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Getting to Know Them: The 2007 Recipients of Tony Honors for Excellence in the Th

By Gerard Raymond

It looks like an American Theatre Wing Tony Award®, only a little different: Instead of being mounted on a black base with a silver armature, it's encased in a block of Lucite. And rather than being announced in June from the stage at Radio City Music Hall®, it is bestowed on its worthy recipients at a special ceremony that takes place in the autumn. We're talking about the Tony Honors for Excellence in the Theatre, the Tonys' token of esteem that recognize individuals and organizations whose contribution to excellence in the theatre does not fit into any of the regular Tony categories.

Nine-time Tony-winner Tommy Tune will be on hand on October 30 to host the Tony Honors ceremony. The honorees—there are four this year—and their guests will join Mr. Tune and other members of the Broadway community for a luncheon at Tavern on the Green, the landmark restaurant romantically nestled among the seasonal foliage in New York City's Central Park.

"We moved the event to the fall because we wanted it to get its own attention," explains Tony Awards Managing Producer Elizabeth I. McCann. The 2007 recipients are a replicator of landmark choreography, a wardrobe supervisor, a technical director/scenery constructor, and a music contractor. "These are highly skilled and dedicated people," says McCann, "and without them, the shows they worked on would have been disastrously ill-served. The Tony Honors give people a better view of Broadway as a community," she continues. "It's a small town, and that spirit is what motivates this whole event."

Here's what this year's recipients of the Tony Honors for Excellence in the Theatre have to say about their work and what the award means to them.

Gemze de Lappe

Having danced in the original productions of some of the best-loved American musicals of all time, Gemze de Lappe is treasured by the theatre community for her ability to replicate for future generations the great choreography she witnessed first hand. She began her career in her late teens performing with Michael Fokine's ballet company before eventually making her way into world of musical theatre. She landed a job with the first national company of *Oklahoma!* in 1943, and entered into a long working relationship with Tony Award-winning choreographer Agnes de Mille.

"*Oklahoma!* is in my head," says de Lappe, "and a lot of *Carousel*, and I have notes on *Brigadoon*," mentioning de Mille-choreographed dances she is often called upon to restage. She is also go-to person for recreating Jerome Robbins' innovative work on *The King and I*. She danced the part of King Simon of Legree in the original 1951 production, as well as in the movie version which followed. "It's helpful to have the notes," she remarks, "because a lot of the dances were very complicated, especially with DeMille. You always have two or three people doing one thing, and another little group doing another thing. She handpicked them for every step."

Six decades since she began her professional career as a dancer, de Lappe is still involved with teaching and helping to keep the legendary work she participated in alive. She is currently coaching at the American Ballet Theatre for their upcoming presentation of *Fall River Legend*, de Mille's ballet about Lizzie Borden, and she is working with the Richmond Ballet on their presentation of *A Rose for Miss Emily*, which de Mille originally choreographed on de Lappe in 1970 (she danced the title role). "I found that when you teach this material fully and honestly, and don't cut corners, the singers, the actors and the dancers involved love it and they work very hard to get it [right]. Very often the conductor or the director [will] say, 'Oh this is old-fashioned.' They don't know what to do with the music, for one thing. So they speed everything up. But if you speed it up, it loses its quality and its character."

"Dances are very ephemeral," de Lappe continues. "I do remember the special nuances and acting points." As she coaches new dancers in the great choreography of the past, de Lappe says she also looking to train people to carry on in her tradition. "It's very rewarding to see young talented people showing the same the aims that the original people had."

"This Tony Honor came out of the blue for me," she says. "I had no idea that anything like that would ever happen to me. It's going to be a very exciting day."

Alyce Gilbert

"I am, of course, thrilled and delighted that the committee has awarded this special honor to someone in wardrobe," writes Alyce Gilbert in an e-mail from Germany, where she is on tour with *Wicked* (she will be flying in to receive her Tony Honor). As the Production Wardrobe Supervisor for *Wicked*'s touring companies, she is responsible for the maintenance of more than 300 costumes, from the moment the clothes arrive at the theatre through the end of the run. "It is an acknowledgement of the valuable work of all wardrobe workers over the years. The contribution of wardrobe workers to the preservation and maintenance of a production's costumes is vital and the committee's honoring of one these workers, indeed honors them all."

