
AXS ENTERTAINMENT / ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT / PERFORMING ARTS

Respectfully biting the hand that feeds

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It would appear, judging by the extraordinary outcry on social media in recent days, that the Tulsa Awards for Theatre Excellence, or TATE Awards, sponsored by The George Kaiser Family Foundation, hit an all-time low on Sunday evening at Cain's Ballroom. While the bizarre behaviour of this year's curious choice for Distinguished Artist Award, Gary Busey, was certainly the focus of much of the criticism, social media was already voicing dissent long before an envelope was even opened.

Along with questioning Mister Busey's theatrical relevance, the usual suspects were all lined up. Age old culprits include the TATE's lack of transparency, their lack of criteria, the narrow focus of the awards, their loss of their own sense of purpose, accusations of cronyism, of who you know not what you do, complaints about the process which essentially amounts to applying for your own nomination along with suggestions that the TATE organisers refuse to engage with, or consult, Tulsa's theatre community. Quoting Mister Busey's alleged remark about not shoving the award where the sun doesn't shine, many were not entirely in agreement with his sentiment after Sunday's debacle. "I'm done, unless things change," one local luminary proclaimed. A sentiment echoed by many.

Attempting to calm the dissenting voices, the usual cohort were also out in force. Advocating a don't rock the applecart mentality, they posited their peace at any price position, disguised as everyone's wonderful and everybody loves everybody and things will all change for the better eventually. Even though nothing has changed in the past several years. In both camps, there's a fear of biting the hand that feeds, that somehow raising these concerns risks offending The George Kaiser Family Foundation who will walk away in a huff, take their ball with them, pouting they don't want to play anymore. Which highlights the underlying difficulty which inhibits raising this issue from the level of personal rant to that of critical debate: namely the fear of being penalised financially in a climate where the lack of money available to theatre, and the manner in which it is distributed, are already serious concerns.

Yet Sunday seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back with a turning point perhaps being reached. Amidst the applause and accolades for American Theatre Company, Theatre Tulsa and Clark Youth Theatre's victories on the night, as well as appreciation for the hard work of event organisers and a heartfelt appreciation for the recognition accorded to the late, great Randy Whalen, old truths came home to roost. How can you call the TATE's an award ceremony when it only recognises a handful of hierarchal awards based on first, second and third place, incorrectly attributed to best play rather than best production? How credible can an award ceremony be when it fails to recognise categories such as best actor and actress, supporting actor and actress, best director, writer, set designer, technician and so on? Why is so much time given to the guest celebrity and not the community?

More than enough has already been said on Mister Busey's erratic behaviour, as well as his alleged health and hearing issues. But the implications of long festering resentments against the TATE's process haven't perhaps been as well addressed. Take the lack of award categories. Whilst not wishing to detract from American Theatre Company's double award winning achievement, the question needs to be asked: is it the TATE's position that American Theatre Company alone offered the best of everything, in every area, without exception, this past year in Tulsa theatre? Not that anyone, critically or personally, appears to question "Mothers and Sons" achievement. "Waiting for Godot," however, is another matter, with many seeing "Waiting for Godot" as a reductive attempt at producing Beckett and an unworthy winner next to other productions in contention. In the absence of categories and criteria which highlight and distinguish excellence, it can be difficult to understand how one company can win both major awards, as is indeed the case this time round.

The remedy seems simple and brings no significant added expenditure, apart from maybe a couple of extra bucks on trophies. Take the awards back from the celebrities and give it back to the community. Celebrities have their place, but it is not their awards. It's the Tulsa Awards for Theatre Excellence. Expand it. Invite dialogue. Create relevant categories and criteria, judge openly and fairly, and people will turn up in their droves. Tulsa needs the TATE's. But they need them to be what they purport to be. An award for theatre excellence in Tulsa across all categories. Otherwise, what should be the theatre community's most memorable night of the year turns into its most dissenting as the awarding and recognition of excellence is replaced by a process which essentially amounts to buying a lottery ticket hoping to win next year's funding.

It needs to be stated for the record that Tulsa theatre owes a huge debt of gratitude to The George Kaiser Family Foundation for their unstinting support throughout the years, including the TATE's. But this is stating the obvious, for there is no one in the community who is unaware of the huge contribution The George Kaiser Family Foundation has made. A contribution that has allowed the community to grow into what it is today and begin to flourish. A community who has outgrown the old format for the TATE's and seeks a new, more inclusive format. A community that wants to continue its long standing relationship with The George Kaiser Family Foundation and the TATE's into the future in an effort to make Tulsa Theatre into all it can possibly be by truly recognising and awarding excellence.

Working together, that's not only possible, it would be something pretty impressive to behold.



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