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THEATER NOTES

In a Big Field, Winners Are Tough to Call

By DON SHIRLEY, Times Theater Writer

The difficulty of predicting the Ovation Award nominations, which were announced Monday, was illustrated explicitly this year.

Theatre LA, sponsor of the Ovations, held a contest via its Web site to see who could guess the most nominees in the four production categories (five nominees per category). Although the contest was announced just a few days before the deadline, 113 people entered.

The winner, Mark Stephenson of Valley Village, guessed only 11 out of the 20 top nominees.

The biggest problem is in the number of productions--this year, more than 200--that were eligible in one giant category: best play in a small theater. Trying to narrow that down to five likely nominees was a daunting task.

Stephenson said he guessed only one of the five nominees in that category. However, he streaked to the top by predicting four of the five nominees in the larger musical category and three of the five in each of the other two categories.

Lee Melville, editor of Theatre LA.'s LA Stage magazine, gave his predictions on the Web site. He too identified only one of the nominees in the smaller play category, even though he listed 27 possibilities.

Stephenson--who is an actor and director and was an Ovation voter this past year, seeing about 50 of the eligible shows--will receive tickets to the Ovations ceremony Nov. 12 as his reward for his prognostications.

Anyone who wants to guess the Nov. 12 winners can log on to <http://www.theatreLA.org> next week for this contest's final chapter. This time, the prize will be dinner at the House of Blues and tickets for four to "Joe Louis Blues," which opens Nov. 3 at the Tiffany Theater. TAKE THAT, EMMY: Just before the Ovation nominations were announced, in a ceremony at El Portal Center in North Hollywood, Ovations show producer Lawrence O'Connor took the stage to deliver a pep talk that included a swipe at the Emmy Awards, which were postponed last Sunday for the second time because of developments in the terrorism crisis.

"Unlike the television actors in Los Angeles, we in the theater recognize that the show must go on," O'Connor said. He vowed that the Ovations show, scheduled for Nov. 12 at the new Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, would not be canceled. The achievements being honored "mean a lot more than having to cancel a show so we can watch CNN all night."

Later, in the lobby, O'Connor revised his vow slightly, saying that nothing "short of a hometown disaster" would cause the cancellation of the Ovations. 'DOWN SOUTH' UP NORTH: Without much fanfare, the L.A.-born "Down South" turned into an off-Broadway hit in New York this summer and has been extended four times. It's finally scheduled to close

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The New York Times review may have helped. Bruce Weber called playwright Doug Field "a prolific and reasonably clever double-entendrist as well as a gleeful vulgarian ... there are moments when anyone but a Puritan might be forced to yield to a giggle and a blush."

Field said he hopes the play's next stop will be London next spring. It premiered at the Flight Theatre in Hollywood last year.

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