

GAY CITY NEWS

In The Noh: Wise Endora, Rosie, Madonna

By: DAVID NOH 01/03/2008

In no particular order, the "Aggie Awards" are here presented for the best live performances of 2007. The awards are named for the divine Agnes Moorehead (1900-74), best known today for her campy "Endora" character on "Bewitched" and rumored lesbianism. But what should most be remembered - apart from her numerous distinguished stage performances - is that in "The Magnificent Ambersons," Moorehead gave one of cinema's greatest, realest performances, for which she won the New York Film Critics' 1942 Award.

She enlivened even mediocre movies like "Dark Passage," in which her sensationally suicidal Madge Rapf is like the bitchiest San Francisco '40s queen trapped in a woman's body, and "Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte," in which her hilarious Velma Cruther is a black woman somehow trapped in a white woman's body. John "Lypsinka" Epperson based the lead character in his 2006 play "My Deah" on Velma.

On to the awards...

GYPSY, for Patti LuPone's already legendary performance alone, which, despite an insane New York Times critical dismissal, is joyously making it to Broadway after all.

MARY J. BLIGE AND USHER, on "Fashion Rocks 07," sizzingly singing "Man's World," "Respect," and "Do I Do," proving once more that R&B is the most elementally satisfying of all music, and that they are the two rare pop singers who can really sing.

AMY HANA'ALII, who, with her gorgeous presence and voice, transformed Feinstein's at the Regency into an authentic Hawaiian paradise, sparked by the genius ukulele-strumming of Jeff Peterson.

BIOGRAPHY, Pearl Theatre's enchanting revival of S.N. Behrman's delicious 1932 play, with lustrous performances by Carolyn McCormick in the role written for supreme comedienne Ina Claire, and Sean McNall who, with this and his definitive "Hamlet," evinced his position as New York's finest actor of the year.

IN THE HEIGHTS, a dazzlingly fun and moving evocation of life in el barrio, also Broadway-bound, in which Olga Merediz's "Abuela" broke our hearts. The play as well provided the pleasure of welcoming rapping writer/composer Lin-Manuel Miranda into New York's theater community.

THE KIROV RING CYCLE, at the Lincoln Center Festival, for proving there is simply no resisting Wagner's penultimate achievement, as powerfully conducted by Valery Gergiev, sung by an energetically committed Russian cast, and even with George Tsypin's fascinatingly bizarre décor concepts, which evoked the Macy's Day Parade as well as J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit."

1907: A VERY GOOD YEAR for providing something always welcome, but ever more rare-surprise; Karen Kohler's appearance in K.T. Sullivan's November 2 Carnegie Weill Recital Hall revue had it in spades. Paying tribute to jazzier Connee Boswell, Kohler sang "River Stay Away from My Door" accompanied by Will and Peter Anderson, 20-year-old

identical twins whom she found in Juilliard's jazz department. Kohler did sexy, tuneful justice to La Boswell while those adorable kids made like a pair of seasoned Artie Shaws. Any savvy manager would be mad not to sign 'em up pronto, and their adoring mom told me, "I'm amazed! They're usually so shy, but Karen really brought something out of them. They're real performers, after all! I took them to a jazz concert when they were six years old and both of them immediately wanted to do that." Sullivan's supple, mellow rendition of "I Don't Want to Walk Without You," honoring Kate Smith, also born in '07, deserved credit, too; who knew that fat lady ever sang anything so sexy?

Snobs sniff disdainfully at the annual Fringe Festival for its bewildering number of productions and widely varying quality, but there was no denying the brilliance of at least three shows this year:

BASH'D was Chris Craddock and Nathan Cuckow's stirring gay rap opera, stunning in its wordplay and bash-back fervor.

I DIG DOUG, by Karen DiConcetto and Rochelle Zimmerman, was hip, deliriously funny, and had it all over "Charlie Wilson's War" as political satire.

THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS from Derek Sonderfan was the one 2007 show I could re-see endlessly, for its totally unhinged originality, hilariously flawless ensemble cast (best of the year), and the most innovative stage fight ever (done with swimming pool noodle floats).

Honorable Mention from Fringe goes to Dan Fogler's juicily absurdist, thought-provoking "Elephant in the Room," which took off from Ionesco's "Rhinoceros" and showed that this Tony-winning actor has definite playwrighting chops.

