



AS PART OF ITS 50th ANNIVERSARY, the Jeff Awards has explored its history, archives, and extraordinary roster of recipients. The result has been a look at the growth of Chicago theatre over the past half-century and the Jeff Awards' ongoing celebration of excellence.

At the first Jeff Awards in 1969, six awards were presented at a gathering of 175 theatre enthusiasts. At its 50th anniversary celebration, more than 900 attendees applauded 39 recipients who were selected from 111 Equity productions that had been "Jeff Recommended" by the Jeff's 55 judges.

THE BEGINNING...



IN 1968, the first Joseph Jefferson Awards were conceived and realized by some theater professionals who felt the need to recognize outstanding theater in Chicago. The Awards were named after the actor Joseph Jefferson, who was a touring actor known affectionately as "our Joe" in Chicago. Since his first appearance on stage in Chicago at the age of four, Joseph Jefferson had a long career and appeared many times in Chicago until his final appearance in 1903.

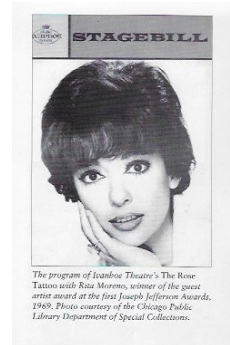
The Midwest Advisory Committee of Actors' Equity appointed member Felix Shuman to find a means of gaining recognition for actors working in the city. Joined by actors Guy Barile, Aviva Crane and June Travis Friedlob, Shuman identified and recruited twenty-four individuals active in education, business and social affairs. These individuals originally met for a luncheon at the Ivanhoe

Theatre and went on to become the Joseph Jefferson Awards Committee under the first Chairmanship of Henry G. Plitt. Among the original members were three theatre supporters who would still be active Jeff members two decades later—Morton Ries, Judith Sagan and Joseph Wolfson.

THE FIRST AWARDS

As a result of their efforts, on October 6, 1969, some 175 theater producers, performers, other professionals, and theater aficionados gathered in the Guildhall of the Ambassador West Hotel in Chicago and presented the first Jeff Awards to five individuals and one production. Ivanhoe Theatre's *The Rose Tattoo* was given the production award. The director George Keathley and the guest artist Rita Moreno were awarded the director and guest artist awards, respectively, in the same production.

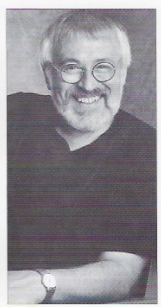
Art Kassul was recognized as best actor in a leading role in *The Subject was Roses* produced by Candlelight Dinner Theatre. Mill Run's *Sabrina Fair* was recognized in two categories: Bob Thompson in actor in a supporting role, and Geraldine Kay in actress in a supporting role.



Rita Moreno

JEFF AWARDS EXPAND - RECOGNIZING CHICAGO THEATRE'S GROWTH

Following the first six awards given in 1969, the Jeff Awards evolved and expanded its scope dramatically, especially during the first several years. In addition to production, direction and performance categories, ensemble, cameo performance, choreography, costume design, set and lighting design (as one) were established in 1973. Also that year, the emergence of many non-equity theaters prompted the establishment of the Jeff's Non-Equity Wing, which is honored in a separate award ceremony each June.



Frank Galati

The first new work award was given in 1973 to Frank Galati's *Boss* produced by Candlelight Forum Theatre although no other New Work Award was given after this until 1983. This category became recognized consistently starting in 1989, when five new works were nominated. Special Awards also were added starting that year.



Above: Lois Smith and Gary Senise in Steppenwolf's 1991 production of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Kate Buddeke and Brian Dennehy in *The Iceman Cometh* at Goodman Theatre. Robert Prosky and Joe Mantegna in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Goodman Studio, 1984. *The Song of Jacob Zulu* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, 1992. Marriott's Lincolnshire Theatre, 1992, production of *Grand Hotel*. The troupe from *The Second City*.

In 1974, musicals and plays were separated, and Production, Direction, and Actor/Actress awards were given to each. In 1981, Revues were also recognized as a separate entity and *The Second City's Well, I'm Off to the Thirty Year War* was awarded with Actor in a Revue (Bruce Jarchow) and Actress in a Revue (Mary Gross) and *Miro, Miro on the Wall* with Director-Revue (Del Close), although *The Second City* had been nominated many times before that in Ensemble and Actor or Actress in a Musical.

NEW CATEGORIES RECOGNIZED

In design areas, Original Music was first recognized in 1980, followed by Sound Design in 1983 and Music Direction in 1986. Equity two-tier nominations based on

the budgetary size of the producing company were introduced in 2008, creating Large and Mid-Size awards in Production and design elements.

The Jeff Awards keeps evolving, reflecting an ever-changing theater scene in Chicago and elsewhere. Although the current award categories more or less follow what was established by 1986, starting in 2018, gender distinction in performers was eliminated to reflect the changing views of gender in general. Also in the Equity Wing, two-tiered awards (large and mid-size) were added for directors in musicals and in plays. And ensemble -musicals and ensemble-plays are recognized separately. Specialized artistic achievement, such as fight choreography, projection design, puppet design, wigs and make-up, properties design, etc. have been evaluated and recognized on a season by season basis.

THE JEFF AWARDS TEAM

The current Jeff Awards consists of 55 judges, who evaluate 140-160 productions by more than 60 organizations in each wing a year, identifying and giving awards to excellent productions and theater professionals in two awards ceremonies. Those judges encompass a wide range of theater expertise and experience, and span different generations. The judges come from a wide range of socio-economic groups and are in different professions and at different points in their career. There also is a group of Artistic and Technical volunteers (the A/T Team) who help judge opening nights.

Periodically, the Jeffs hold panel discussions on various elements of theatrical productions. The public is welcome to attend, and videos of the panels are available on line.

A HALF-CENTURY OF EXCELLENCE

As the former chief critic for the Chicago Tribune Richard Christiansen observed 25 years ago in the silver celebration of the Jeff Awards, “in charting the progress of theater in this city and in citing many of its accomplishments, the Jeffs have played a major role in shaping the wide-spread recognition that has come to our theater scene and its artists.”

The Jeff Awards’ commitment to honoring excellence has continued throughout its second quarter century, and it is with wonder and applause that this important celebration of honoring excellence will continue in years to come.



Michael Shannon and Guy Van Swearingen in Sympatico at A Red Orchid Theatre. The Heir Apparent at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. August Osage County at Steppenwolf Theatre. Black Ensemble Theatre, Jackie Wilson Story. Southern Gothic at Windy City Playhouse. Ragtime at Drury Lane Theatre. Porgy and Bess at Court Theatre.