

Peppermint Creek Theatre center of 2015

Thespie's spotlight

Mike Hughes, For the Lansing State Journal - June 21, 2015



For the Peppermint Creek Theatre, this is another big year for Thespie Awards.

Peppermint won for the best-show Thespie among plays ("Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo") AND among musicals ("Parade"). Two of its other shows also won awards.

But the Williamston Theatre also scored big and there were signs of a richly varied theater scene: Thespies went to groups that have been frequent winners – Riverwalk, Michigan State University, Lansing Community College – and to others. There were wins for the new Ixion Ensemble and the summer Over the Ledge; Starlight won three times.

The Thespies are the State Journal's annual awards for local theater. If a professional wins in a category, the committee has the option of adding a non-professional award.

On the pro side, the Williamston Theatre has again received waves of praise. One play, "Outside Mullingar," drew Thespies for best director, actress, actor (in a tie) and supporting actor.



Still, this was a big year for Peppermint Creek, which is noted for going in odd directions.

"Bengal Tiger," for instance, has actors playing a tiger, Uday Hussein and their ghosts. And "Parade" is no musical-comedy; it centers on the anti-Semitism surrounding a real-life murder trial in 1913 Atlanta.

Unusual productions have been standard for Peppermint. It won for the puppets and the improvised music in one show ("Or You Could Kiss Me") and for the actress in another ("Venus in Fur"). And its founder, Chad Badgero, is a key figure in the neatly off-center Renegade Theatre Festival; Renegade won the Robert Busby Award and returns to Old Town in August.

Other awards also went in fresh directions. For instance:

•Over The Ledge has been doing summer-only shows at the Ledges Playhouse in Grand Ledge. Last summer's "In the Next Room" (also known as "The Vibrator Play") won a Thespie for director Mary Job and came close in other categories.



•Ixion was launched just over a year ago by Jeff Croff, doing shows in the emerging REO Town area. Among other things, it's had two collections of short plays that were locally written. When an actress dropped out this year, playwright Oralya Garza stepped into her own show; she won the Thespie for featured actress in a play.

•Starlight, by comparison, has leaned toward audience-friendly, dinner-theater comedies. This season, it varied and won awards for actress in a musical (Paula Sheynerman in "Camelot"), supporting actress in a play (Laura Croff Wheaton in "What's Susan's Secret?") and for the oversized props in "Garage Sale," reviving a locally written show from 1989.

Plays

•**Best show:** "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo," Peppermint Creek

•**Director:** John Seibert, "Outside Mullingar," Williamston Theatre

•**Director (non-professional):** Mary Job, "In the Next Room," Over the Ledge Theatre

•**Actor:** Tie: John Lepard, "Mullingar," Williamston; and Zev Steinberg, "Bug," Michigan State University.

•**Actress:** Suzi Regan, "Mullingar," Williamston.

•**Actress (non-professional):** Mary Dillworth, "Venus in Fur," Peppermint.

•**Supporting actor:** Arthur Beer, "Mullingar," Williamston.

•**Supporting Actor (non-professional):** Michael Banghart, "Bengal Tiger," Peppermint.

•**Supporting Actress:** Laura Croff Wheaton, "What is Susan's Secret?" Starlight Theatre.

•**Featured actor:** Todd Heywood, "Bengal Tiger," Peppermint

•**Featured actress:** Oralya Garza, "Family Tradition," part of "Mother's Nature" combination, Ixion Theatre.

Musicals

- Best show:** "Parade," Peppermint.
- Director:** Jane Falion, "Parade," Peppermint.
- Actor:** Adam Woolsey, "Parade," Peppermint.
- Actress:** Paula Sheynerman, "Camelot," Starlight.
- Supporting actor:** James Houska, "Young Frankenstein," Peppermint.
- Supporting actress:** Jane Zussman, "Young Frankenstein," Riverwalk.
- Music director:** James Geer, "Ain't Misbehavin'," Riverwalk.
- Choreography:** Chantelle Henry and Hope Rollns, "Ain't Misbehavin'," Riverwalk.

Plays or musicals

- Sets:** "Miracle on South Division Street," Bartley Bauer, Williamston.
- Sets (non-professional):** Tim Fox, "Parade," Peppermint.
- Costumes:** Lark Burger, "Vanya & Sonia & Masha & Spike," Riverwalk.
- Props:** Philip Benedict, Linda Granger, Sherin Gross, Cathy Wotring, "Garage Sale," Starlight.
- Lights:** Daniel Walker, "The Gravedigger," Williamston.
- Sound:** Roger Nowland, "Young Frankenstein," Riverwalk.

Special awards

- Scott Crandall**, for his puppet creations for "Or You Could Kiss Me," Peppermint
- Janine Novenske Smith** for "Steppin' to the Bad Side," the latest of the terrific musical revues she creates for her Lansing Community College students.
- Yardain Amron**, for the improvised music that backed "Or You Could Kiss Me," Peppermint.
- Christine Trainter and Adam Niller-Batteau** for the "Macbeth" fight choreography, MSU.
- And the Robert Busby Award** goes to the Renegade Theatre Festival, which projects some of the most admirable theater qualities – shows that are eccentric, individualistic ... and free. The 10th

annual festival will be Aug. 13-15, scattering shows and mini-shows in all sorts of Old Town locations.

The award is for overall contribution to theater, but this year's winner fits particularly well. Busby, who died in 2007, was a champion of Old Town; he'd be delighted to see how far its Renegade has come.

The voting:

•**On plays:** Jane Falion, Cele Friestater, Jan Lockwood, Kate O'Neill, Jane Zussman, Mark Zussman.

•**On musicals:** Friestater, Lockwood and O'Neill. The others, who were involved in musicals this season, weren't present for those discussions or for some of the combined categories. Mike Hughes chaired, but didn't vote.