

Paramount, other suburban theaters top Jeff Award nominations

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- Northlight Theatre's world premiere of "Shining Lives: A Musical," starring Tiffany Topol, left, Jess Goodwin, Bria Sudia and Johanna McKenzie Miller as workers poisoned during their employment at the Radium Dial Company in Ottawa, Illinois, earned a best new musical nomination for writer Jessica Thebus and composer/lyricists Andre Pluess and Amanda Dehnert.

Courtesy of Michael Brosilow

[Paramount Theatre](#) in Aurora on Friday accomplished what no other Chicago-area theater has in the 47 years since the establishment of the Joseph Jefferson Awards -- topping the nominations in only its first year of eligibility.

The nominations were noteworthy for local theater fans for another reason as well: Suburban theaters claimed a place in the top three spots.

Paramount received 16 nods, with [Drury Lane](#) in Oakbrook Terrace earning the second-highest number with 13 nominations and [Marriott Theatre](#) in Lincolnshire sharing third place with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company with 12 nominations each.

The announcement left Paramount artistic director Jim Corti speechless.

"I didn't expect this. I thought it was going to take a lot more time before we landed anything like this," said Corti, of

the awards recognizing excellence in Chicago-area equity theater.

Corti earned two of the nominations himself for helming the theater's re-imagining of "Les Miserables" and the rock opera "The Who's Tommy." Both of those productions received six nominations each, including best musical-large theater.

"I'm very happy for our creative and technical teams to receive this recognition," Corti said.

"Les Miserables" also received nominations for supporting actor Devin Desantis (also nominated for lead actor in a musical for "The Who's Tommy"), music director Tom Vendafreddo, set designers Kevin Depinet and Jeffrey D. Kmiec, and lighting designer Jesse Klug.

"The Who's Tommy" picked up nominations for choreographer Brock Clawson, lighting designer Greg Hofmann and projection designer Mike Tutaj, who earned a nomination in that category for Porchlight Music Theatre's "Sondheim on Sondheim."

Also vying for best musical is Paramount's "Mary Poppins," which received four nominations, including a directing nod for previous winner Rachel Rockwell. Rockwell also received directing and choreography nominations for Drury Lane's "Billy Elliot, The Musical."

For principal actor, the Jeff Committee recognized 14-year-old Vernon Hills resident Nicholas Dantes for his performance as Billy, a role he shared with Kyle Halford of Naperville.

"The nomination I'm most thrilled about is Nicholas. I couldn't be happier about that," Rockwell said. "And I want to acknowledge Kyle, who was stellar as well."

"These nominations are a lovely acknowledgment of all the hard work that goes into these projects," Rockwell said, adding that they confirm "we did what we set out to do: We created something beautiful, moving and exciting."

Nick Bowling earned directing nominations for his Marriott debut "The King and I" and for the theater's artfully conceived regional premiere of "City of Angels." Both were nominated for best musical-large theater. Bowling also received a directing nod for Porchlight's "Sondheim on Sondheim" revue.

Marriott's "The King and I" earned nominations for principal actress Heidi Kettenring, supporting actress Kristen Choi and costume designer Nancy Missimi.

Joining Kettenring in the principal actress category is Shoshona Bean, who earned a nomination for her performance as CeCe in Drury Lane's Broadway-bound world premiere of "Beaches, The Musical." The category also includes 2014 winner Susie McMonagle for "Billy Elliot," Megan McGinnis for Chicago Shakespeare Theater's world premiere musical adaptation of Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility," and Rebecca Finnegan, for her role as Mrs. Lovett in Porchlight Music Theatre's "Sweeney Todd."

Naperville native Mat Smart received a best new play nomination for "The Royal Society of Antarctica," which premiered in February at The Gift Theatre. Northlight Theatre's "White Guy on the Bus," a world premiere by Bruce Graham, was also nominated. It received nominations for supporting actress Patrese D. McClain and principal actor Francis Guinan, a double best actor nominee for his work in Steppenwolf's "The Night Alive."

Jerod Haynes received two best actor nods as well -- for American Theater Company's "The Royale" and for his visceral turn as a man at war with himself and society in the Court Theater/American Blues Theater world premiere of "Native Son." The play also earned nominations for best play-large theater, Nambi E. Kelly's adaptation, lighting designer Marc Stubblefield and sound designer Joshua Horvath.

Also nominated for best play-large: "Moby Dick" from Lookingglass Theatre Company and Actors Gymnasium, Steppenwolf's "Airline Highway," Writers Theatre's "The Diary of Anne Frank" and Goodman Theatre's "The Little

Foxes."

In the supporting actor category, the committee recognized former Downers Grove resident Anthony Fleming III for his work in "Moby Dick" and Hoffman Estates native Greg Matthew Anderson for Remy Bumppo Theatre's revival of Tom Stoppard's "Travesties."

Leading all productions with eight nominations, including best play-mid-size, is The Hypocrites' "All Our Tragic," which combines the 32 surviving Greek tragedies into one 11-hour production.

"It's truly humbling to be in such great company," said Hypocrites founder and artistic director Sean Graney, nominated for directing and adapting "All Our Tragic."

Praising the show's 100 actors, designers and crew members, Graney described the nomination for best ensemble as "particularly meaningful," coming as it does three months after cast member Erin Myers succumbed to cancer.

The 47th Annual Equity Jeff Awards ceremony takes place Oct. 5 at Drury Lane Theatre. For more information, see jeffawards.org.