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**The Award I Wish I Could Give by [Matthew Murray](#)**

You've undoubtedly heard the saying that no good deed goes unpunished. That's particularly true of awards voting, when a limited number of selections and too many possibilities can sometimes make for monumentally painful choices. I was reminded of this in a big, disappointing way on October 18 of this year.

Why the odd date? First some background. In 2004, the first year of the New York Musical Theatre Festival, [I was completely bowled over by a show called \*The Woman Upstairs\*](#), written by the despair-inducingly young and gifted team of [Brian Lowdermilk and Kait Kerrigan](#) (both of whom [I've previously interviewed in this space](#), but which at the end of the year had been completely deprived of the recognition I felt it deserved. *Altar Boyz*, another accomplished musical that [premiered at NYMF that year](#) (and, as of this writing, is still playing Off-Broadway, [where it opened several months later](#)), met a similar fate.

So the following year, I helped conceive the Talkin' Broadway Summer Theatre Festival Citations, which would serve to honor the shows that opened at the summer theatre festivals (such as NYMF, the Fringe Festival, and the Midtown International Theatre Festival, as well as some smaller entries). With judges culled from the most dedicated ranks of online reviewers, including Peter Filichia, Andy Propst, and Dan Bacalzo, the many worthy shows and impressive work that can be found at these fly-by-night events could finally be acknowledged in five categories: Best Play, Best Musical, Best Actor, Best Actress, and the "Wildcard" (which can be for pretty much anything). I'm proud of many of the shows and performances I've cited over the last five years—in some cases, they represent some of the finest work of the year, whether from a festival or not.

But rarely have I been as conflicted about one single award as this year—and I wasn't until 3:59 PM on Sunday, October 18, the last day of NYMF.

I was positive, at that moment, that my Best Musical vote would go to [Max Understood](#), an amazingly touching and strangely inventive "soundscape" musical about a very young autistic boy named Max who escapes his house, roams around the neighborhood for a while, and eventually returns safe and sound to his parents. This description may not make the show sound like much, but it was a rich and absorbing 75-minute show that eschewed traditional music for a score comprising sound effects, fragments of noise, and found recordings that perfectly established the unorderable aural collage of little Max's life. The first scene, in which Max wakes up in the morning, literally shaking with fear and delight and at the myriad sounds that are filling his ears was itself a triumph, and David Schweizer's direction filled the rest of the show with moments almost as magical as Max encountered his neighbors, a pegasus and a rapper-presidential scholar on his trip around the block. It told the tiniest of stories in the biggest of ways, employing irony, misdirection, and good-old-fashioned honesty to truly tearjerk effect. I still have no idea if *Max Understood* can or will have another life after NYMF, but it was unlike any other musical I'd ever seen, and—going into my last show—I was sure would be my Best Musical choice.

Then, at 4:00 PM at the Theatre at St. Clement's, *The ToyMaker* started.

It could not have been more different from *Max Understood*. Where that show broke all the rules, this one followed them to the letter. A big (20-person) cast enacted the dueling sad stories of Sarah Meeks (Rosena M. Hill), a contemporary woman who's miscarried two children and is finding her marriage to her husband (Greg Stone) on the rocks, and Petr Klimes (Rob Richardson), a toymaker in World War II Czechoslovakia who's on the bad side of the Nazi occupation and whose wife (Jessica Burrows) has also lost her children before their births. Sarah becomes obsessed with Petr and his creations when she buys two of his toys (one for each of his unborn children) on eBay, and travels to Europe in search of a third that apparently no one has ever seen. She criss-crosses the continent searching for clues, discovering as much about herself as about Petr in the process. The songs were played by a seven-piece string-and-woodwind band, and were fervently dramatic from beginning to end, charting Sarah's emotional evolution from near insanity to spiritual liberation, much the way musicals like *Carousel* or *Floyd Collins* do. The two stories came together, in a completely natural and believable way, to say something uncommonly powerful about how we all deal with grief and hope—and the cumulative effect was so powerful, I was moved to tears in the final scenes, something that didn't quite happen at *Max Understood*.

Filing out of the Theatre at St. Clement's at 6:20 PM, having witnessed a remarkable afternoon of theatre, I was faced with a difficult question: Which should receive my Best Musical vote? Both seemed to eminently deserve it, but for different reasons.

There was no question that *The ToyMaker* was more surely crafted, more traditional in its art, and bearing a score that—in intent if not always in quality—was in line with Hammerstein, Sondheim, and LaChiusa (in roughly that order) in a way *Max Understood's* could never hope to be. Yet because all it did was tell a new style of story in an old style, *The ToyMaker* felt like any of dozens of other shows. *Max Understood* looked and sounded like no other, lacking traditional music but carrying on its shoulders a thoroughly musical concept that made you a part of the story. You couldn't draw lines between yourself and Max—you were one and the same, which gave his adventures a terrifying and cathartic immediacy that the cooler and more distant *The ToyMaker* simply didn't possess. One show sought to move you through narrative, the other sought to move you through immersion.

I've gotten into fierce arguments with people about things like this—one last week, as a matter of fact: Is it okay if a show violates certain cherished precepts to create a richer experience, or is a show only truly great if it makes something impossibly fulfilling out of adhering to the letter of every single regulation? *The ToyMaker* was unquestionably the more "mature" show; and was populated almost entirely with adult, fully human characters with pasts, flaws, and problems that made them unlike the stereotypically cheesy figures so many people seem to think exclusively populate musicals. (In truth, they only exclusively populate *bad* musicals.) *Max Understood* had a caricature or two, yes, and some performances that were broader than I usually prefer. But given the prevailing

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concept, isn't it possible, perhaps even likely, that those choices were intentional, employed to give you a particular view of Max's fractured outlook on the world? And if so, weren't they all perfect representations of the show's artistic vision, something that the wonderfully natural but occasionally holding-back performers in *The ToyMaker* seemed to be impeding, if only just the smallest bit?

I eventually decided my answer was yes. *Max Understood* ultimately struck me as the more emotional and theatrically satisfying show, with almost perfect writing that was augmented by the creators daring to try something wholly original—and, in addition to everything else, succeeding brilliantly at it. *The ToyMaker* may represent the best of its breed at NYMF this year, but it didn't take you to new places—merely exquisitely appointed old ones. Plus, there were just the fewest infelicities in the writing—a false ending here, a bit of confusion there, the slightest threads of incredibility that Sarah could unravel this decades-old mystery quite as succinctly as she does—that helped tip the scale.

But in any other year, *The ToyMaker* would have won in a walk—it's a wonderfully uplifting story that acknowledges everything that makes life joyful and terrible in equal measure, and points the way to a future that is as much about the people around us as about ourselves. If there's any justice, it will have a future life, inspiring many others with its truly impressive story and unflagging dedication to the craft of creating musicals aiming at the form's loftiest standards. And, who knows, if *The ToyMaker* moves ahead while *Max Understood* stands still, my allegiances may shift if I come in close contact with both again. I hope, for the sake of musical theatre and its audiences, that we eventually get exactly that chance again—and soon.

Monday, October 19, 2009 at 9:43 PM | [Item Link](#)

The last five columns written by Matthew Murray:

10/19/2009: [The Award I Wish I Could Give](#)

09/28/2009: [Hope and Love, Lost and Found in the Twin Towers' Absence](#)

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