

## The best of times for 'Hard Times' - Adaptation of Dickens tale wins Jeff Award for best production of season among Equity plays

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Awards ceremonies have had a difficult time in recent weeks as they've tried to balance a sense of celebration and entertainment with a need to address the gravity of the current world situation. Mixing high spirits and a sense of the theater's role as a source of healing, the Chicago theater community succeeded in striking the perfect tone Monday night at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie. The occasion was the 33rd annual Joseph Jefferson Awards, presented to honor excellence in Equity productions during the 2000-2001 theater season.

In what was an exceptionally strong season, "Hard Times," the physically and emotionally daring adaptation of a Charles Dickens classic--created by the Lookingglass Theatre Company with the Actors' Gymnasium--was named best production of a play. The show also received awards for its director and adapter, Heidi Stillman (who flew in from New York, where she is appearing in Mary Zimmerman's production, "Metamorphoses," originally created for Lookingglass); for the demanding choreography and circus skills created by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, and for the work of lighting designer Brian Sidney Bembridge.

Winner of the best musical honors was the revival of "The King and I" at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. The production's principal actress, Mary Ernster, won the award for best actress in a musical; costume designer Nancy Missimi also was honored.

Other major awards in the musicals category went to Gary Griffin, for his direction of "big, the musical" at Drury Lane Oakbrook, and Rod Thomas, the giddily boyish lead in that show whose effusive acceptance speech suggested why he was such a hit. Equally effusive was Marilu Henner, named best actress for her performance in the touring production of "Annie Get Your Gun." Nick Garrison, star of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," won for best non-resident actor. And "The Bomb-itty of Errors," a tour de force update of "The Comedy of Errors" in which Shakespeare gets the hip-hop treatment, was named best overall non-resident production.

Carmen Roman received the award for best actress in a play for her bravura performance as a cancer patient in "Wit," at the Goodman Theatre. Greg Vinkler was recognized as best actor for his strong portrayal of "King Lear" at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Named best supporting actors were David Darlow for his splendid work in the American Theatre Company revival of Samuel Beckett's "Endgame" and Laura T. Fisher as the hilariously vengeful wife of a Chicago politician in the Famous Door Theatre Company production of "Early and Often."

Among the most touching moments of the evening was Jackie Taylor's acceptance of the award for Mark Townsend, winner of best actor in a revue. Townsend, who starred in the Black Ensemble production of "The Nat King Cole Story," had told her it was "a dream come true" when he was nominated for the award earlier this year. He died just over a month ago at age 36.

The coveted ensemble award went to the cast of "The Incident," a tale of terror in a subway presented by Evanston's Next Theatre. Named best new works of the season were Ann Noble's "The Pagans," a multi-generational tale of an Irish family premiered by Seanachai Theatre, and "The Ballad of Little Jo," the musical by Mike Reid and Sarah Schlesinger, which opened to mixed reviews at Steppenwolf Theatre. (Reid's acceptance speech was refreshingly self-effacing and blunt.)

The polished, swiftly moving Jeff Awards show itself--always notable for the funny, impassioned and deeply personal comments of the winners--was deftly hosted by the wonderfully emotional and glamorous Barbara Robertson and the acerbic Jim Corti. Among the entertainment interludes were a high-energy opening rap by the members of the "Bomb-itty" cast; William Brown's zesty rendering of Noel Coward's wicked cautionary song "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington"; Heidi Kettenring's expertly sung take on the Kander & Ebb song "And the World Goes 'Round," and Larry Yando's bravura rendering of "Investigative Report," Curt Dale Clark's annual custom-crafted, noir-style tale that cleverly interweaves all the titles of the evening's nominated shows.

A special Joseph Jefferson Award went to Sun-Times columnist Irv Kupcinet and his wife, the late Essee Kupcinet, one of the first members of the Jeff Committee following its founding in 1968. They were honored for their "six decades of working together to make Chicago a fertile ground for careers in the arts, and for nurturing the talents of Chicago actors and artists." Another special Jeff went to WTTW-Channel 11's "Artbeat Chicago," the weekly television arts magazine, cited "for its intelligent, witty and compassionate celebration" of Chicago theater.

In addition, throughout the evening, tribute was paid to the often-unsung heroes of theatrical productions--the stagehands, technicians, design shop workers and stage managers who make the complex backstage mechanics of any show function like clockwork.

**Caption:** Philip R. Smith and Louise Lamson starred in "Hard Times," a joint production of Lookingglass Theatre and the Actors' Gymnasium. On Monday it was named best production of 2000-2001. See also related CHART page 56.

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