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2009 B. Iden Payne Awards

Improv rules, McKelvey sweeps

By Robert Faires

Most of the 35th annual B. Iden Payne Awards ceremony on Sunday, Oct. 18, was, as usual, spent recognizing work in theatre, but the night's big takeaway was the power of the city's comedy scene. The Austin Circle of Theaters' most prestigious honor, the Special Recognition Award for outstanding contributions to local theatre, was given to Shannon Sedwick for her 32 years and counting with Esther's Follies. And the improv community was literally running the show: Dave Buckman of the Frank Mills directed it, improv master Les McGehee emceed, troupe Girls Girls Girls improvised musical moments from audience suggestions, and the crew of *Confidence Men: Improvised David Mamet* argued over which show should win the Outstanding Production of Music Theater award.

Actually, in the awards, there wasn't much argument about the year's most outstanding musical. *Sweeney Todd*, as produced by Summer Stock Austin, took not only the category's top prize but five other awards, the most for any show all night. The performances of Kathleen Fletcher as Mrs. Lovett and Aaron Moten as Judge Turpin were honored, as were the costumes by Pam Fletcher-Friday and both the direction and music direction by Michael McKelvey. McKelvey proved to be the man of the hour, with another musical he directed, *The Pajama Game* at Mary Moody Northern Theatre, winning the other two music theatre category awards (Lead Actor to Andrew Cannata, Featured Actress to Julia Duffy), plus an award for the choreography by Danny Herman and Rocker Verastique.

Another big winner was Tutto Theatre, which took home the production award in both the comedy and drama categories for *Black Snow* and *Ophelia*, respectively, along with the Director of a Drama prize for Artistic Director Dustin Wills and design awards for Lisa Laratta's set on *Black Snow* and Megan M. Reilly's lighting on *Ophelia*.

It was also a night for, to borrow a term from improv, callbacks. Sedwick, in accepting the Special Recognition Award, invoked its first recipient and now namesake, Dr. B. Iden Payne, suggesting that she was probably the last person present to have worked with the eminent Shakespearean director in her student days at the University of Texas in the Sixties. And a new award established by Executive Director Latifah Taormina harkened back to the early Payne Awards, when whoever came to the ceremony voted on them. This year, ceremony attendees could nominate a production or person that ACoT's Nominations Committee hadn't recognized. Their votes were tallied after intermission, and the first People's Choice Award was presented to *God's Man in Texas*, produced by Georgetown's

Palace Theatre.

The ceremony clocked in at just under three hours, but the overflow crowd at the Long Center's Rollins Studio Theatre stayed in good spirits throughout, a tribute to the smooth work of Buckman, the efficient stage management of Etta Sanders and Nathan Wylie, and the ebullient hosting of McGehee, who was a free-flowing fount of spontaneous hilarity. He and his colleagues gave this theatre crowd all the evidence they needed of how active and deeply integrated into the arts scene Austin's improv community has become.

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