

Entertainment news & reviews

MICHIGAN, TAKE A BOW: Free Press' annual theater awards will honor a particularly strong season

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BY MARTIN F. KOHN
FREE PRESS THEATER CRITIC

For anybody who couldn't make it to Harlem in the 1930s, England in the 1940s or Kentucky between 1775 and 1975, there was always the 2003-04 theater season in Michigan. Productions of plays set in those times and places -- Pearl Cleage's "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit" and Robert Schenkkan's "The Kentucky Cycle" -- are among nominees for best play at the 19th annual Free Press Awards for Theater Excellence, scheduled for Monday night at the Gem Theatre.

Those plays are joined by Kim Carney's "The Home Team," set in contemporary East Lansing; Tim Clue and Spike Manton's "Leaving Iowa," set today, with flashbacks, in and around Iowa; Dael Orlandersmith's "Yellowman," which takes place in modern South Carolina, and the difficult-to-pin-down "Hamlet Machine Hamlet," by William Shakespeare, German dramatist Heiner Muller and adapter-director Jennifer George.

Followers of these annual awards might have counted a record number of nominees. Your fingers do not deceive you: There are seven best-play nominees this year, reflecting an abundance of quality and the fact that the theater season in southeast Michigan is no longer a September-to-May operation but a year-round proposition. This year's earliest nominee for best play, Purple Rose Theatre's "Blithe Spirit," opened last June; the most recent, Plowshares Theatre's "Blues for an Alabama Sky," opened April 3. Because of the time needed to inscribe plaques and certificates, shows that opened after April 15 will be considered for awards in 2005.

Further indication of the season's strength is that two of the nominees for best play are new and could be going places.

One, Purple Rose Theatre's "Leaving Iowa," was a world premiere production. A tender comedy about family car trips, "Leaving Iowa" enjoyed a near-sellout run and has great potential for further stagings around the country; audiences will recognize their parents, themselves or both in Clue and Manton's characters.

Another, Performance Network's "The Home Team," was the second production of Michigan dramatist Carney's play. A family comedy-drama -- the family being a mother and her grown children, all rabid Michigan State football fans -- the play could enjoy subsequent regional stagings, at least wherever Big Ten football is played. In its earlier production in Indianapolis, the family rooted for Purdue.

Of the other nominees for best play, two are contemporary, widely acclaimed dramas by and about African Americans: "Blues for an Alabama Sky" at Plowshares Theatre and "Yellowman" at Detroit Repertory Theatre. Another is Hilberry Theatre's "The Kentucky Cycle," a Pulitzer Prize-winner rarely

Leaving Iowa
is nominated for
Four Awards
from the
**Detroit Free
Press**

BEST PLAY
BEST DIRECTOR
BEST ACTOR
BEST SET DESIGN

performed because of its six-hour length; playgoers could see it over two nights, or all in one day with a dinner break.

Another nominee, Zeitgeist's unique "Hamlet Machine Hamlet," is a new amalgam of two existing plays, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and the 20th-Century German "Hamlet Machine."

The final nominee, Purple Rose's "Blithe Spirit," is a perennial favorite about a novelist and the ghost of his former wife.

21 productions nominated

In all, 21 productions from 11 theaters received nominations in one or more categories: best play, best director, best actor, best actress, best featured actor, best featured actress and best design. Purple Rose Theatre leads with nine nominations, followed by Hilberry Theatre with seven. Those numbers are slightly inflated because Purple Rose's "Blithe Spirit" and Hilberry's "Kentucky Cycle" had two directors apiece, and all four of those directors are nominated.

As is customary, three special awards will also be given: the Lee Hills Award for distinguished career achievement, named for the late Free Press publisher and Detroit arts patron; the Lawrence DeVine Award for outstanding contribution to theater this season, named for the Free Press's longtime (1968-1998) theater critic, now retired; and the James Kisicki Award for a season's acting, named for a former Detroit actor who now lives and acts in Cleveland.

Nominees and winners were chosen by Free Press theater critic Martin F. Kohn in consultation with members of the Free Press arts and entertainment staff.

