what happens. That's what competitive artistic performance has to offer – embracing the challenge of 'maxing out' your achievement level. If you do, you've offered the greatest educational experience possible to your students, staff, parents, and communities.

3. Find the time to watch other groups in your classification. It is very tempting to ask the judge about another groups performance or score. Adjudicators should never be cornered into addressing this. It's none of your business what was said to another group. The best way to get a read on this is to watch the other groups with an open mind. Maybe you don't like their style or approach, but in the big picture - how are they? What would their 'credit list' look like? Is it more ambitious than yours? Why? If you answer these impartially, you will probably understand the results more clearly. *You may not ask the judge to compare groups in a critique*, their job is to rank and rate according to the criteria that the directors have agreed upon.

4. Understand that you will not get full credit unless something is performed well. Don't plead your case unless you feel it's being done cleanly. It is okay to point out some of the things that you are striving for. "Once this is clean, I hope you recognize it and give us the credit we need." Your informing the judge of the direction you would like their evaluations to head towards in the future, but are acknowledging that at the moment you understand that something still needs work to come across properly. Keep in mind - this approach is useful early in the season, but becomes less relevant as Finals approaches.

## **V. Putting It Together**

If you have spent time considering all of the areas above, you will be more likely have successful and informative critiques, and a more rewarding season. You will represent yourself and your students professionally, and show judges that you and your staff are prepared and willing to sell your program in a realistic, prepared, and thoughtful manner. Judges are very willing to work together with instructors to help the students achieve success. That should be the underlying reason for everything we do - period. This doesn't always mean winning, but helping students to realize their potential as performers, and having the designed program give them a rewarding educational experience in the performing arts.

## **In Summary**

\*As you design your show, make a list of those elements that you feel will stand out as 'positive credit' builders.

\*Know your strengths and weaknesses. Incorporate your assets into show design.

\*Keep track of designed credit builders. Are you getting credit for them? Why or why not? It is your job to steer the judges towards *your positives* in a critique.

\*Taking accurate notes while listening to tapes will not only help you to evaluate the perception the judges have of your show, it should also steer your week to week and daily lesson plans. How can you achieve maximum credit for the areas of your show that were designed to be highlights?

\*In a “one shot - 5 minute critique”, your main goal should be to sell the strengths of your program. If you are not getting credit for areas that were designed to be key moments, ask the judge to purposely look for them the next time they see your group. Only after that should you move on to more detailed, and specific concerns.

\*Don't let the dynamics of a critique get the better of you. Relax and be professional. If you are organized, 5 minutes can be very productive.

\*You may not discuss commentary given to other groups, watch them yourself with an open mind.

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