



June 15, 2009

Top Thespies go to Thatcher and BoarsHead

Mike Hughes

For the Lansing State Journal

Kristine Thatcher has won some of the highest honors in this year's Thespie awards - shortly after learning that her BoarsHead Theater job is being eliminated.

BoarsHead's "Permanent Collection" was named the season's best show overall and brought Thatcher the award for best director of a drama. In addition, she won the Robert Busby Award, for overall contributions to theater and/or the community.

There were plenty of other big winners, including:

- Rob Roznowski, who directed both Michigan State University musicals. "Cabaret" won for best musical and Roznowski tied (with Jane Falion of Riverwalk Theatre's "The Rothschilds) for best director of a musical. He also received an award for his innovations in "Tommy."
- One of Roznowski's students, Jennifer Shafer. She won one award (actress in a musical) in "Cabaret," another (supporting actress in a play) in Williamston Theatre's "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds."
- Williamston Theatre in general. For the second consecutive year, everything in its season drew some praise and award consideration.
- And an intimate, Riverwalk Theatre production of "The Substance of Fire." In the categories for non-professional plays, it won for best show, director (Bill Helder) and actor (Bob Gras).

In each category, the awards are wide open at first. If a non-professional wins, that wraps it up. If a professional person or show wins, there can (but doesn't have to be) a separate, non-pro winner.

This is the 32nd year for the Thespies, the Lansing State Journal award honoring the best in local theater.

Clouding this year's voting was the news of a budget cut by the BoarsHead board: The artistic director job will be eliminated when Thatcher's contract ends in August.

Committee members agreed this wouldn't effect the voting, except in the Robert Busby category (named for the late Creole Gallery owner who did so much for Old Town and theater). In other categories, the current news about Thatcher and BoarsHead would be ignored.

BoarsHead did, however, go on to win top awards for "Permanent Collection," the subtle drama about sub-conscious attitudes stirred when a historically black college inherits control of an upscale art gallery in suburbia. It is not the type of show that automatically draws huge audiences; it was, however, a chance to display some immensely talented people, including Kristine Thatcher.

Shows

- » Best show: "Permanent Collection," BoarsHead Theater.
- » Best show (non-professional): "The Substance of Fire," Riverwalk Theatre (in its intimate, "black box" setting at Creole Gallery).
- » Best musical: "Cabaret," MSU. (The Civic Players' "Fiddler on the Roof" came close.)
- » Best new show: "Flyover, USA: Voices from Men of the Midwest," Dennis North and Joseph Zettelmaier; idea from Tony Caselli; Williamston Theatre.

Directing

- » Play: Kristine Thatcher, "Permanent Collection," BoarsHead. (Coming close was Mary Job for Riverwalk's play-with-music "The Dead.")
- » Play (non-professional): Bill Helder, "The Substance of Fire," Riverwalk.
- » Musical: Tie: Rob Roznowski, "Cabaret," MSU; and Jane Falion, "The Rothschilds," Riverwalk.

Acting, plays

- » Actor: John Lepard, "Leaving Iowa," Williamston. (Coming close were Michael Joseph Mitchell and Allan Bomar Jones in BoarsHead's "Permanent Collection.")
- » Actor (non-professional): Bob Gras, "The Substance of Fire," Riverwalk.
- » Actress: Emily Sutton-Smith, "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds," Williamston.
- » Actress (non-professional): Yana Levovna, "The Clean House," Peppermint Creek.
- » Supporting actor: Daryl Thompson, "The Glass Menagerie," BoarsHead.
- » Supporting actor (non-professional): Mark Zussman, "Sherlock Holmes, the Final Adventure," Riverwalk.
- » Supporting actress: Jennifer Shafer, "Gamma Rays," Williamston.
- » Supporting actress (non-professional): Megan Winnas, "Dog Sees God," Peppermint Creek.
- » Featured (smaller role) actor: Bruce Bennett, "Leaving Iowa," Williamston (with a nod to his work in BoarsHead's "Driving Miss Daisy").
- » Featured actress: Gloria Vivalda, "Gamma Rays," Williamston.

