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THE BEST PLAYS THEATER YEARBOOK 2006–2007

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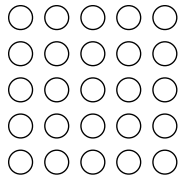
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THE BEST PLAYS
THEATER YEARBOOK

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Carole A. Krumland, James D. Steinberg, Michael A. Steinberg,
Seth M. Weingarten, William D. Zabel
Directors



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 THEATER YEARBOOK
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EDITED BY
 JEFFREY ERIC JENKINS

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INTRODUCTION



EVERY YEAR at this time we spend hundreds of hours checking thousands of names of plays, playwrights, actors, directors, designers, producers and technicians who make our nation's theater. Although it is, at times, an onerous task, it is also a source of unending inspiration to note the names of people who set their lives to the challenge of creating theater in this country. There are, of course, the well-known names of Broadway lore but we should never forget that most people who toil in professional theater in this country do it at some personal sacrifice. In these pages, we celebrate the work of thousands of theater artists throughout the United States. We begin by honoring playwrights in essays on the Best Plays in New York. But we continue by listing details of more than a thousand professional productions throughout the country—including essays on the Steinberg/ATCA New Play honorees from the previous calendar year.



Invariably there comes a moment when we feel as though these persons—these names—have become our friends. (Of course, many of these fine workers in theater are our friends in reality as well; and some are, as the saying goes, friends we've yet to meet.) As we assemble this compendious index, we wonder how many of these people know that their contributions to the larger body of work in United States theater have been recorded for posterity. Before you peruse the remarkable collection of essays from our terrific band of writers or dip into the Broadway and Off Broadway listings to recall the fascinating season of 2006–2007, take a few minutes with the index and see if you do not find yourself astonished by the effort expended to create theatrical work in this country during that year.

One of the more exciting projects of the 2006–07 season was the November 13, 2006, beginning of Suzan-Lori Parks's *365 Days/365 Plays*. For this project—which culminated November 12, 2007, long before this book appears but outside its purview—Parks has written a play a day for a year. The plays (most are just a few minutes in length) are then presented

vii



by a vast network of professional, academic and community theaters during the 365 Festival, which is produced by Bonnie Metzgar. It is a remarkable project that brings theater to communities and communities to theater, creating a new sense of possibility for theater in this country. We have listed some of the plays in this book: specifically, those performed at the 2007 Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville. Not included in our listing for the Public Theater are the 365 plays, which were read in two parts in 2006—August 17–18 and September 28–29—in anticipation of their impending publication. Participants in the readings included the playwright and her producer (serving as director), stage managers Stephanie Gatton and Taibi Magar, and a roster of some of the finest actors in this country: Rob Campbell, Reg E. Cathey, Kathleen Chalfant, Gail Grate, Peter Francis James, Ty Jones, David Patrick Kelly, Joan MacIntosh, S. Epatha Merkerson, Adina Porter, Michael Potts, Daphne Rubin-Vega, Ching Valdes-Aran. More information is available about the project at www.365days365plays.com.

II

ONCE THE VOTING is done for the Best Plays—by a group that includes our editorial board and selected members of the theatrical press, including a few academics—there is a temptation (a compulsion, perhaps) to find the thread that links these particular works. Was there a “hip” factor? Possibly. Do these plays tell us something about the state of our culture, of our nation? We would certainly like to think so. Essentially, though, the Best Plays must reflect who we are at a particular moment; must allow us to preserve—as a second-draft of history—a sense of what it was to live in this time and to experience the most human(e) of all the forms of art.

