

Navigation ☰

The S&S Award Gala 2015 – St James Theatre

by **Admin** on Tuesday, 17 November, 2015 in **Onstage, Review**



Kate Marlais and Alex Young, winners of The S&S Award 2015 for their musical *Here*. *Pictures: Ollie Boito Photography*

The S&S Award Gala was held at the St James Theatre, London.

Star rating: **four stars** ★ ★ ★ ★

Where is the home of new musical theatre writing in the UK? The West End houses 33 musicals currently – putting aside adaptations, jukebox musicals and classic works, only two of these could be considered new standalone original works. The National Theatre allows musicals to permeate, but its devotion is to playwriting. Fringe ventures bubble with promise, but rarely find the academic or financial support which their efforts deserve.

So it is with great delight we look to the work of the Mercury Musical Developments, The S&S Awards, and most recently their partnership with Curve Leicester in nurturing and advising the next generation of MT creatives. And **The S&S Awards Gala** this year demonstrated just how quickly that support is empowering the genre.

Hosted by the indelibly charismatic Nigel Harman, the show kicked off with two-time Olivier nominee Charlotte Wakefield, giving a capable performance of 'Promise Me', with music by last year's winner, Tim Gilvin, who recently premiered his musical ***Stay Awake, Jake*** at an industry showcase at The Lounge in Leicester Square. The lyrics of 'Promise Me' were penned by co-sponsor of the awards, Warner Brown, who named the prize after his late parents, hoteliers Sidney and Sylvia Brown.

We were then presented with a 40-minute extract of ***Forest Boy*** by Scott Gilmour and Claire McKenzie, who won **The S&S Award** back in 2013. The plot centres around the real-life tale of Robin van Helsum, a young runaway who claimed to have lived in the forests of Germany for five years.



The cast of winning musical *Here*

from strength to strength.

We were then treated to short showcases from each of the three finalists, performed, largely, by the same cast. Louis Maskell shone as a homebound soldier and a nerdy scrabble player, in both instances keeping a tender lid on his usually elated vocal, nonetheless maintaining a commanding stage presence. Another standout of the core cast was Emily Byrt, giving a generous intensity to her performance, whether in a featured role, or supporting as chorus.



Actress Janie Dee, who presented the award, and gala producer/director Simon Greiff. Pictures: Ollie Boito Photography

sew together the seams of her unwitting family's torn relationships before she succumbs.

After Lydia had a very unique voice, the opening number accompanied only by a plucked solo cello, and sung with an understated grandeur by Rebecca Caine. The narrative worked well, raising the stakes of the

You can see how much development has gone into the score and the detail of the piece, and the sound was beautiful. The choral arrangements felt like a soundscape at times, epic and undulating, and then came together with vicious, pinpoint precision later on for the intricate '*Let Me in First*', which was, for me, the best song of the evening. The cast handled these tricky segments with flair, giving the music the care and drive it deserved.

Condensing such a panoramic show into a 40 minute slot was commendably well handled. This is a musical with huge promise, and it's a pleasure to be able to watch it go

The first showcase and overall winner of the competition was *Here*, by Kate Marlais and Alex Young, also based loosely on a true story, this time with focus being Kurt Schwitters, a German surrealist artist fleeing Nazi Germany, and living in a Cumbrian farmhouse with five others.

The show was gentle, good humoured, and packed a deep heart within its resident artist. Greg Castiglioni did a lovely job of capturing the pomposity of the artist without losing his integrity. There were some lovely numbers, with delightfully folky arrangements, although further development could consolidate those sections which as yet lack a little melodic drive.

The next extract was from *After Lydia* by Christine Denniston and Gwyneth Herbert, a distinct and poignant look into the life of a woman diagnosed with cancer and trying to

typical family drama, and surprising us constantly with subversive surprises about each character. The music was perfectly tallied to the drama, underscoring the rising tension perfectly. It lost pace a little towards the middle of the extract, but still packed a punch.



The S&S Award co-sponsors Caroline Underwood and Warner Brown

And then, for something completely different, ***The Last Word*** by Brett Sullivan. A pop/rock manifesto, the plot documented a charming young slacker, Jay, in 1970s New York, trying to regain control of his life, his friendships, and his late father's restaurant, 'Paradise', by entering scrabble tournaments.

Nathan Amzi did a great job of commanding the energy of the piece, rocking out in true Jack Black feel-good style to the rockier numbers, and delivering a lovely tenderness when required. It was a quirky and smile-inducing extract, though the music could have demonstrated a little more dynamic variation at times.

Presenting the award, Janie Dee was, as ever, a delight, speaking to the audience mic-less and with trademark candour, on the subject of new musical theatre's future resting place. So could

we have found our home at the St James? It has certainly kept its promise to support new musical theatre, with its consistent programme of workshops, new musicals and cabarets this year alone.

Only time will tell, but for now we can enjoy peace of mind, that in MMD and ***The S&S Award*** (together with producer/director Simon Greiff of SimG Productions), the support network for new writers of musical theatre is growing stronger with every year.

Aura Simon

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* In the cast of ***The S&S Gala 2015*** were: Harry Jardine, Matthew Wycliffe, Michael Matus, Samuel Clifford, Emily Byrt, Nina Yndis, Anja Rittersbusch, Shirley Darroch, Rebecca Caine, Matthew Rixon, Greg Castiglioni, Daniel Buckley, Charlotte Wakefield, Nathan Amzi, Haley Flaherty and Louis Maskell.

* Movement director was Carly Hainsby, musical director for the gala was Inga Davis-Rutter. Musicians were Maria Rodriguez Reina (cello) and John Gregson (guitar).



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