Acting, musicals

- » Actor: Tie: Doak Bloss, Riverwalk's "Rothschilds," and Rusty Broughton, MSU's "Cabaret."
- » Actress: Jennifer Shafer, "Cabaret," MSU.
- » Supporting actor: Joseph Baumann, "The Rothschilds," Riverwalk. (Tom Klunzinger came close, also in "Rothschilds.")
- » Supporting actress: Tie: Carin McEvoy, "Fiddler on the Roof," Civic Players, and Jaclyn Hofmann, "Cabaret," MSU.

» Featured actor: Chad DeKatch, "Little Shop of Horrors," Riverwalk.

» Featured actress: Lara Bidus, "Hymn and Carol," BoarsHead.

Behind the scenes

» Sets: Justin Miller, "Love's Labour's Lost," MSU.

» Costumes: Mary K. Hodges-Nees, "The Rothschilds," Riverwalk.

» Set dressing: "Panache," Williamston; Bartley Bauer was the set designer.

» Original music: Sergei Kvitko, "Glass Menagerie" and "Permanent Collection," BoarsHead.

» Lighting: Michael Beyer, "Glass Menagerie," BoarsHead.

» Musical direction: Bill Henson, "The Dead," Riverwalk.

» Choreography: Mark Ruhala, "Cabaret," MSU.

» Hair styling and wig construction: Dan Moore, "Rothschilds," Riverwalk.

Special awards

» Several extraordinary ensembles, in a year filled with neatly blended groups. They include "Flyover" (Williamston), "Forbidden Broadway" (BoarsHead), "Under Milkwood" (Riverwalk), "The Clean House" (Peppermint Creek) and "Greater Tuna" (Ledges Playhouse).

» A particular award to Terry Jones and Michael Hays in the Ledges' "Greater Tuna"; coming off eye surgery, Jones was virtually unable to see, yet gave a strong performance.

» Tina Brenner, as the ghost in "Fiddler on the Roof," Civic Players.

» Two awards for exceptional child actors - one for Emilio Pido of MSU's "Tommy," the other for the ensemble in Riverwalk's "Rothschilds" - Joel Reynolds, Dominic Redman and siblings Nic and Lexie Roberts.

» Linda Granger, for her extraordinary work at building the Starlight Dinner Theatre into a successful and popular operation.

» The Williamston Theatre, for an entire season of excellent sets in tight quarters.

» Melody Stratton, for the killer plant in Riverwalk's "Little Shop of Horrors."

» Connie Curran Oesterle, for molding the Irish dialects in Riverwalk's "The Dead."

» MSU's remarkable creation of a video game and other innovations, as part of a modernized "Tommy." This show was directed by Rob Roznowski, who also was the Thespie-winning "Cabaret" director; he had a great season.

» BoarsHead, for its remarkable assembling of "Star Wars" items in "All Childish Things"

» A general nod to Lansing Community College's "An Experiment With an Air Pump." A difficult play leaping between centuries, it had strong work on sets, costumes, props, direction and performances.

Of special note

» A nod to the Williamston Theatre, for another extraordinary year. Last year, Williamston won the Robert Busby Award for its strong season; this year, it may have been even better.

Robert Busby Award

And now this year's Robert Busby Award, for extraordinary contribution to theater and/or the community. It goes to Kristine Thatcher, for the superb work in her too-short time as artistic director of BoarsHead Theater.

Thatcher has shown a great touch in finding new shows ("Unnecessary Farce," "The People vs. Friar Laurence," etc.) that are both artful and audience-pleasing. She found gifted actors (such as Michael Joseph Mitchell); her schedules included youthful fun ("All Childish Things") and vibrant music ("All Night Strut"). She reminded us that she's a gifted director ("Permanent Collection") and playwright ("Voice of Good Hope"). And she's been a vibrant symbol of the joy of theater.

The committee members are: Kate O'Neill, Bridgette Redman, Barbara Milstein, David Milstein, Jane Falion, Cheryl Thompson and Ken Glickman. Mike Hughes chaired, but didn't vote, except on the Busby Award. Falion recused herself from any discussion of musicals. There were brief moments of recusing by Redman for Thompson (supporting actor) and Redman (child actors).