After a season such as 2006–07, that ranged from an epic drama about the failure (or is it folly?) of utopian social ideals to a reconstructed German play from the Victorian-era about adolescents set to contemporary music it is seductive to think that perhaps Broadway audiences have grown more high-minded—or more fascinated with 19th century thought and culture. Those two works, *The Coast of Utopia* by Tom Stoppard and *Spring Awakening* by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, which between them received 60 percent of the Tony Awards given this season, are honored herein with essays by Charles Wright and Michael Feingold. Representing Stoppard’s eighth Best Play and Sater and Sheik’s first, these two pieces challenged audiences in divergent ways. Stoppard’s *Coast*, which became the hot ticket of the season, demonstrated that the liberal social theories of the Russian

aristocracy were empty-headed enterprises that failed to account for human nature's more base desires. At the other end of the sociopolitical spectrum, *Spring Awakening* argued for a more open attitude toward those desires—particularly those of the sexual type.

Of the 10 plays this season, seven were written by first-time honorees of this series, always a sign that fresh writing continues to inspire us. In addition to Stoppard, returning honorees include the late August Wilson, whose final play *Radio Golf* marks his 10th (and sadly, final) appearance in this series. *Radio Golf* is an almost-comic elegy about the implications of endings and beginnings in a “blighted” Pittsburgh neighborhood and a fitting capstone to his 10-play cycle devoted to reclaiming the narrative of African-American culture. Christopher Rawson, the Pittsburgh theater critic who has functioned as Wilson's Boswell for the past two decades, offers his assessment of the final installment. Our final returning honoree this season is the always incisive Theresa Rebeck with her second Best Play, *The Scene*. Nominally concerned with those who claw their way to the top of our celebrity-obsessed culture without regard for who gets hurt along the way, Rebeck's play is also the hilariously painful study of a man who falls victim to one of these “culture vultures” (and to his own midlife crisis). Chicago theater critic Chris Jones, who wrote about Rebeck's collaboration with Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros, *Omnium Gatherum*, for the 2003–04 edition, considers her latest Best Play.

There was an elegiac quality to several of the Best Plays that reflect tellingly where we, as a culture, are situated at the end of the 2006–07 season. In Christopher Shinn's *Dying City*, a gay New York actor tries to discover why his twin brother died in the Iraq War under mysterious, even suspicious circumstances. The actor looks to his brother's widow for answers, but she has none. As the tale unfolds, it becomes apparent that the boys' father—a Vietnam veteran—may be a source of what troubled the late soldier. The answers are not found in the play, but in the audience's consciousness about war and how its effects ripple through society in ways unknown. Charles Isherwood's essay examines the innovative ways in which Shinn moves through the characters's lives. This same haunted perspective also shadows Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House* and Bruce Norris's *The Pain and the Itch*. In Ruhl's play, to which San Diego critic Anne Marie Welsh lends her analytic talents, characters seem almost to float through the scenes as one woman after another is dislodged from her reality by loss of love, the death of parents and the cruel twists of biological fate that plague the female gender. Despite these challenges, Ruhl's characters forge

bonds between and among themselves that should serve as fitting reminders of what we all need to thrive in life: connection to others. It may be a simplistic observation—it certainly looks so on the page—but in an increasingly dislocated world of instant messaging and continuous stimulation, it is possible to forget that “connection” may mean something more than how fast one downloads data from the internet.

The Pain and the Itch is also concerned with dislocation and how the sins of the parents may be visited upon the children. But Norris’s point of attack skewers a segment of upper-middle-class conspicuous consumers, whom essayist John Istel is happy to tweak as well, whose sense of entitlement may be familiar to anyone who has attempted to walk in a neighborhood where strollers the size of small automobiles clutter sidewalks as “mommy patrols” intimidate all who pass before them. Norris’s characters are concerned only with maintaining their enhanced sense of identity and their privileged lifestyles—until they discover that their lives are as fragile and empty as the shell of a cracked egg.

