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Updated November 11th, 2018

NATIONAL THEATRE SCHOOL FESTIVAL: ADJUDICATORS' GUIDE

Revised by Erin Brubacher, November 2018

Professional theatre artists and educators are invited to adjudicate for the National Theatre School Festival based on experience, expertise, training and commitment to creative learning. The central role of the adjudicator is to provide useful critical feedback, in a thoughtful caring way. Adjudicators should provide feedback that helps participants to grow as artists and people through enriched understandings of their own collaborative work.

BEST PRACTICE IN PUBLIC & PRIVATE ADJUDICATION AT ALL LEVELS SHOULD INCLUDE:

- Positive reinforcement to the company about the strengths of the work.
- Clear suggestions and observations about how the company might make the work stronger: Sometimes this can be offered by providing the company with *questions to consider* and answer for themselves about what they are working on, other times *concrete* proposals or creative alternatives to choices are most useful. Adjudication should include both.
- Specific, detailed commentary about both on-stage and off-stage elements: Where possible, adjudicators should use specific examples and observations about as many participant roles as are applicable (design/ directing/ performance/ writing/ music/ choreography... and how those elements work together)
- Sensitivity toward all participants and a comprehension of any challenges or limitations faced by the company.
- An admission of subjectivity:
It is important that students know that while adjudicators have been selected for their expertise and have insight to offer, each adjudicator will have her/his/their own tastes and points of view. The participant's job is to listen to the adjudicator, consider the feedback and determine for themselves what is most valuable. Adjudicators should find their own way of expressing this at both public and private adjudications.



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WHAT ADJUDICATORS WILL RECEIVE FROM EACH COMPANY IN ADVANCE:

Companies working from a previously published or original script, will submit a copy of the script to their adjudicator(s). Some productions are more movement/ score / improvisation based: in these cases companies may send text for their pieces, with accompanying notes as they deem appropriate. In all cases, companies should submit to the adjudicator(s) an artistic statement (of 250 words or less) that includes a response to the following questions:

Why did you choose the play/ subject matter/ material you are working with? (Why this piece here and now?)

What has been the most challenging part of your process so far?

What are you most excited by in this work that you are making together?

These questions should be discussed and answered as a company. The groups' thoughts on these matters may be summarized by the director, the writer, another member of the creative team, or composed collectively. Companies are asked to indicate the author(s) of their artistic statements.

ON PUBLIC ADJUDICATION:

Public Adjudication happens at the conclusion of a program of shows and should not exceed 15 minutes at the end of the evening. It should consist of a positive general assessment of each production and include the adjudicators strongest impressions of the whole. Constructive criticism can be provided, but coupled with positive reinforcement. The place for a real critical discussion is in the private adjudication where there can be a constructive conversation. Comments on individual performances are better left for private adjudication. The goal of public adjudication is not to single out any member of the team but rather to focus on how the elements work together. Under no circumstances should an adjudicator rank productions or make comparative value judgements between them.

The adjudicator should, in general, approach each of the productions in order of appearance. (The Provincial Showcase adjudicator might take a slightly different approach and weave some feedback together, in order to draw connections between the productions at the showcase for the audience). The adjudicator may start and conclude by finding formal or thematic connections between the productions to help close the evening for participants and audience. Contextualizing the script, devised or



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collectively created material, may also be a way to enrich the audience's experience of the evening of work.

ON PRIVATE ADJUDICATION:

Private Adjudications ideally last 20-30 minutes for each production— They are sometimes scheduled at the end of an evening's performances and other times scheduled the following day. Private adjudication should be a conversation between the adjudicator and participants and should consist of a detailed assessment of the production focussing on both individuals' work as well as the work of ensembles and production teams. The adjudicator should ask and encourage questions of and from the company to encourage engaged dialogue. Though a more critical attitude is appropriate in private adjudications, it should be tempered with consistent positive reinforcement and coupled with creative and *concrete* suggestions for improvement. The adjudicator may provide positive observations and constructive feedback to teacher-directors in a collegial way within the framework of providing support to students together. Teachers and adjudicators together should encourage students to think both openly and analytically about feedback.

