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THE BEST PLAYS THEATER
YEARBOOK 2007–2008

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Illustrated with production photographs



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INTRODUCTION

AS WE PORE over the statistics of the theater season under review and add our research of earlier years to the mix, an astonishing fact arises from the result: neither *South Pacific* nor *Gypsy*—both of which received outstanding revivals this season—were chosen as Best Plays for their respective seasons (1948–49 and 1958–59). Sitting as virtual bookends to the decade of the Korean War and the Eisenhower administration, these two works were shining examples of theater art—and its possibility—in a time often cited as the “Golden Era” of the Broadway musical.

Despite record attendance figures in recent years and the collection of many millions of dollars at the box office, an increasingly figurative term given the rise of online ticketing through the internet, Broadway attendance has become the purview of those who can afford tickets that run to \$100 or more. At the end of the 2007–2008 season, *Variety* reported that the average ticket price was \$73.55, down \$2.72 from its all-time high the previous year. If one figures on a family of four who may wish to have dinner in the Theater District, may need to park a vehicle and may desire a souvenir of the experience, a trip to Broadway can easily run \$500 or more. Even in flush times, which these are not, that is a significant amount of money for a family evening. Although ticket prices today are roughly consonant with those of the Golden Era—the median four-person family income in the tri-state area rose by multiples of 22 to 28 between 1949 and 2007 while top Broadway ticket prices increased by a factor of a little more than 20—the perception of tickets at \$100 or more raises concerns of accessibility from many corners. New Yorkers in the know, of course, are aware of ticket-buying clubs that make extremely low-price tickets available to their members, but it is difficult to imagine that Broadway’s core audience of tourists and tri-state residents might easily avail themselves of such bargains.

Setting aside the commercial details of attendance and income for the moment, it is worth considering what constitutes a Best Play as we launch into the seasonal narrative that comprises the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook*.

The absence of *South Pacific* and *Gypsy* from the master Best Plays list implies that the respective editors of those past volumes (John Chapman and Louis Kronenberger) found something lacking in the now-classic musicals. Chapman admitted that *South Pacific* was a “fine musical” but found it not to be the “real work of art” of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel* and *Oklahoma!* It is tempting to suspect that Chapman took the idea of “play” too seriously, but a review of Best Plays during his tenure as editor demonstrates that he managed to pick such divergent musicals as Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Allegro* (1947–48), *Lost in the Stars* by Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill (1949–50) and *Guys and Dolls* by Jo Swerling, Abe Burrows and Frank Loesser (1950–51). The works that bumped *South Pacific* from the list included such titles as Sidney Kingsley’s melodramatic *Detective Story* and Robert E. McEnroe’s *The Silver Whistle*, but that season’s honorees also included plays such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Maxwell Anderson’s *Anne of the Thousand Days*.

A decade later, Kronenberger declined to pick *Gypsy* by Arthur Laurents, Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim because the musical “hardly seemed worthy” of the critical plaudits it received on its opening. Kronenberger gave most credit for *Gypsy*’s success to director-choreographer Jerome Robbins and star Ethel Merman (who nonetheless saw the Tony Award go to Mary Martin that year for *The Sound of Music*). Unwilling to let it go at that, Kronenberger further noted that Laurents’s book was a “touch commonplace and more than a touch repetitious,” that Styne’s score was “nowhere noteworthy” and Sondheim’s lyrics were “largely routine.” These hasty judgments must give pause to any historian who hopes to construct a reliable narrative from a theater season of the recent past. In the ensuing decades, *South Pacific* and *Gypsy* became touchstones of American musical theater, embedding themselves in our consciousness largely through their memorable songs but also in the ways that each musical plucks emotional and spiritual chords that are distinctly American.

