

Wilson's 'Guitars' plays a winning tune for Congo Square with Jeffs

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It was a very good night for Congo Square Theatre Company.

On Monday evening, the six-year-old African-American troupe trumped such established companies as Steppenwolf, Court and Chicago Shakespeare to receive the Jeff Award for best production of a play. Its exceptional production -- a revival of August Wilson's "Seven Guitars" -- also served as a timely tribute to the playwright, who died last month, and who helped foster and support Congo Square's growth.

"Seven Guitars," the lushly written 1940s-era installment in Wilson's cycle of plays about African-American life in the 20th century, also garnered awards for the cast's ensemble work and for director Derrick Sanders.

On the musicals front, the top Jeff Award went to Marriott Theatre's "Beauty and the Beast," one of the first regional productions of that hit Disney show. It was named best musical of the 2004-05 season and earned director Marc Robin one of the three Jeffs he picked up at the ceremony (the other two were for his work as director and co-choreographer on "Swing!," also staged at the Marriott).

Another musical -- Porchlight Music Theatre Chicago's revival of Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" -- received four awards, for principal actor and actress (Michael Aaron Lindner and Rebecca Finnegan), supporting actor (Peter Pohlhammer) and musical direction (Eugene Dizon), with Finnegan also winning for best actress in a revue (Porchlight's "Closer Than Ever").

Steppenwolf Theatre carried away two awards for best new plays of the season: Bruce Norris' "The Pain and the Itch," the controversial tale of an upscale dysfunctional American family, and Adam Rapp's "Red Light Winter," a disturbing play about a sexual triangle staged in the theater's Garage space. Two adaptations also were cited: Rebecca Gilman's "Dollhouse," an exhilarating reworking of the Ibsen classic, staged at the Goodman Theatre, and Andrew White's "1984," a new look at the George Orwell classic, staged by Lookingglass Theatre Company.

This year's Jeff Awards, honoring excellence in Chicago theaters operating under the Equity union contract, attracted a sellout crowd to the new Drury Lane Theatre Water Tower Place.

Besides those already mentioned, other winners include:

PRINCIPAL ACTOR, PLAY: Jefferson Mays, "I Am My Own Wife" (Goodman).

PRINCIPAL ACTRESS, PLAY: Barbara E. Robertson, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (Court Theatre).

SUPPORTING ACTOR, PLAY: Tom Aulino, "Take Me Out" (About Face Theatre).

SUPPORTING ACTRESS, PLAY: Jane Houdyshell, "The Pain and the Itch."

SUPPORTING ACTRESS, MUSICAL: Renee Matthews, "The Full Monty" (Drury Lane Theatre Water Tower Place).

ACTOR, REVUE: "Mississippi" Charles Bevel, "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues" (Northlight Theatre).

CHOREOGRAPHY: Mark Stuart Eckstein, Beverly Durand, and Marc Robin, "Swing!"

SCENIC DESIGN: Scott Bradley, "Silk" (Goodman).

LIGHTING DESIGN: Michael Rourke, "Kabuki Lady Macbeth" (Chicago Shakespeare Theater).

COSTUME DESIGN: Nancy Missimi, "Beauty and the Beast."

SOUND DESIGN: Lindsay Jones, "Kid Simple" (American Theater Company).

ORIGINAL INCIDENTAL MUSIC: Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman, "Red Herring" (Northlight).

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN PRODUCTION DESIGN: John Boesche, "Sunset Boulevard" (Marriott).

SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN CIRCUS CHOREOGRAPHY: Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, "Lookingglass Alice" (Lookingglass Theatre Company and Actors Gymnasium).

OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT IN CHICAGO EQUITY THEATER: Dennis Zacek, artistic director, Victory Gardens Theater.

Caption: Photo: Congo Square's "Seven Guitars" -- with Kenn E. Head (from left), Ann Joseph and Will Sims II -- won for best production of a play.

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