

 Print

CLOSE WINDOW

The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2010-03-31

Merritt Awards create a scene at Alderney Landing

By ANDREA NEMETZ Entertainment Reporter

A magical outdoor production of *Rockbound* was the big winner at the Merritt Awards, celebrating the best in Nova Scotia theatre, on Monday night at Alderney Landing Theatre in Dartmouth.

The Two Planks and a Passion original musical production picked up awards for actress in a supporting role for Burgandy Code (who played Anapest Kraus), best director for Ken Schwartz, best original score and best new play for creator Allen Cole, and outstanding production.

Cole wrote the book and lyrics and composed the score for *Rockbound*, an adaptation of the 1928 novel by Frank Parker Day.

Now living in Toronto, Cole grew up in Halifax and spent summers at his grandmother's cottage on the South Shore, where he now takes his six-year-old son Dash. He says he drew inspiration from those memories when creating *Rockbound*.

A composer for many years, Cole was particularly moved to win the award for best new play.

"It's something I came to later in my career, a very specific kind of writing. I don't write straight plays."

Schwartz was not able to accept the directing award in person as he is in London, Ont., taking part in a workshop at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. However, a near life-size cardboard cut-out, complete with real glasses and suit jacket, was placed onstage next to his wife, Two Planks co-founder Chris O'Neill, as she accepted his award.

She said Schwartz had asked her to thank Cole, "an artist who raises the bar for everyone he works with."

Schwartz also paid tribute to Alexis Milligan, a choreographer he said shared in the directing of *Rockbound*.

Milligan accepted Code's award, noting the actress is in London, Ont., doing *Pride and Prejudice* at the Grand Theatre. Milligan and Code will both work on Two Planks' production of *The Crucible* this summer.

The annual awards show, as always laced with in-jokes and creative video segments, was emceed by husband and wife performers Mary Colin Chisholm and Christian Murray.

Murray set the stage by donning a cowboy hat and performing a version of *I've Been Everywhere* with the lyrics changed to "I've seen every play" and running through the 47 productions in the province last year evaluated by the Theatre Nova Scotia jury.

No Great Mischief, Neptune Theatre's adaptation of Alistair MacLeod's novel, was a double winner, earning awards for Duncan Fraser for best actor and best sound design for Mike Ross.

Neither they nor Patrick Clark, who was honoured with the award for best costumes for Neptune's lavish production of the period drama *The Game of Love and Chance*, were on hand to accept.

Shelley Thompson, who claimed best actress honours for her turn as wannabe opera singer Florence Foster Jenkins in *Glorious!* at Festival Antigonish, was not in attendance either as she is in Winnipeg reprising the role at Prairie Theatre Exchange. Bill Wood was thrilled to accept the award for best supporting actor for his role as Hermann in *East of Berlin*. It was one of two awards for 2b theatre, which also claimed the award for lighting design for Will Perkins' work on *Homage*.

Perhaps best known for his work with the Picnicface comedy troupe, Wood said *East of Berlin* was his first real production outside of high school musicals and shows he created himself.

He says his role was terrifying because of the types of issues dealt with in the play — the Holocaust and sexuality.

"I learned how to act doing this role."

Perkins, who was also nominated for his lighting work on *East of Berlin*, thanked Sylvia Bell in his acceptance speech for convincing him to pursue technical theatre. A while later, Bell received the award for best stage manager, saying she was flattered considering the talent around her.

Louisa Adamson won best set design for *Poor Boy*, a co-production of Zuppa Circus Theatre and Neptune Theatre.

Ian Pygott received the technician award, and volunteer awards went to Perry Kossatz for his work with Ship's Company Theatre in Parrsboro and Aaron Harpell for his work with Zuppa Theatre in Halifax. Courtney Siebring won the inaugural Theatre Nova Scotia scholarship for professional development.

Halifax Regional Municipality councillor Gloria McCluskey presented Jeremy Webb with the Mayor's Award for achievement in theatre and Natasha MacLellan with the Mayor's Award for emerging theatre artist.

MacLellan, a University of King's College grad, is an actor, writer, director, producer and co-founder of Forerunner Theatre who has worked with Irondale Ensemble Theatre, Mulgrave Road Theatre and will star with Murray in Eastern Front Theatre's *Lauchie*, Liza and Rory, beginning April 7 at the Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax.

Genevieve Steele presented director, actor and dramaturge Jean Morpurgo with the Legacy Award, to a prolonged standing ovation.

"Everyone in the community has been touched in some way by Jean," said Steele, who attended theatre school at Dalhousie with Morpurgo 20 years ago.

"They've been directed by her, shared the stage with her, watched her from the audience. . . . She's a pillar of the Halifax theatre scene."

There was also a tribute to members of the Nova Scotia theatre community who have died in recent years, including Terry Dolan, Paul MacLeod, Bill Forbes, Allena MacDonald, Joan Orenstein, David Renton, Joe Ruttan and Patrick Christopher Clark.

(anemetz@herald.ca)

CLOSE WINDOW

© 2008 The Halifax Herald Limited