Three other plays we honor in these pages embark upon visitations of the past as they attempt to unearth perspectives on the human condition. In David Harrower’s *Blackbird*, a young woman who had sex with an older man many years earlier finds her former lover and confronts him. The added twist is that she was 12 years old when they had sex and he was in middle age. Has she come to wreak vengeance on this predator? He has served years in prison already. Is his debt to society paid? Is he still a danger? Harrower’s taut examination of the nature of desire and taboo made it a compelling choice as a Best Play. Essayist David Cote locates Harrower’s play in a modern literary tradition that may be unsettling to polite society. In *Frost/Nixon* by Peter Morgan, one of the most reviled characters of late-20th century American politics, Richard Nixon, took the stage opposite a widely known jetsetter and broadcast personality, David Frost. Set against the backdrop of negotiations for and taping of a series of interviews between Nixon and Frost, the play is most notable for the ways in which it captures the desperation of both men to attain a kind of redemption. Playing first in London and then on Broadway at a time when considerable political discourse centered on ranking the worst US presidents in history, the play made Nixon appear human, deeply flawed and only marginally aware of his shortcomings. While much of what appeared onstage was “true,” it is worth noting that playwright Morgan is a dramatist, not a historian. In the play, each man attains some part of what he wanted to gain from the interviews—one audience member even said she could not

believe that she found herself, in 2007, missing Richard Nixon's presidency. Elizabeth Drew, who had a recent book on Nixon in print at the time, rang alarm bells in *The Nation* over the distortions represented in the play. Los Angeles critic Charles McNulty finds Drew's references to the play as "propaganda" to be a "misreading" of Morgan's intentions. Ultimately, Morgan's play is a work of fiction and audiences would do well to keep that in mind—dramatic license is one that never requires renewal.

In *Passing Strange*, Stew and Heidi Rodewald collaborated with director Annie Dorsen to create a powerful, resonant picaresque in the form of a musical. A tale of an African-American's journey through the urban Los Angeles middle class and into the European artistic avant garde, *Passing Strange* is a story that anyone—regardless of race, class or ethnicity—who is (or has been) young should find truthful and deeply moving. Critic Alisa Solomon hopes (as do we) that it is not their last work for the theater.

In addition to the plays celebrated in these essays, we also hope that readers enjoy the volume's expanded statistics and index. Whenever possible we track all Broadway and Off Broadway revivals back to their original presentations in New York, around the country and abroad. In the case of William Shakespeare and others of his ilk, we employ George C.D. Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage*—which links with the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* series to chronicle New York theater back to the 18th century. We also use the archives of *The New York Times* and other major publications as we attempt to locate plays in their original contexts.

With our colleagues in the American Theatre Critics Association, we also keep close tabs on new plays developing in theaters across the US. Through the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, we recognize the honorees of the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations. The Steinberg Charitable Trust, which has supported the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* series since 2001, recently demonstrated its support of our mission by refocusing its commitment to our work. We extend our deepest thanks to the Trust and its board (William D. Zabel, Carole A. Krumland, James D. Steinberg, Michael A. Steinberg and Seth M. Weingarten) for making *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* a priority for their support.

Honorees for the 2007 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations are Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's *Hunter Gatherers*, which won the Steinberg top prize (\$25,000). Nachtrieb's play is discussed by Robert Hurwitt. The 2007 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Citations (along with \$7,500 each) went to Jeff Daniels for *Guest Artist* (detailed here by Martin F. Kohn), and to Michael Hollinger for *Opus* (essay by George Hatza).

III

AS WE MOVE forward with the 88th volume of this chronicle of theater in the United States, we celebrate the beginning of a reinvigorated partnership with Limelight Editions, now under the management of the terrific publisher Michael Messina.