TIME KEEPING:

Please pay attention to the time you have. Different districts, regions and the provincial showcase all have varying amounts of time available for private adjudication. Be aware of how much time you have with the students so that you don't run out of time to give them your concrete, detailed feedback about their hard work. One approach you can take is to ask the company's stage manager to keep time for you! For example, you can ask that person to give you a 10 and 5 minute warning.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN ADJUDICATING PRODUCTION ELEMENTS:

Choice of script/ material:

Adjudicators should be familiar with the scripts, having researched their origins in advance of the performances. Companies should also have provided adjudicators with a statement about why they have chosen a particular script or subject matter here and now. This should allow the adjudicator to see where students and teachers are coming from and incorporate that prior knowledge into the adjudication.



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It may be relevant or helpful to further unpack the choice of particular performance material in a private adjudication, but the adjudication should not be about the adjudicator's personal feelings or tastes about a particular script or style. If the material or script is original / student written / collectively created, the adjudicator can provide dramaturgical feedback alongside other responses to the company's work. Other questions an adjudicator should consider are:

- What kinds of challenges does the script offer a director, actor, designer or technician? How did the team address these challenges?
- What is the potential social or artistic impact of the script or performance material?
- How did the company serve the material they chose to work on?

Sound/ Music/ Original Composition:

- How do the sound/musical elements serve the piece and interpretation of the piece?
- How did the choices of live or recorded music contribute to the overall production?
- Are the sound levels correct and balanced with the actors' voices?
- Are the cues well timed and executed? (Consider the number of cues and if/ how they are serving the production.)
- Does the soundscape/ aural world serve the mood/ style/ world of the production?
- If there is live singing:
 - Are the voices strong and clear?
 - How well are the songs interpreted and executed?
 - Are any harmonies accomplished and well executed?
 - Is there an effective balance between the voices and any other live music or sound sources?
- If there is a live instrumentation/ orchestra/ band:
 - How well are the songs/ is the score interpreted and executed?
 - How do the players play together?
 - Is there an effective balance between the orchestra/ band and any other live music or sound sources?
- Is any student written music? Is there a student musical director?
- Are there missing elements that could better serve the production (that are realistic to produce)?

Scenic Design:



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- How do the scenic elements and props serve the piece and interpretation of the piece?
- Is the set safe for the performers?
- How does the set 'collaborate' with the actors and other design elements?
- How does the set help or hinder the action on stage?
- Is it adaptable to a variety of venues?
- How do the scenic elements enhance the storytelling?
- Do the scenic elements communicate a world to the audience?
- Do the elements feel like they belong to the created world?
- Is an intention or concept communicated through the scenic design?
- If there are set changes, do they occur seamlessly within the performance?
- Are there missing elements that could better serve the production (that are realistic to produce)?

Lighting:

- Does the lighting help to communicate time, place, season, etc.?
- Are you aware of the lighting on it's own or is it implemented in conversation with the other elements and overall storytelling?
- How well does the lighting focus audience attention?
- How effective is the use of specials?
- Are the cues well timed and executed? (Consider the number of cues and if/ how they are serving the production.)
- Specifically, how could the lighting be improved? Are there alternatives choices worth exploring?

Please consider that some schools have very little access to lighting equipment and expertise. Adjudicators should make that what they are valuing is not simply access to resources but rather innovative offers with available means.

Costumes:

- Do the costumes contribute to our understanding of the characters or performers?
- How do the costumes contribute to our understanding of time and place (period or contemporary)?
- How do the costumes work with the other design elements?
- How much detail/ care has been worked into the costumes?
- Do any costumes prove distracting in any way, constricting movement or taking us out of the story/ world of the piece?
- If applicable, how are quick changes handled during the performance?



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Properties:

- How do the properties help the performers do what they need to do?
- Do they get in the way of the actors or detract from the performances?
- How do they contribute to the total stage picture?
- Are there missing props that could better serve the production (that are realistic to produce)?
- Are there alternative choices to existing props worth exploring?

Hair & Make Up:

- Are hair and make up significant elements of the production? If so:
 - Do hair preparation and make up help us to better understand characters, time and place
 - Is make up over done, or under done, considering the context?
 - Is the construction of wigs, masks or make up notable in any way?
 - Is hair or make up distracting at all?
 - Are there any special hair styles or make up that could better serve the piece?

