

Excerpts from Jim Dwyer's Virtual Presentation at the RMPA Judges' Seminar on Sunday, February 1, 2026

Transcribed by Mike Nevin

The RMPA judge's seminar was very successful and informative. All ten local RMPA judges were in attendance as well as several instructors and others interested in judging. Most of the information Jim had was geared toward judging, but he also spoke to the instructors in the room on topics relevant to them. Rich Hammond, a WGI Music Effect judge, joined Jim partway through the presentation to give us his perspective.

I've included what Jim had to say to the instructors and any content about the judging process that you may find useful throughout the season. The topics jump around a little, but I wanted to keep them in the order they were in the presentation.

The following is edited for length, clarity, and relevancy.

Jim Dwyer:

Critique: I want to talk about critique for a second. Critique, by and large, is my favorite part of any judging weekend. It's where I get a chance to peel back the curtain a little bit. I get to talk to the instructors. I get to ask them what it was that they were trying to convey and what it was that they were hoping to emote. I'm going to speak from the effect visual caption here for a second.

Elements of Effect: When you're judging the effects captions there are three ways that we generate effect. We generate effect aesthetically: the costumes, the props, the tarp. Emotionally: the program, whether it creates an emotional reaction or not. Then intellectually. So, aesthetic, emotional and intellectual are the three drivers to effect. If that's news to you, you probably want to jot that down. As I'm adjudicating, I'm always thinking, "How is this affecting me?" "Is it giving me an emotional reaction?" "Is there an intellectual aspect to it?" "Is there a vertical depth to that?" "What's the aesthetic?" Early in the season you might see a group in jeans and black T shirts. That's kind of standard the first couple of weeks in February in our activity. So, there's going to be less of an aesthetic impact because of that. Maybe they're using the tarp from last year. You might be in critique and say, I don't understand about the show, because the show is a racetrack on the on the tarp, and you're doing a show about cloning, and they say, "Well, we don't have our tarp yet." So, some of that goes into factoring how you approach that in critique and how you approach that in scoring.

Critique: My role is to clarify any comments that they may have had issue with, or concern with, or where I wasn't completely clear, and I'm not supposed to write their show. We're supposed to give them input based off our experiences. We talked about the fact that most groups see their own show dozens and dozens of times throughout the year. They might even see one group after them at a contest or the group before while they're waiting to come into the arena or the auditorium or the gymnasium, but they don't see a bunch of different groups. We see hundreds of groups, and so what we're offering them is things that say, in my experience, what I've witnessed is this blank that this works well for groups that have done it. So, when they come to you and say, "Well, you know, we're going to do this." they don't know that eight of the groups have tried that before unsuccessfully, so you might be able to help them kind of direct where they should go based off that. I say this to every group. "Look, if one judge mentions it, I wouldn't give it a ton of credence I were you. If two judges mention it, you probably want to look at it. And, if three judges mention it, whether it's at one show or over the course of three shows, I would suggest that you definitely want to address it."

Subjectivity: Let's take a second to talk about the fact that this activity is subjective. I'm going to give you this example. I've used it dozens and dozens of times at dozens of clinics over the years. If you do a show about Vietnam, you're going to get a different reaction from Dennis DeLucia than you are from Mark Thurston or from

Jim Dwyer. Dennis DeLucia *lived* Vietnam. Mark, and I only read about it in books. So, your level of authenticity, if you're Dennis DeLucia, when you're experiencing a show about Vietnam is going to be very much more emotional. It's going to have to be more esthetically correct, because he's going to know what the truth was, right? And probably, if there's an intellectual aspect, he's going to want to engage you with that based on his experience in the army in Vietnam. That won't be the same for Mark Thurston or Jim Dwyer.

Now, if you do a show about kids in sports, that's going to relate more to Mark Thurston than it is to me perhaps, because I didn't raise young children through that process. Whereas Mark and his wife, Marcy, did. So, their experience is going to be more visceral to that than it is to me. Now, if you do a show about dolphin fishing, Jim Dwyer is going to be more into that than Dennis DeLucia or Mark Thurston. In fact, you do a show about fishing, I'm going to be on it. So, you can't take the judge out of judging. That's the good news and the bad news, because there are going to be some shows that you're going to do that are going to absolutely resonate with a specific judge, and there's going to be some shows that don't,

Judging Philosophy: It takes hard work, standards and perseverance, and it's not about being right. It's about the students and the system that the students are in. If the students are committed, and the system supports it, they're going to have success. We want more groups doing that, not less groups.

I want to segue over to a sheet I have here called "Philosophy of Judging". Basically, it says, "Teacher, Counselor, Critic." One of the things that I really value about the indoor activity right now at its upper levels - SCPA, RMPA, IPA, MAPS, the bigger kind of circuits that lead into WGI - is that we use a three-tiered system, A, Open, and World. And in A, we are teachers, in Open, we are counselors, and in World, we are critics. It's not that we are criticizing what a World group is doing. It's that, in A, we expect to say things that we almost accept at our level should be common. Like, "Shouldn't they know that both sticks should be the same size, that one can't be 3S, and one 5A, that that's not going to sound even?" You might think that's an exaggeration, but I've gone to local little shows and had to look at groups that were drumming with different... they didn't have a budget, with whatever they could find. And so, we're teachers there. We're going to teach them how to make that work for them. We're going to help them with that. The open groups, we're more counselors, more like your guidance counselor. You want to counsel them on the process. That's where those words, "Have you considered..." "You may want to try..." things like that. It's amazing to me that some groups don't know what a basic block is and how you would teach an ensemble to move motivating motion with their core muscles so they're not reacting, they're anticipating. And sometimes you'll say to a group, "Do you ever do like a basic drill down block?" And they'll say, "I don't even know what that is." [We should say to them] "Hey, let's take a second and talk about how you can help your group move better as an ensemble by investing time there." We've got to let them know that "Hey, man. There are mechanisms in place that can help you."

Information for a book on visual art that can be helpful with visual design:

...It's called "Picture This: How Pictures Work" by Molly Bang. So, if you are a visual designer, I use this book in every single clinic. It's basically a story of Little Red Riding Hood told through pictures and shapes. It's absolutely spectacular if you're working and trying to figure out how to stage things, how to use color as an effect. I mentioned this earlier about availing yourself to different things, the elements of design, like line, weight, mass, movement, color. All those things. They're the elements of design. Not [only] for indoor, drum line. They're the elements designed for everyone. Renoir, Picasso, Monet, all of them. So, I would encourage you, if you're doing the effect side of the sheet, certainly the visual side, read about art. Go to any bookstore and there's a section and pick up, you know, art for Douglas. I don't know, whatever's there. This is, again, you can find it online... Molly Bang - "Picture This". It's very entry level, but super clear. Nothing gets lost in the messaging there that often, sometimes with drum lines, does. You're not sure what they're trying to say, and so we can help there.