

Theater: Jimmy Awards Light Up Broadway With Teen Talent

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NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL THEATRE AWARDS *** out of ****
MINSKOFF THEATRE

Summertime may be slow for new shows on Broadway, but it's a great chance for other events to garner attention. [The August Wilson Monologue Competition in May](#) spotlights USA's greatest playwright and gives high school kids from around the country a chance to sink their teeth into his work. If you're planning a visit to the city in July, checking out the brand new musicals getting full productions in the [New York Musical Theatre Festival from July 7-27](#) is an absolute must.

And in June, savvy theater buffs check out the talent on display at the [National High School Musical Theatre Awards](#). Hosted by two time Tony winner Michael Cerveris, the awards offer scholarships to deserving winners, give 52 talented teens a chance to be mentored, receive top notch coaching, work with directors and choreographers and then perform numbers on a Broadway stage. But put all that good work aside: it's just a fun evening of entertainment and you invariably spot a star or two of tomorrow. They're nicknamed the Jimmy, in honor of James Nederlander, who has been working in the theater world for 86 years (he started sweeping the floors for his dad when he was 7) and was proudly in attendance.

The evening is split into two parts. In the first half, six groups of performers do medleys of songs from the musical that took them from their local schools to regional competitions to New York City. Numbers are strung together very cleverly, often with two or more actors who tackled Mary Poppins or Doctor Frankenstein or the lead in Big Fish (apparently a big show in high schools last year!) trading off lines in clever ways. Based on this night's entertainment (and a full solo performance by each actor the day before for a panel of judges) six finalists are selected. In the second act, three men and three women do another number and two winners are chosen.

It's a fun night worth every penny, with the money going to fund the evening and all the arts outreach done by the various groups involved with the [National High School Musical Theatre Awards](#). Naturally, the audience is filled with family and friends. Yet it's a shame more casting directors and agents don't flock to the show because there's a lot of talent here. They really should post the solo performances from Sunday of all 52 performers online, not to mention the medleys and solo numbers done live on stage Monday night. Why not showcase their talent as much as possible?

The performers themselves give you hope for musical theater when you realize how much work they put into learning their choreography, the group numbers, the lyrics of the other songs in their medleys AND bits of business to do throughout. All in less than a week. Much credit for the night goes to director Van Kaplan, choreographer Kiesha Lalama and musical director and arranger Michael Moricz, who do a sterling job in a very short amount of time molding these kids into a satisfying ensemble.

I'm not quite sure who to credit for the creative decisions that turn 52 individual performances into a medley. Vast fun is had in transitioning from one song into another, often to humorous effect. Wisely, they focus on turning out a good show, rather than worrying about shortchanging one performer or another. There's simply no good way to showcase three different actors who played the same role and each gets a chance to strut their

stuff the day before. Witty moments abound and it's surely a group effort of all involved, though Kaplan's name is at the top as director.

The highlight was unquestionably having the maid in *Caroline, Or Change* bemoan her job and then having two of the four actresses who played Mary Poppins assure Caroline that "In every job that must be done/ there is an element of fun." Clearly a tremendous effort has been made to give all the actors bits of business: they stay in character even when performing in the ensemble or passing off the baton from one performer to the next, often getting little laughs but never, ever upstaging one another or interfering with the overall flow.

Marla Louissant was the night's standout and won Best Actress for her performance as Caroline, as well as a solo turn doing "I'm Here" from *The Color Purple*. The judges have a lot more to draw upon when making their choices than the audience but there was no doubting Louissant's talent as an actress and singer. If the new Broadway revival of *The Color Purple* didn't already have its star, Louissant would be ready to make the leap today, just as a runner up from two years ago jumped right into the West End revival of *Miss Saigon*.

Anthony Skillman won Best Actor after doing a number from *Tarzan* and a solo turn from *Parade*, specifically Frankie's angry soliloquy "It Don't Make Sense." And Skillman proved Tony ready in his endearing acceptance speech, giving a happy shout out to the Supreme Court decision for marriage equality and thanking his parents in the audience in the same breath.

Here's Skillman doing a performance of a medley during one of the regional events leading up to the finals.

Yet they were far from the only story here. I circled six people as locks for the finals (I got three right) and another ten as very promising talents. So more applause for Kylie Lynn Heyman who gave verve to Reno Sweeney of *Anything Goes*. I was certain she'd be one of the finalists! Travis Anderson was a long-limbed Lord Evelyn Oakleigh, also from *Anything Goes* (but a different production), creating a full comic performance in about 90 seconds. He was matched by Zac Gottschall's equally winning Horace Vandergelder from *Hello, Dolly* and Larry McKay's charming J. Pierrepont Finch from *How To Succeed*.

Marnie Quick made the tricky Bacharach/David tune "Wishin' And Hopin'" seem easy. She too was a deserved finalist. Aleksander Papanastasopoulos had by far the best name of the night and was a very good Javert, matched by Evatt Salinger's convincing Jean Valjean. Kamari A. Saxon was the lucky talent who earned a scholarship to attend Carnegie Mellon's pre-College Drama Program. (I wish I'd been able to hear his performance from *Violet* in full.) Noah Barnes was a natural for Joe Hardy from *Damn Yankees* he's too handsome and gifted with such a classic, gorgeous Broadway voice (he opened his mouth and filled the Minskoff with ease) that you have to believe this won't be the last time Barnes will be on stage in New York.

Finally, my vote for Best Actor based simply on what I saw this night was for finalist Alec Michael Ryan who was excellent as Laurence in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and -- like Louissant -- had one of the night's cleverest transitions and made the most of it, in his case playing off *Les Miserables*. His solo turn ("Who I'd Be" from *Shrek The Musical*) and medley number both felt like complete performances as both actor and singer. I don't always say that with the pros being paid to perform on Broadway every night but I'm saying it about him. And I'd happily pay to see him perform again.

THEATER OF 2015

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[Da](#) no rating