

Tonys? No, it's the Peters

Critic's cream of the crop in Garden State theater season

BY PETER FULCHIA
STARLEDGER STAFF

What would happen if the New Jersey theater community gave its own Tony Awards?

How would the state's 21 professional and three semi-pro theaters stack up if a committee chose four or five nominees in 32 categories, as in the Tonys? How would the shows that drop by the New Jersey Performing Arts Center fare along with them?

When marquee names such as Judd Hirsch and Ben Vereen and seasoned Broadway performers like June Gable and Kevin Gray can't make the list, you know it was a potent year for Jersey theater. Ninety-six contenders opened, and fewer than half of them are represented here. It was that competitive a season.

It was varied, too. Theaters including the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival and Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, both in Madison, 12 Miles West Theatre Company in Montclair, and Two River Theatre Company in Manasquan put a musical on their schedules — a rarity for them.

Here's what I consider the best of the 2001-02 season, from "Salt and Pepper" in Netcong to "Peer Gynt" in Manasquan:

BEST MUSICAL NEW TO N.J.

"The Book of Candy" (Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, Madison); "Cookin' at the Cookery" (Two River Theatre Company, Manasquan); "Fosse" (New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark); "Paganini" (Forum Theatre, Metuchen)

Winner: "The Book of Candy," a delicious, bittersweet chocolate bar of a musical. Sweet, because it showed how far women have come since the '60s, but bitter, in



PHOTO BY DAVID GARD

Adam Heller and Beth Glover go cheek-to-cheek in a scene from "The Book of Candy" at Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey.

that it ultimately revealed how much women must still compromise to get what they want.

BEST PLAY NEW TO N.J.

"Ctrl+Alt+Delete" by Anthony Clarvoe (George Street Playhouse, New Brunswick); "The Laramie Project" by Moises Kaufman (New Jersey Repertory Company, Long Branch); "The Trial of One Short-

Sighted Black Woman vs. Mammy Louise and Safireta Mae" by Marcia L. Leslie (NJPAC); "Yellowman" by Dael Orlandersmith (McCarter Theatre, Princeton)

Winner: "Yellowman." It was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize, but a clear winner here. The story of a dark-skinned black girl who makes friends with a light-skinned black boy — and has no idea that skin tones will eventually

come between them — was heart-breaking.

BEST MUSICAL REVIVAL

"A Chorus Line" (Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn); "Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill" (George Street Playhouse); "The Fantasticks" (New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, Madison); "The Robber Bridegroom" (12 Miles West Theatre Company, Montclair)

Winner: "A Chorus Line." "The

greatest musical of them all still packs a punch, even after 25 years.

BEST PLAY REVIVAL

"Don Juan" (McCarter Theatre); "Romeo and Juliet" (McCarter Theatre); "Still Life" (Women's Theatre Company, Madison); "The Three Sisters" (New Jersey Shakespeare Festival)

Winner: "The Three Sisters." Of the 16 productions I've seen

since 1969 — including one in London with the Redgrave sisters, and one by a Russian troupe — this was the finest.

BEST ACTOR IN A MUSICAL

Adam Heller ("The Book of Candy"); Brian Sutherland ("Guys and Dolls," NJPAC); Jim Walton ("Red Hot and Blue," Paper Mill Playhouse); Jared Zeus ("The Fantasticks")

Winner: Walton. Playing the part that Bob Hope originated nearly 70 years ago, Walton showed an ease with comic material that recalled the grand master of gags.

BEST ACTRESS IN A MUSICAL

Carolee Carmello ("The King and I," Paper Mill Playhouse); Suzanne Douglas ("Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill"); Debbie Gravitte ("Red Hot and Blue"); Erica Piccinini ("The Fantasticks"); Diane Sutherland ("Guys and Dolls")

Winner: Douglas. We learned from last season's "Wit" at George Street that she was an astonishing actress. This year, we learned that she could sing with equal power.

BEST FEATURED ACTOR IN A MUSICAL

Bruce Adler ("Red Hot and Blue"); Paul Benedict ("The Fantasticks"); Tim Federle ("A Chorus Line"); Luis Villabon ("A Chorus Line")

Winner: Adler. His way with double takes made us double over with laughter.

BEST FEATURED ACTRESS IN A MUSICAL

Ann Duquesnay ("Cookin' at the Cookery"); Cindy Marchionda ("A Chorus Line"); Reva Rice ("Fosse"); Debra Walton ("Cookin' at the Cookery")

Winner: Walton. Not only did the actress portray the legendary Alberta Hunter with style, but she also played — unbelievable as it seems — Louis Armstrong. An did a hilariously accurate job.

BEST ACTOR IN A FLAY

Jared Harris ("Hamlet"); Jeff Lambert ("The Last of the Red-Hot Lovers," African Globe TheatreWorks, Newark); Mark Nelson ("Talley's Folly," George Street Playhouse); Howard W. Overshown ("Yellowman"); William Schallert ("The Social Prisoner," Play-

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