In *South Pacific*, Rodgers, Hammerstein and Joshua Logan crafted a poignant and deeply disconcerting story regarding the human cost of war and racial prejudice. At a time when African-American veterans of the recent world war returned to find themselves continuing to be treated as second- or third-class citizens, *South Pacific* raised the hackles of some members of the Establishment. When the show previewed in Boston, according to critic Elliot Norton in an interview published in *Under the Copper Beech* (Foundation ATCA, 2004), “the audience froze [after ‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’]. You could almost feel the chill and I talked to some

people afterwards—bigoted people who hated the show, believe it or not.” Norton told Bill Gale that he subsequently tried to get Logan to “tone it down a little,” but that the director intensely disagreed. (Norton came to believe that Logan was correct to stay with his instinct.) Although it is often said that there are no atheists in foxholes, *South Pacific* made its first audiences question whether the same held true for racists—and it raised these questions less than a year after President Truman issued an executive order requiring the “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Armed Services.” Although it nearly cost him his presidency that year, Truman effectively began the desegregation of the military. As a result of Truman’s actions, the US military is now the most egalitarian institution in American life. But when *South Pacific* opened in 1949, issues of racial prejudice were not a common topic for mass entertainment.

In the case of *Gypsy*, sometimes described as the perfect show-business musical, it is easy to discern the ways in which the work echoes familiar elements in the American psyche. Much has been made, for instance, of the American Dream—particularly in cultural products emanating from 20th-century popular fiction, Hollywood films and 1950s women’s magazines. The “dream” has become a cultural Rorschach test in which almost anyone can define his or her deepest desires as related to it. Mama Rose’s ambition for her daughters and, by extension, herself, mark this musical as a tale—which has more than a little in common with Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*—of continual adaptation to attain a measure of success. That it results in a young woman, Louise, converting herself into a commodity, Gypsy Rose Lee, presented to satisfy what theorists call the “male gaze” only heightens the paradox of what some women encounter on the path to material success without the direct support of a dominant male figure. Indeed, Mama Rose’s grasping nature also aligns to a large extent with the fame-at-any-cost ethos so prevalent in American reality television today.

Should *Gypsy* have been overlooked by editor Kronenberger in favor of Shimon Wincelberg’s *Kataki*, which played 20 performances on Broadway? Judging from the e-mail received and chatter on theater websites after we announce the 10 Best Plays of a given season, this is the type of question on the minds of many theater lovers. The answer, of course, is complex: We choose three dozen or so finalists, which are then discussed with nearly two dozen theater critics and writers, including the *Best Plays* editorial board, former essayists and other top theater writers. For the season just past, we considered 48 plays for a place on the *Best Plays* list. Although we

sometimes wish there were enough space to honor 15 Best Plays, we cannot. Did we choose the “correct” 10 plays? Have we overlooked the next *South Pacific* or *Gypsy*? Read on and decide for yourself.

II

AS WE EXAMINE the list of this season’s 10 Best Plays (and one Special Citation), it is natural to wonder what these choices tell us about the 2007–2008 theater season in New York. We often find that there is a narrative thread to be teased from the fabric of our choices, but occasionally that thread is rather more tortured than teased. It is, however, our mission to construct a second-draft of recent theater history—with journalism, a craft in seemingly inexorable decline, as the first. Amid the growing elimination of theater critic positions (and shrinking arts coverage) at daily newspapers around the US, it sometimes feels as though *Best Plays* may soon be the last publication of mainstream critical perspective on theater to appear in print. In the meantime, however, we have 11 New York theater works from the season under consideration to explore.

There was a great deal of unhappiness lodged in the works we celebrate in this volume. Could it be that we have chosen these works because they reflect our sense of insecurity at a time of war and growing economic calamity? In *Adding Machine*, Jason Loewith and Joshua Schmidt’s musical adaptation of Elmer Rice’s 1923 play *The Adding Machine*, the talented duo have tapped Rice’s key thematics regarding the ways in which guilt may prevent sentient creatures from pursuing what anthropologist Joseph Campbell called their “bliss.” Performed in 90 intermissionless minutes, Loewith and Schmidt’s work unearthed the essence of Rice’s expressionistic classic in near operatic form. Despite the use of Rice’s work as a springboard, the creators made *Adding Machine* a new entity of its own—and converted some detractors of the original. Essayist Jeffrey Sweet unfolds the results of their work.

