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Students get poetic at City Theater

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BIDDEFORD — The words of poets William Shakespeare, Adrienne Rich and T.S. Eliot, among others, rung through the City Theater on Thursday afternoon, when 17 students from high schools in Maine's southern region recited works from the great poets, making the words their own.

The City Theater was the setting for the southern Maine regional competition of the fifth annual national poetry recitation contest "Poetry Out Loud." The contest is sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation, and in Maine, by the Maine Arts Commission.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for students to engage with the written word in the poetic form," said Maine Arts Commission Director Donna McNeil.

During the competition, students performed three poems, said McNeil, and were judged on such attributes as accuracy, physical presence, voice and articulation, appropriateness of dramatization, difficulty level and evidence of understanding.

After an introduction by McNeil, Emcee Joshua Bodwell, who is a Biddeford resident and local writer, took the stage after riding down the aisle on a bicycle.

"Too often these days, we have grown content with the belief that poetry is merely the words we read on the page. The text. In reality ... Poetry is the action, the moment, the event, ... And the poem, the words on the page? That is how we dare to believe that we can capture those moments. Poems are how we celebrate our existence..." he said.

In her recitation of a sonnet by William Shakespeare, Nellie Kelly, a junior at Boothbay Region High School, celebrated love.

She recited "Sonnet XVIII: Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" by William Shakespeare. To Kelly, the poem means falling in love so deeply that "nothing can taken them away from you, not even death."

Erica Dailey said the meaning behind one of the poems she recited, "Poor Angels," by Edward Hirsch, is that "the soul wants to live forever even if the body cannot. It means that we should allow ourselves to live to the fullest."

Paige Meserve, a senior at Thornton Academy in Saco, recited the poem "Planetarium," by Adrienne Rich. She chose Rich, said Meserve, because she was "a formidable woman, involved in the feminist movement, that really resonated with me."

After reading "Planetarium," "I found it so powerful and inspiring I couldn't choose any other," she said.

The winners from the southern regional competition were: Aaron Bartlett, a senior at Gorham High School; Paige Meserve, a senior at Thornton Academy in Saco, Erica Lance, a sophomore at Leavitt Area High School in Turner; Mary Montalvo, a senior at Mt. Ararat High School in Topsham; Caleb Shoemaker, a senior at Sanford High School; and John Booth, a sophomore at Gardiner Area High School.

More than 4,000 students statewide took part in the competition, said McNeil. The competition was narrowed down to 18 who made it to the southern regional semi-finals (one student was absent on Thursday,) and 14 who competed in the northern region.

On March 5, the six medal winners from the southern region of the state and the five winners from the northern region will compete at the Waterville Opera House. The winner of that competition will go on to compete in the national contest in Washington, D.C., in April, where they will have a chance to win a \$20,000 scholarship.

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Thornton Academy student Paige Meserve adjusts a microphone prior to her recitation of poetry Thursday at the Biddeford City Theater. (JEFF LAGASSE/ JOURNAL TRIBUNE PHOTO)

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