

BACKSTAGE

News

East June 11, 2004

Obies, Tonys: Move Over

Three Actors Create 'Innovative' Honor

By Leonard Jacobs

Conventional wisdom says New York theatre doesn't need more awards. There's the Tonys for Broadway; Off-Broadway has the Obies; and honors bestowed by the Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, New York Drama Critics Circle, the Lucille Lortel Foundation, and the Drama League (to name a few) cover virtually everything in between.

But the Off-Off-Broadway spirit is one that constantly aims to turn conventional wisdom on its head, which is why three New York performers -- Jason Bowcutt, Shay Gines, and Nick Micozzi -- have created a not-for-profit company to produce the New York Innovative Theatre Awards (the "IT Awards"), a new honor to be distributed in fall 2005.

Bowcutt and Micozzi told Back Stage that the genesis of the IT Awards began with Gines, who could not join the interview owing to a rehearsal. "Shay's inspiration came when she realized that, after living in New York a long time and working in Off-Off-Broadway for a long time, how disparate and diverse Off-Off-Broadway really is," Bowcutt said. "Plus this whole idea that you could work with so many different companies and so often have the experience of not knowing all these new people you're working with. So the idea is to have this enormous world come together -- to find a common place [for] all of Off-Off-Broadway to join together."

Gines then asked Bowcutt and Micozzi (with whom she had previously worked) to join her in what became a two-year process of examining Off-Off-Broadway from the bottom up. According to the [awards' website](#), there are up to 2,000 Off-Off-Broadway productions each New York season, which may mean up to 40,000 artists plying their craft. That, in turn, means ticket-buying opportunities for a million audience members or more.

To fairly create awards honoring such a swath of the scene, the trio gave the IT Awards some basic qualifications: productions must complete eight performances between September 1, 2004 and May 31, 2005; budgets must be under \$40,000; ticket prices must be \$30 or less; performances must be held in Manhattan, with producers based in one of the five boroughs; productions must adhere to "all New York laws and all applicable union regulations"; and, most important, there is a registration process.

This registration process, Bowcutt and Micozzi acknowledge, is ambitious and egalitarian in outlook. Essentially, each producing group must submit one or more shows for consideration; it must also designate a judge to represent the production in a judging pool. This judge will then also be required to see three additional productions throughout the season and complete online ballots. Each production must also provide at least three (and no more than six) complimentary tickets during its run for judging purposes.

In addition, at-large judges are to be appointed. Finally -- perhaps even fatefully -- audiences are asked to submit their comments and scores via the Internet. Add up all the scores submitted by all the judges, and the nominations go to the top-six-scoring contenders in each slot.

"And there are 20 categories -- including all the ones you'd expect," Micozzi says, "like outstanding lead actor and actress and best solo performance. Being Off-Off-Broadway, we also have categories for best short and full-length script. There are also two honorary awards: the Keene Curtis Award, which goes to an individual or company that has made significant contributions to Off-Off-Broadway, and the Caffé Cino Fellowship, which goes to an Off-Off-Broadway company with a history of great work."

Micozzi says funding for the fellowship (the denomination will be announced at a later time) comes from several sources, including "private funding through grants. We're also doing a lot of partnering with like-minded individuals and organizations."

Officially, the IT Awards launch Mon., June 21, with an invitation-only soirée at the Tank, the Midtown black-box hotspot. For more information, visit www.nyitawards.com.