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COUNTERPUNCH

Theater doesn't end at L.A.'s city limits, does it?

By Larry Aldrich

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Dec 6 2004

DON SHIRLEY opted to bestow a "turkey award" to the recent Ovation Awards for local theater productions, stating that "the Ovations are supposed to help unify and clarify the vast sprawl of the L.A. theatrical landscape" and then adding that "the sprawl won" ["Sometimes 11 Votes Can Add Up to '1776,' " Nov. 24]. I think the theater community won.

From Long Beach and International City Theatre to Ventura County's Rubicon Theatre Company to, yes, even Riverside County with Performance Riverside, first-rate theater can be found all over the "vast sprawl." Why should that fact merit a "turkey award" or be disparaged? How can such remarks "help unify and clarify" the great work being performed and produced in Southern California?

Shirley found it an "oddity" that Performance Riverside's revival of the musical "1776" won five awards. Yet it is a show he admitted he had not seen, nor did The Times review. What is so odd about a production, directed by an Ovation Award-winning director with a cast assembled from the very best of this theater community, being awarded an Ovation?

While LA Stage Alliance, which sponsors the Ovation Awards, is named after the city of Los Angeles, its charter is clearly broader. LA Stage Alliance seeks to promote live theater in Los Angeles *and its environs*. It never intended to limit its jurisdiction to L.A. proper. Riverside, Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Bernardino and Orange counties are intended to be under its mantle. Factors such as Actors' Equity's rules, commuting distance and the tendency of outlying areas to pull from the pool of Los Angeles-based professional talent were considered. Los Angeles County is the *focus* of LA Stage Alliance, not its limitation. It's certainly no different than The Times' coverage of theater in New York, San Diego and Orange County.

To further clarify: The purpose of the Ovation Awards is not simply to award "best" kudos to theatrical ventures, though that is part of it. The Ovation Awards also seek to celebrate and honor the diversity of area theater.

Eliminating shows with "low profiles, short runs and tiny seating capacities" from award consideration, which would be the upshot of a proposal Shirley endorses, would be at odds with Ovation procedures that have stressed inclusion, whether of small productions, farther-away productions or alternative productions.

Shirley points out that "1776," a play with a limited run and attended by only 11 of the 178 Ovation voters, garnered five awards while the Ahmanson's "La Bohème," seen by 75 voters, won only four. He seems to think this is a skewed result — but is it truly? In a previous year, "The Lion King" at the Pantages veritably swept the awards. At that time, did anyone complain that shows attended by a large number of voters had an unfair advantage? You bet they did! It's to be expected.

Any type of voting procedure comes under criticism, whether it is electing a president, choosing an Olympic gold medal athlete or picking the best pie at the fair. Voting for entertainment awards is no exception, whether it is the Oscars, the Tonys or the Ovation.

Shirley fails to acknowledge that LA Stage Alliance succeeds in a crucial area: It promotes live theater in a town that has historically belittled the art form. In a community where the film industry is king, LA Stage Alliance has helped to keep live theater affordable, culturally stimulating, appealing to alternative and mainstream audiences and, above all, vibrant and exciting. It has done this by reminding itself and the Southern California community that small, intimate theater is just as valid as Broadway tours. Celebrating cultural, geographic and artistic diversity is a good thing. If that deserves a "turkey," give me a second helping, please.



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