The collection of data for a volume such as this relies on the labors of many people. Our thanks to Paul Hardt for his efforts on the Cast Replacements and Touring Productions section, and to Garrett Eisler for his essay on Off Off Broadway theater. At a moment when we needed a keen observer of the burgeoning OOB scene, Eisler has provided a thorough and learned perspective. Rue E. Canvin, our retiring USA section editor, has worked on the *Best Plays* series in various capacities for more than 40 years. It is with deep gratitude that we wish her all of the best in the next phase of her admirable career. As we move forward, we welcome Sheryl Arluck and Jennifer Ashley Tepper to the ranks of our assistant editors for the Off Off Broadway and the USA sections. Jonathan Dodd, the longtime publisher of the *Best Plays* series, continues to provide important background information and good advice. In the absence of our dear friend and mentor, the late Henry Hewes, another friend and mentor, Robert Brustein, has generously agreed to accept the consulting editor position that Henry held until the end of his life—though I doubt anyone will ever consult as passionately (or frequently) as Henry.

We are also deeply indebted to all of the press representatives who assisted in the gathering of information for this volume, but we particularly acknowledge Adrian Bryan-Brown and Chris Boneau of Boneau/Bryan-Brown for their unflagging support of the series and its editors.

Thanks also are due to the members of the *Best Plays Theater Yearbook's* editorial board, who give their imprimatur to our work by their presence on the masthead. We are grateful as well to those who have offered and provided extra support and assistance to this edition: Charles Wright, Christopher Rawson (Theater Hall of Fame Awards), Caldwell Titcomb (Elliot Norton Awards), David A. Rosenberg (Connecticut Critics' Circle Awards), Bill Hirschman (Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and Citations), Edwin Wilson and Mimi Kilgore (Susan Smith Blackburn Prize) and Michael Kuchwara (New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards).

We especially note the ongoing joint efforts of the *Best Plays* editorial team and the research department of the League of American Theatres and Producers (renamed The Broadway League as we were preparing for press)

over the past several years. First with Stephen Greer, later Neal Freeman and now with Jennifer Stewart, we have worked since 2002 to correct the records of the Internet Broadway Database (www.ibdb.com) as well as past errors made in the pages of *Best Plays*. Our thanks and compliments to our friends at the League for their cooperation in this long-term project of correcting the historical record.

We congratulate and thank all of the Best Plays honorees who made the 2006–07 season so invigorating to contemplate. David Harrower, Peter Morgan, Bruce Norris, Theresa Rebeck, Heidi Rodewald, Sarah Ruhl, Steven Sater, Duncan Sheik, Christopher Shinn, Stew, Tom Stoppard and August Wilson all enriched our lives during the season under review. The photographers who capture theatrical images on film and help keep those ephemeral moments alive for historical perspective are also due thanks for their generous contributions to the greater body of theatrical work. Building on our work from past years, we have included credits with each photograph and indexed the photographers' names for easier reference. Similarly, we continue offering biographical information about each of this volume's essayists and editors.

A personal note: In addition to serving as editor of this series, I teach full-time in the Drama Department at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Although I am blessed with superb students who inspire me to strive for excellence in my teaching, research, editing and writing, I also have the support and friendship of as fine a faculty of artists and scholars as I have had the honor to know. Each member of the faculty has provided the kind of encouragement one needs to keep in print an annual compendium of critical perspective and historical reference that runs more than 500 pages. Thanks to all of my colleagues for their advocacy, especially to the senior academic faculty: Awam Amkpa, Una Chaudhuri, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Laura Levine and Edward Ziter. For the season under review, I especially thank our department chair, Kevin Kuhlke, and our directors of theater studies, Robert Vorlicky and Carol Martin, for their continuing support of my work as a teacher, researcher and writer. Thanks also to Shayoni Mitra, my very capable teaching assistant during the season under review, for helping to make my work more manageable.

My wife, Vivian Cary Jenkins, continues to serve the theater and *Best Plays Theater Yearbook* as a tracker of what's happening in the New York theater. Despite facing challenges that would utterly stymie someone made of lesser stuff, she continues to contribute in ways large and small to the success of the series. Although I repeat these thanks each year, one thing



xiv BEST PLAYS THEATER YEARBOOK 2006–2007

remains true: It is largely through her consistent efforts that this series continues to appear.

JEFFREY ERIC JENKINS
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