

## On Your Marks, Get Set, Act! A Race for Attention

By NEIL GENZLINGER

Aspiring actors are accustomed to having doors slammed in their faces, but lately in a modest club in the East Village, a few have been doing some slamming of their own.

At a frenetic monthly competition called the Manhattan Monologue Slam, performers looking for that fabled big break, or even a small break, are squaring off against one another in a flurry of three-minute monologues, with a casting director or other industry professional sitting as judge. First prize is a one-on-one meeting with that judge for career input — the kind of meeting many struggling actors can only fantasize about.

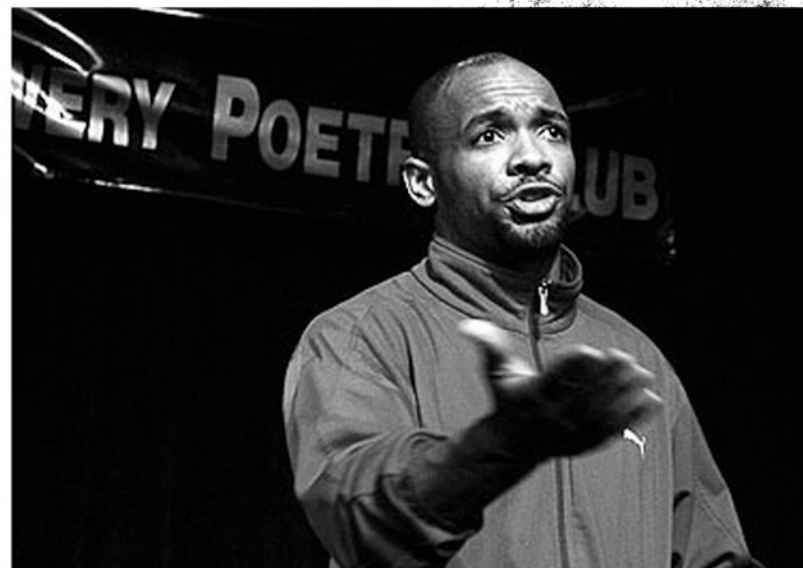
The slam, patterned after a poetry slam and with the same mutually supportive, raucous atmosphere, is the creation of Robert and Philip Galinsky, brothers who know the struggling-Village-actor life from firsthand experience.

"We were sitting in my living room one afternoon, thinking about how could we control our destiny and not just be another actor trying to get the head shot onto somebody's desk," Robert Galinsky, 40, said, recalling how the first slam came about in April 2003. "After we brainstormed a little bit, we came up with, 'Hey, let's do the structure of a poetry slam, but do it for actors with monologues.' And that was it."

The event started at the Cornelia Street Cafe but outgrew the space; now it's at the Bowery Poetry Club, where earlier this month about 170 people crammed in to see an end-of-the-year slam-off: all of the competitors were past winners. For this special occasion, there were three judges: Ingrid French, a talent manager; Robert Russell, a casting di-



Allison Findlater, current grand champion of the monologue slam.



Scott Glover, one of the past winners vying in the year-end slam-off.



Rachel Shukert delivering her three minutes in the 2004 tournament.



Sean Williams, deep into character as he woos the audience.



Photographs by Keith Bedford for The New York Times

Left, Robert (left) and Philip Galinsky, who started the Manhattan Monologue Slam, and above, actors preparing for it at the Bowery Poetry Club.

## Doing three-minute monologues for a chance at the fabled big break.

rector; and Craig Holzberg, an agent.

After a dozen polished performances — comic and serious, costumed and street-clothed, within the time limit and over it (the three-minute rule is firmly enforced) — Allison Findlater of the West Village was proclaimed grand champion. Ms. Findlater, 36, whose monologue was a piece from the book "American Dreams" by Sapphire, first won the slam in September and said she had been feeling the effects ever since.

"I've been sent out continuously now, whereas I couldn't even get through the doors of some of these agents," she said. "So it's been huge for me."

The styles on display at any given slam are wide-ranging, but this is not an open-mike night. "The level of talent that they get in there is really good," said Ms. French, who has been a judge twice. (The winner the first time she judged, Matt Walker, booked a music video as a result.) "It's a venue that actors really like to perform in, but it also has the respect and is getting the respect of the industry."