More than a dozen of this year's nominated people are previous winners or nominees. Detroit is fortunate to have many honored actors, directors and designers choosing to stay and work here. This has also been a very good season for some previous winners and nominees working elsewhere. In chronological order, they are:

- Jayne Houdyshell, 1986 best actress winner for "Monday After the Miracle" at the Attic Theatre, earned rave reviews and Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel and Outer Critics Circle award nominations for her performance in "Well" at the Public Theatre in New York. Houdyshell appeared in many Detroit productions in the 1970s and '80s. In "Well," a semi-autobiographical play by Lansing native Lisa Kron, she played Kron's mother; one New York writer praised Houdyshell for mastering a Michigan accent.
- Steve Brady, 1989 best actor winner for "Wild Honey" at Hilberry, had a featured role in the national tour of "The Exonerated," which played the Fisher Theatre in February.
- Thorsten Kaye, 1994 best featured actor winner for "Much Ado About Nothing" at Hilberry, joined the cast of ABC's "All My Children." Kaye previously had regular roles in the soaps "One Life to Live" and "Port Charles."
- Raul Esparza, 1998 best featured actor nominee for "What the Butler Saw" at Meadow Brook, received a Tony Award nomination last week as best featured actor in a musical for his work in "Taboo."
- Keegan-Michael Key, 1999 best featured actor nominee for work at Second City Detroit, joined the cast of the Fox network's "Mad TV."
- Antoine McKay, 2001 best featured actor winner for work at Second City Detroit, joined the Second City Chicago company.

Nominees, 2004 Detroit Free Press Awards for Theater Excellence

Best Design

Bartley Bauer, set, "Blithe Spirit," Purple Rose Theatre
Mark Choinski, lighting, "The Diviners," Theatre Company
Scott Mollman, set, "Glengarry Glen Ross," Hilberry Theatre
***Vince Mountain*, set, "Leaving Iowa," Purple Rose**
Heather White and *Emily Rose Merrell*, costumes, "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," Zeitgeist Theater

Best Featured Actress

Sandra Birch, Madame Arcati, "Blithe Spirit," Purple Rose
Mary Bremer, Neva, "The Home Team," Performance Network
Terry Heck, various roles, "The Good Doctor," Purple Rose
Jennifer McConnell, Constance, "Lovers and Executioners," Hilberry
Leah Smith, Rodeo, "Talking With," Meadow Brook Theatre

Best Featured Actor

Joseph Albright, Johnny, "The Home Team," Performance Network
Eddie Collins, Magwitch, "Great Expectations," Hilberry
Robert Grossman, Les Kennkat, "Boy Gets Girl," JET (Jewish Ensemble Theatre)
Paul Hopper, Candy, "Of Mice and Men," Meadow Brook
Chris Korte, Scarecrow, "The Wizard of Oz," Planet Ant Theatre
R. Stanley Skrok, Ferris Layman, "The Diviners," Theatre Company

Best Actress

Linda Boston, Ella, "Sarah, Ella and Pops," Plowshares Theatre
Barbara Coven, Theresa, "Boy Gets Girl," JET
Nikki Ferry, Julie, "Lovers & Executioners," Hilberry
Cecilia Foreman, Alma, "Yellowman," Detroit Repertory Theatre
Jennifer Tuttle, various roles, "The Kentucky Cycle," Hilberry

Best Actor

Loren Bass, Dr. Fried, "Dance Like No One's Watching," BoarsHead Theater
Paul Hopper, various roles, "Greater Tuna," Meadow Brook
***John Leopard*, Don, "Leaving Iowa," Purple Rose**
Thomas Mahard, various roles, "Greater Tuna," Meadow Brook
Andrew Parker, Danny Saunders, "The Chosen," JET
Mark Young, Guy, "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Plowshares

Best Director

***Anthony Caselli*, "Leaving Iowa," Purple Rose**
Janet Cleveland, "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Plowshares
Jennifer George, "Hamlet Machine Hamlet," Zeitgeist
Lavinia Hart and *Pat Ansuini*, "The Kentucky Cycle," Hilberry
Jim Posante, "The Home Team," Performance Network
Tim Rhoze, "Yellowman," Detroit Repertory
Guy Sanville and *Anthony Caselli*, "Blithe Spirit," Purple Rose

Best Play

"Leaving Iowa," Purple Rose
"Blues for an Alabama Sky," Plowshares
"Hamlet Machine Hamlet," Zeitgeist
"The Kentucky Cycle," Hilberry
"The Home Team," Performance Network
"Yellowman," Detroit Repertory
"Blithe Spirit," Purple Rose