****The same criteria used to consider all of the above design elements can also be used to evaluate video projection, puppets and other production design elements that overlap with the above areas.*

Acting/ Performance:

- Were actors being *interested* or *interesting*? Were they fully present, listening and responding to their fellow performers or were they attempting to be seen/ be the 'best' on stage.
- Do the actors remain focussed when not at the 'centre' of the action?
- Do actors appear to thoroughly comprehend their characters or roles?
- Do actors appear to understand and be contributing to a shared vision for the piece?
- Are there elements of originality to an actor's interpretation? Is there a magnetism apparent in the performance?
- What clear choices have been made in the development of characters?
- Is the character or performer convincing and compelling?
- How successfully have the actors physicalized and internalized the characters they are portraying or the roles they are performing?
- What else did you notice about actors' physicality?
- Do the actors have clear, articulated speech and adequate projection?
- Did the actors alter their voices and if so were the choices appropriate to the characters/ time/ place/ world of the piece?



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- How were the actors' approaches to pacing?
- How does the ensemble work together in pace, movement and speech?
- If there is dance or choreographed movement in the piece:
 - how well is it executed by the performers
 - how do the performers move together
 - how does the expression in the dance advance the storytelling?

*** Many of these actor areas will of course say something about the director's (and choreographer's where applicable) contribution to the work as well.*

Direction:

A good adjudicator should frame feedback so as to encourage both student and teacher directors to model reception to both productive constructive criticism and positive reinforcement. If time permits, a private discussion with a director might be useful, both to determine how best to give the actors notes/ feedback and to offer constructive criticism that won't undermine the director's leadership in front of the team. But as time may very well not permit for one on one conversations, adjudicators should be mindful to place respect and care at the core of adjudication. The goal is the help the director do her/ his/ their job even better, so it is important to acknowledge the director as a leader within the team.

Things to consider:

- How well has the director understood the play/ material/ subjects of exploration?
- How has the director combined and made use of design and performer elements in relationship to each other in order to create the world of the play or piece?
- How well has the director guided the audience to enter the world of the play/piece and accept the rules within it or suspend disbelief?
- Have the director's choices communicated time/ place
- Do the actors move in space with purpose and in relationship to each other or do they move for the sake of moving?
- Are the transitions tight or flowing and as well considered as the 'action' of the piece?
- Do the actors seem to understand their roles as well as a collective purpose?
- Has the director provided a unique or unusual interpretation of the play or collectively generated material?
- What are some alternative choices a director may want to consider?

*** Many of these directing areas will apply to choreographers as well.*

Things to consider about production overall:



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- How effectively do members of the creative and production teams work with limited resources?
- Are resources effectively employed to serve the play/ piece/ story? Was the most effort used in the most important places?
- Does there appear to have been a coherent vision for the piece that all the creators understood?
- Are there any especially significant production values? (i.e. original music composition, special effects, masks, movement, use of space etc.)
- What was the experience of the piece like as a whole? What emotional impact did it have? How did it provoke thoughts or feelings?

IMPORTANT:

Adjudicators should use specific examples and observations about as many elements as are applicable: scenic design/ lighting/ sound/ directing/ performance/ new writing/ music/ choreography... And, most importantly, how those elements work together. That said, no production should be penalized for more or less or the absence of any of these elements. (For example: one company may choose, for artistic reasons, to use a bare stage and employ no set pieces at all, while another company may create a set that is a crucial element to the point of feeling like another character in the piece!) There is no point system and there are no 'marks' to gain or lose. The adjudicators feedback is qualitative not quantitative.

AWARDS:

This can be is the toughest part of adjudication. Good luck!

In keeping with the positive atmosphere of adjudication and the festival, each participating company should leave with an award for some aspect of their production. Awards may vary district to district and region to region so adjudicators should seek guidance from local festival coordinators about strategies for acknowledging each company's work and a distribution of awards that is both generous to all participants and an honest reflection of the adjudicator's evaluation of what is presented. Your district/ regional coordinator or NTS Festival rep will communicate the specific awards to be allocated in each specific adjudication context.

Remember to always check the program to be sure that awards are going to students (not teachers or advisors) and that they are truly acknowledging student work. Adjudicators should explain to the audience why they feel the student(s) deserve the awards they are given, in a few well chosen words.



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Shows should not be ranked. It should be made clear to the audience that awards for Outstanding Production at the district and regional levels are given in no order of value.

NOTE:

All adjudicators will be asked to participate in an online meeting to further a shared vocabulary and ethos. In 2019 adjudicators can choose one of three time slots on January 20th and 21st. Contact Festival Director erinbrubacher@ent-nts.ca with any questions.