Leo Tolstoy’s aphorism about family happiness that begins *Anna Karenina*—“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Constance Garnett translation)—seems to bear weight once again with the productions of *August: Osage County* by Tracy Letts and *Dividing the Estate* by Horton Foote. In *August*, which first came to life at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre Company, an extended family in Oklahoma gathers to mourn its patriarch as it tries to contain its drug-addled matriarch. Playwright Letts shows that he has learned well the lessons of Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller and Sam Shepard, with a side helping from the king

of trash-talk television, Jerry Springer. Chris Jones, who observed the play's development from Chicago to New York, takes note of this Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

The unhappiness at the core of Horton Foote's *Dividing the Estate* is less about familial chaos and more about the sense of entitlement that runs through a Texas family. Foote's play, which is set during the oil bust of the late 1980s, centers on a family, featured in other plays of his, who were once wealthy landowners and farmers. In the straitened circumstances of 1987, the family discovers that the land is worth much less than they hoped and that their free-spending ways are about to end. Essayist Garrett Eisler draws parallels between Foote's characters and the challenging economic climate now facing millions of Americans.

Plays by two women, Sarah Ruhl and Kate Fodor, examine the nature of love and loss in works that share an elegiac underpinning. In Ruhl's *eurydice*, the title character attains a kind of grace as she leaves behind her beloved and travels to the Underworld where she encounters her dead father. Essayist Celia Wren makes the water-drenched voyage with Eurydice and discovers that in our world today "comic desolation" may at times resemble a "leaky faucet." John Istel makes a similar journey in his essay on Fodor's *100 Saints You Should Know*, yet another Steppenwolf gift to New York. In *100 Saints*, however, Fodor tracks the paths of several characters seeking solace and understanding: a sexually confused priest questions his faith and befriends a working-class mother, a teenage boy tries to fit into his own skin but makes a fateful choice to engage with the working-class mother's daredevil daughter. These lives intersect and diverge in the course of the play. Ultimately, however, Istel finds that the playwright's art lies in how she allows "each point of view" to radiate "its own profoundly human value and worth."

Evil rears its head in ways banal and Biblical in plays by Adam Bock and Conor McPherson. Bock, who captured the attention of audiences and critics with *The Thugs* during the 2006–07 season, is honored for *The Receptionist*. Essayist David Cote argues that the two plays combined, which are one-acts of roughly 50 and 80 minutes, might make for a "darkly funny evening of post-September 11 paranoia." Cote explores Bock's deployment of the banality that overlays a corporate culture in which torture is the service provided by a commercial entity. In *The Receptionist*, Bock demonstrates what is possible (and probable?) in a society whose moral compass has gone haywire. Playwright McPherson dabbles with a more familiar image of evil. Amid a houseful of alcoholics on Christmas Eve, the Devil comes to call and collect the debt of a soul owed by one of the men.

Essayist Charles McNulty considers McPherson's narrative style and how the playwright's perspective echoes literary classics as he grapples with the essence of "Hell" and the desire for grace.

Master playwrights Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee each make their ninth appearance in the *Best Plays* series. Stoppard's ideological sequel to last season's *The Coast of Utopia* charts the crushing oppression and decline of Soviet-style Communism in *Rock 'n' Roll*. Appropriating popular music and art movements of the latter part of the 20th century, Stoppard shows the naivete of those who believe that ideals of freedom and revolution in popular culture can overcome the personal betrayals elicited by totalitarian regimes and their secret police. Essayist Charles Wright argues that Stoppard's characters are "superbly shaded" and that, despite the intellectual debate at the play's core, the author's work is marked by "increasing poignance and variety of emotion." Albee's *Peter and Jerry* (retitled in 2008 as *At Home at the Zoo*) receives a Special Citation in this volume partly because one half of the piece is the revised version of the playwright's 1958 play, *The Zoo Story*. Essayist Michael Sommers details the dark humor that Albee evokes as he "completes" a play that long has been a classic in American colleges and on American stages.