The recent stagehands strike had me turning to various talking-head events for diversion. Rosie Perez showed up 45 minutes late to Seth Rudetsky's "Chatterbox" at Don't Tell Mama on December 6, but rectified things by being her naturally riotous self. Her life and career have truly been charmed; she originally wanted to be Jacques Cousteau, fate kept throwing her on the wicked stage. An embarrassing bout of diarrhea during her audition for "Fearless" gave her the exact stricken look director Peter Weir was looking for and landed her an Oscar nom, to boot.

Perez described being discovered by Spike Lee for "Do the Right Thing" at a nightclub where he and his posse were humiliating girls by making them show their asses. She made dissing fun of their machismo and was thrown out of the club, but not before getting Spike's number, which she promptly tore up. Luckily a savvy girlfriend retrieved the scraps and soon Perez was up on the big screen, getting naked and funky with Lee himself.

"My father asked what kind of film this was and I was embarrassed about being naked so I said, 'It's an artistic movie,'" Perez remembered. "At the premiere, during that scene, he had a heart attack. Don't worry, it was a mild one, but after that, he would always ask about my upcoming films, 'Ees thees an ah-tees-tic movie?'" Perez also remembered that P. Diddy, then an intern on the set, was her date for the film's premiere, and, even then, knew how to work a red carpet.

Film Forum's special guest evenings are always jam-packed cinemaniac orgies, never more so than on November 26 when actor/producer/director Norman Lloyd appeared in conjunction with the documentary of his life, "Who is Norman Lloyd?" At 93, Lloyd is

phenomenally energetic and alert, after a career that encompassed working with Hitchcock, Welles, Chaplin, and Jean Renoir. His reminiscences were crystalline in their detail, including the tale of Louis Calhern, playing "King Lear," thundering at an obstreperously scene-stealing Jo Van Fleet (as Regan): "Van Fleet! There are small parts!" Lloyd's verbal evocation of Welles' revolutionary 1937 production of "Julius Caesar," set in fascist Italy, made it truly come alive again.

Marian Seldes was in the audience, along with Sam Goldwyn, Jr., and his son, talented, gorgeous Tony, who told me, "I grew up knowing Norman. He still plays tennis with my dad, and gave me my first acting job." Goldwyn, who has always been a class act to me, ever since he wrote me a thank you letter for a rave review I wrote about his film, "A Walk on the Moon," is directing a new movie, "Betty Anne Waters," with Naomi Watts. It's based on a true story about an unemployed single mother whose brother was serving a life sentence for murder in 1983. Convinced of his innocence, she spent the next 12 years earning a law degree to work on his case and eventually set him free.

Madonna recently raved about "Celia," the musical bio of salsa queen Celia Cruz at New World Stages, and, after seeing it on December 22, I can only concur with her enjoyment. For sheer musicality, there's not a more enjoyable show in town and most of Cruz's beloved repertoire is performed by a tight band - arrangements by Isidro Infante - to which you will rock out and shriek, "Azucar!" At my performance, Xiomara Laugart Sánchez as Celia seemed a bit weary - in great voice, but lacking the electrifying pizzazz that Cruz lent her every appearance.

The show was definitely enlivened by the presence of 21-year-old Grizel "Chachi" Del Valle, a triple threat talent who kept me smiling throughout with her gracefully precise, hot moves and winning personality. This Newark Boriqua, raised entirely by three strong Puerto Rican women, made her own salsa debut at age 15, and is well on the road to a career that may well match that of Cruz herself one day.

Camp aficionados won't want to miss the New York club debut of Synthea Starr at the Metropolitan Room on January 6. The creation of seasoned actor Joel Vig ("Ruthless," "Hairspray"), Synthea has performed on Theatre Guild cruises across the world, having just sailed to Monaco and Alaska with Ed Asner, Donna McKechnie, and Cliff Robertson, a devoted fan, who swears she stole every show. Starr originally made her cruise debut when she gallantly substituted for Joy Behar, who missed an Amazon-bound boat. Descended from semi-deposed Russian royalty and boasting an extensive list of famous husbands and lovers, Synthea tops a five-decade career with this appearance of songs and stories, which will be introduced by her dear friend, Tammy Grimes, and accompanied by pianist Dennis Buck and violinist Erin Slaver.