The Galinskys make clear that they want character-driven monologues — no poets, spoken-word types or standup comics need inquire — and they select many of the performers from among their wide circle of acquaintances and professional contacts. (Robert lives in the East Village, Philip in the West.) But they also leave a wacky window open to anybody: a 30-second slam at the end of the evening, at which walk-ons who think they might be good enough for the main three-minute event can show their stuff.

That is how Erica Ash, 27, broke through. She did a 30-second bit about how impossible it was to do anything in 30 seconds, and did it well enough that the Galinskys asked her back for the three-minute competition, which she won. Though winning is barely the point.

"It's great for the connections, whether you win or lose," said Ms. Ash, a singer, actress and model who lives in Harlem. "It's such a small world in the performing arts business, you never know who you're going to meet."

Louise Devery, 52, of Queens, hopes to follow Ms. Ash's path. She first learned of the slam because it happened to follow another event she was attending at the club. On the spur of the moment, she did the 30-second slam that night. She ran over the time limit, she said, but "since then I've perfected the 30-second monologue," and now she is hoping to be invited into the three-minute group.

The three-minute performances are rarely out of the Monologues for Beginners Handbook. About half of the performers write their own pieces, the Galinskys said, and many of the others take innovative approaches, like adapting a piece of movie dialogue. The performers, who are perhaps more accustomed to presenting monologues to a bored audience of one, also need to think about how they deliver the material, given that the room is long and packed with people.

"It's not like on some audition, where you're going to see an agent, you're in their office and your monologue's got to be soft and real Kevin

Spacey-like," said Philip Galinsky, 29. "Here, you can't come in and be small. You have to be big, and project, and come in with some sort of theatrical bent to it."

The three-minute format is easy for comedy, and many of the monologists go for that, but serious pieces often impress the judges more, as Ms. Findlater found this month.

"I love the actors who, if it's just them there on the stage, they can create a scene, making you think that you're really there or that they're really talking to someone, and you're a fly on the wall — that's what I'm always trying to do," said Ms. Findlater, who defends her title at the next slam on Monday. "I think as more serious actors get involved with it, it's going to have to raise the bar so that it's not just about humor necessarily, but really good acting."

Mr. Russell, the casting director, agreed that from the judges' perspective, funny isn't necessarily best. "It's all about being so far into that character that you can't breathe anything else but," he said.

Ms. Findlater, for the record, is Robert Galinsky's former wife, something that each said has made them harder on the other, lest any eyebrows be raised. Ms. Findlater at first was reluctant even to participate, but then the success of the slam became impossible to ignore. "It was doing really good, and I said I want in," she said. "And I knew that if I wanted in, I had to come correct, have my stuff together, tight." Certainly when she was announced the grand-slam winner this month, no one was complaining; the frivolity of the evening left no room for ill will.

The Galinskys are not getting rich off their creation: audience members pay \$6 (unless they print the two-for-one coupon off galinskyplace.com), and unlike many corners of the up-and-coming-actor world, the slam doesn't require performers to pay anything. "There's a lot of venues out there where you have to pay \$6 and bring three friends," Robert Galinsky said. "We don't do pay to play, and we don't want to be anywhere near that."

But the Galinskys do get something out of the deal: they can perform every month themselves. They are not in competition, but they are evaluated by the judge. Philip Galinsky said he had landed a movie role as a result of a slam performance.

It has also not escaped the Galinskys that the format they have would make a dandy reality-television show — the viewing audience assisting with the judging, the prize being a walk-on part on some sitcom. They said a small production company approached them six months ago, but they held off.

"We said we're going to wait a little longer, cook it a little more," Robert Galinsky said. "We want people to come downtown, rather than going uptown to try to sell it."

Mr. Russell, who has cast for reality television, also sees small-screen potential, as long as the atmosphere stays as it is — the downscale club, the whooping crowd, the go-for-broke style of the performances. "I think it's gritty, I think it's New York," he said. "It has that gut feel."

The next Manhattan Monologue Slam is Monday night at 8 at the Bowery Poetry Club, 308 Bowery, near Bleecker Street, East Village. Tickets: \$6. Information: [www.galinskyplace.com/mslam.htm](http://www.galinskyplace.com/mslam.htm), (212) 614-0505.