It is entirely fitting to end our brief introduction to the Best Plays honored herein with questions that relate to everything we do in this series: What is history and who owns it? Aaron Sorkin's *The Farnsworth Invention*, which was criticized for not hewing strictly to the facts of Philo T. Farnsworth's life and career, is a Best Play that raises one such question. After surviving a stagehands' strike while in previews, the creative team faced a *New York Post* piece on factual inaccuracies in the play just a few days before opening. Sorkin was accused of taking liberties with certain events, including a dramatized court case that did not end as depicted in the play. Other elements such as Farnsworth's well-documented drinking problems and his eventual loss of control over his invention, were challenged for the way they were handled. Some who were interviewed in the *Post* article had a significant financial stake in Farnsworth-influenced projects unrelated to the play. Sorkin confronted his accusers in an open letter and the contretemps devolved into "he said, he said." But for 104 performances, Sorkin's trademark dialogue and crisp narrative style held sway on Broadway in a fascinating tale that was itself an interrogation of the way history is often written by the victors, implicitly criticizing the tactics employed by those victors. Essayist Christopher Rawson digs into the piece and finds a story in which neither of the play's narrators is completely reliable—which may well have been Sorkin's point all along.

David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* also challenges the ways in which history is constructed. In Hwang's case, however, the story is more personal than it was for Sorkin. Hwang unspools the threads of his own life through a character named "DHH," whose father shares initials with the playwright's late father, a prominent banker. In *Yellow Face* the tale told centers on a prominent Asian-American writer who finds himself speaking for an entire community of Asian-American theater workers. As the play unfolds, often in comic fashion, DHH confronts a variety of issues that relate to personal and ethnic identity. He also learns that life in the public square all-too-easily spins out of control when the agendas of others—newspaper reporters, unemployed actors, government regulators—come into conflict with one's own sense of reality. Essayist Dan Bacalzo finds that Hwang "explodes notions of truth and authenticity," exposing them as "subjective and prone to manipulation."

In creating narratives that interrogate the nature of storytelling even as they reconstruct narratives beloved by various interest groups, Sorkin and Hwang have both demonstrated that compelling playwriting need not be hostage to linearity—as long as the writing possesses wit, clarity, perspective and humanity. Indeed, it is fair to argue that all of this year's honorees—whether exploring dysfunctional characters in decline, societies gone mad or the reliability of narrative—tell us something about what it means to be a human being in ways that are fresh and, often, exhilarating.

In addition to the plays celebrated in these essays, we also hope that readers enjoy the volume's expanded statistics and index. Whenever possible we track all Broadway and Off Broadway revivals back to their original presentations in New York, around the country and abroad. In the case of William Shakespeare and others of his ilk, we employ George C.D. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*—which links with the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* series to chronicle New York theater back to the 18th century. We also use the archives of *The New York Times* and other major publications as we attempt to locate plays in their original contexts.

With our colleagues in the American Theatre Critics Association, we also keep close tabs on new plays developing in theaters across the US. Through the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, we recognize the honorees of the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations. The Steinberg Charitable Trust, which has supported the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* series since 2001, recently renewed its support of our editorial research and data compilation mission for an additional five years, which will help keep this publication in print until at least 2013. We extend our deepest thanks to the Trust and its board (William D. Zabel, Carole A.

Krumland, James D. Steinberg, Michael A. Steinberg and Seth M. Weingarten) for making *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* a priority for their support.

Honorees for the 2008 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations are Moisés Kaufman's *33 Variations*, which won the Steinberg top prize (\$25,000). Kaufman's play is discussed by Nelson Pressley. The 2008 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Citations (along with \$7,500 each) went to Sarah Ruhl for *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (detailed here by Peter Marks), and to Deborah Zoe Lauffer for *End Days* (essay by Christine Dolen).

III

AS WE MOVE forward with the 89th volume of this chronicle of theater in the United States, we celebrate the beginning of a reinvigorated partnership with Limelight Editions, now under the management of publisher John Cerullo.