Gilbert was barely in her teens when she first discovered her skills at repairing and maintaining costumes, working with a touring children's theatre in her native Milwaukee. She later worked on several Off Broadway shows, particularly with three-time Tony Award winning costume designer Theoni V. Aldredge. Later Aldredge and director Michael Bennett invited Gilbert to work on her first Broadway show, *A Chorus Line*. She supervised wardrobe for the 1976 Tony Award-winning Best Musical for the full length of its original fifteen-year run, as well as national and international touring productions.

She subsequently supervised wardrobe on such Broadway hits as *Dreamgirls*, *The Will Rogers Follies*, and the 1999 revival of *Kiss Me, Kate*. "It has been my great good luck to work with multi-talented crews with many skills, and wonderful assistants with great abilities," Gilbert writes. "Wardrobe also has responsibilities for the continuing of the costume designer's vision, often over a period of years. I have been privileged to work with many of the most extraordinary designers, whose many and varied approaches to costume have been a source of endless fascination for me."

Neil Mazzella

After studying liberal arts in college, Neil Mazzella had planned on writing for *The New Yorker*. Instead he is now the owner and CEO of Hudson Scenic Studio, Hudson Sound & Light, and Hudson Theatrical Associates. He started the outfit in 1980 with just five employees. One of Mazzella's earliest jobs was building a portion of the original David Merrick production of *42nd Street*, but the show that put Hudson Scenic on the map as a big-time scenery shop was *Les Misérables* in 1987. Today he can proudly claim that the sets for nearly half the shows on Broadway have been built at his studio in Yonkers, New York.

"I work with the designers, producers, general managers and technical supervisors," says Mazzella, who also works as a technical supervisor on several shows. "First of all, we establish the show according to the budget and the size of the theatre. Then we engineer it, build and then execute it, and assist with setting it up." His team is called in for service calls on long-running shows. For example, he is responsible for re-flameproofing the sets when the required certificates expire during extended runs.

Looking back on 27 years in the business, Mazzella says he has witnessed remarkable changes. "Computer automation has taken over and it is now very sophisticated," he comments. "*The Tap Dance Kid* was the first show with a computer for automating scenery, but it didn't become viable until *The Phantom of the Opera*. Now it's a matter of course on all shows." Mazzella's company didn't get into the automation part of the business until he took on *The Lion King*. "We've grown over the years," he says. "We started by just building scenery. Then we started to build and paint it, then, as time went on, we decided to get into automation as well. It was a gradual process to become a full-service organization." He takes particular pride in his current work on *The New Mel Brooks Musical Young Frankenstein*. "We not only built the set, we were the technical supervisors, trying to keep the show on budget, as well as providing the special effects. We were entrusted with a lot of elements of that show."

And now there's the Tony Honor. "I'm very humbled and very excited," Mazzella says. "I'm proud that we've done this work and the community that we live in is recognizing it. That is very nice."

Seymour "Red" Press

"I was flabbergasted when the phone rang. As someone who is hooked on theatre and has spent pretty much most of my life involved in it, this the most honorary thing you can get," says Seymour "Red" Press, who recently celebrated his 50th year on Broadway. "Reading the list of those who have been honored before, and thinking of all the Tonys that I have watched on television, this is the first award that is actually going to the musicians. I'm here because of the orchestras I have hired over the years. So you are honoring those players--the unsung heroes that sit under the stage and play their hearts out and hope that someone is listening. Evidently the Tony Committee listened. I feel that this is their award as well as mine. I am very grateful for it."

Press is one of those musicians himself. He plays woodwinds--saxophone, clarinet, flute--and currently sits in the orchestra of *Chicago*. But he is being honored this year principally for his work as a music contractor and coordinator. "Some people refer to it as a casting agent for the orchestra," he explains. "I hire the orchestras, I budget the music department, purchase instruments if they need to be purchased, or rent them. I schedule the rehearsals for the orchestra, handle recording dates and jingle dates. Whatever happens to the orchestra throughout the whole life of the show, I'm involved. And most of the time I deal with the road company as well." He is currently working on the Broadway and road company of *The Color Purple*, he handles the Encores series at City Center, and later in the season he will oversee the orchestra requirements for *Passing Strange*.

"It's a wonderful thing, being involved and watching things grow through different stages from its very concept, from the first meeting when you sit around a table and discuss it with the composer, the orchestrator and conductor, and watch the birth of a show," says Press. "And when the actors hear the orchestra for the first time, sometimes tears come to your eyes. It's been a marvelous experience. I am

a lucky man."

Gerard Raymond writes about theatre.

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