The collection of data for a volume such as this relies on the labors of many people. Our thanks to Sylviane Gold for her remarkably thorough essay on Off Off Broadway theater. Sheryl Arluck continues as an invaluable compiler and assistant editor of the Off Off Broadway section, among other duties for the series. Jennifer Ashley Tepper expands her portfolio to include the USA, Cast Replacements and Touring, and In Memoriam sections. Jonathan Dodd, the longtime publisher of the *Best Plays* series, continues to provide important background information and good advice. Thanks as well to our friend and colleague Robert Brustein for generously continuing as consulting editor to the series.

We are also deeply indebted to all of the press representatives who assisted in the gathering of information for this volume, but we particularly acknowledge Adrian Bryan-Brown and Chris Boneau of Boneau/Bryan-Brown for their unflagging support of the series and its editors.

Thanks also are due to the members of the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook's* editorial board, who give their imprimatur to our work by their presence on the masthead. With this edition we welcome Misha Berson to the editorial board as we wish our longtime colleague and friend Tish Dace a happy and well-deserved retirement. We are grateful as well to those who have offered and provided extra support and assistance to this edition: Charles Wright, Christopher Rawson (Theater Hall of Fame Awards), Caldwell Titcomb (Elliot Norton Awards), David A. Rosenberg (Connecticut Critics' Circle Awards), Bill Hirschman (Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations) and Edwin Wilson and Mimi Kilgore (Susan Smith Blackburn Prize).

We especially note the ongoing joint efforts of the *Best Plays* editorial team and the research department of the The Broadway League—which changed its name from the League of American Theatres and Producers on December 18, 2007—over the past several years. First with Stephen Greer, later Neal Freeman and now with Jennifer Stewart, we have worked since 2002 to correct the records of the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com) as well as past errors made in the pages of *Best Plays*. Our thanks and compliments to our friends at the League for their cooperation in this long-term project of correcting the historical record.

We congratulate and thank all of the Best Plays honorees who made the 2007–08 season so invigorating to contemplate. Edward Albee, Adam Bock, Kate Fodor, Horton Foote, David Henry Hwang, Tracy Letts, Jason Loewith, Conor McPherson, Sarah Ruhl, Joshua Schmidt, Aaron Sorkin and Tom Stoppard all enriched our lives during the season under review. The photographers who capture theatrical images on film and help keep those ephemeral moments alive for historical perspective are also due thanks for their generous contributions to the greater body of theatrical work. Building on our work from past years, we have included credits with each photograph and indexed the photographers' names for easier reference. Similarly, we continue offering biographical information about each of this volume's essayists and editors.

A personal note: In addition to serving as editor of this series, I teach full-time in the Drama Department at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Although I am blessed with superb students who inspire me to strive for excellence in my teaching, research, editing and writing, I also have the support and friendship of as fine a faculty of artists and scholars as I have had the honor to know. Each member of the faculty has provided the kind of encouragement one needs to keep in print an annual compendium of critical perspective and historical reference that runs more than 500 pages. Thanks to all of my colleagues for their advocacy, especially to the senior academic faculty: Awam Amkpa, Una Chaudhuri, Laura Levine, Carol Martin and Robert Vorlicky. For the season under review, I especially thank our department chair, Kevin Kuhlke, and our director of theater studies, Edward Ziter, for their continuing support of my work as a teacher, researcher and writer. Thanks also to Dan Dinero, my graduate assistant during the season under review, for helping to make my work more manageable.

My wife, Vivian Cary Jenkins, continues to serve the theater and *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* as a tracker of what is happening in the New York theater. Despite facing challenges that would utterly stymie someone made

of lesser stuff, she continues to contribute in ways large and small to the success of the series even as she has collaborated this season with the brilliant theater artist, Ping Chong. Although I repeat these thanks each year, one thing remains true: It is largely through her consistent efforts that this series continues to appear.

JEFFREY ERIC JENKINS
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