

Special

Backstage at The Tony's

By Iris Wiener



The 58th Annual Tony Awards at Radio City Music Hall marked a landmark year for Broadway's finest, as a witch and a legendary homosexual took the gold, a team of puppets scored big, and a slew of assassins made off with the big ones. History was made as African American actresses topped their categories, and the little musical that could stormed off with the night's biggest nods. With a telecast featuring the rap stylings of Carol Channing ("LL Cool J says my rap name is C-Lo!") and the hip swinging of Sarah Jessica Parker, the evening was a huge success. Here within, the stars took a few moments to reflect on a fantastic season, and to discuss what being at the Tony Awards is really all about.

In an early on emotional moment, Billy Joel stepped up to present the first big winner with the Tony for Best Featured Actress in a Musical, after having remembered his father and fallen troops on D-Day, sixty years ago to the date of the Tony's. "I

performances in *Carousel*, *Master Class*, and *Ragtime*, McDonald knew the winner circle ropes well. "[On making history for African-American women] It would just be wonderful in a season where they have really been given the chance to have a voice."

Rashad (winner for Best Leading Actress in a Play) felt that the wins from her show were due to the diversity of the audience, an aspect of the production she attributes



LL Cool J & Carol Channing

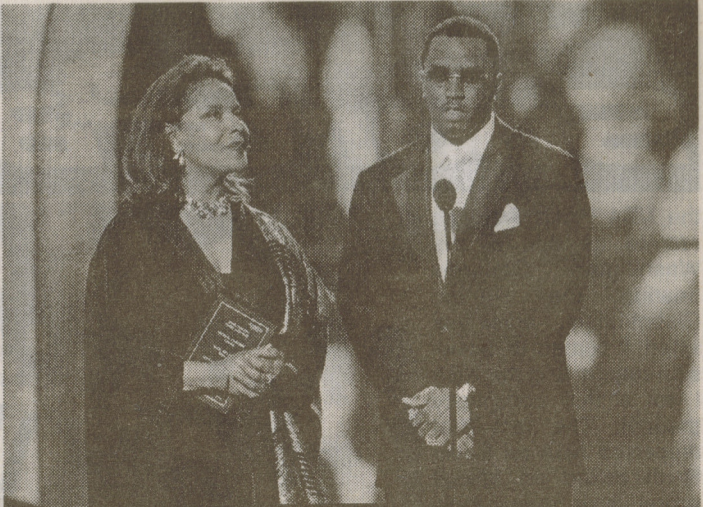
bation, and the theater is like making love. It's an incredibly slow, rewarding, passionate, romantic experience."

For Idina Menzel, winning the award for Best Leading Actress in a Musical as a witch in *Wicked* was definitely worth the wait. A Long Island native, she was first nominated for her

role as Maureen in the original cast of *Rent*. "It's been an amazing ride. I feel good about the show and the work and the time put into it. I'm happy I was acknowledged. I started in *The Wizard of Oz* back in the fourth grade, that might have been a good omen!" Soon Menzel begins filming *Ask the Dusk*, co-starring Colin Farrell. "I get to kiss him, although nothing beats kissing (husband) Taye Diggs!"

Male categories were won over by Broadway newcomers, with Jefferson Mays winning Best Leading Actor in a Play for *I Am My Own Wife*, Brian F. O'Byrne of *Frozen* championing Best Featured Actor in a Play, and Michael Cerveris of *Assassins* winning Best Featured Actor in a Musical. Cerveris commented on the relativity of the politics in his show during an election year. "It feels like an incredibly appropriate show, it feels like people are more ready and willing and eager to start looking at difficult questions about how we come to be in the position that we are these days. To me *Assassins* represents the essence of America's freedom of speech and democracy."

The irony in that having been said comes



Phylicia Rashad & Sean P. Diddy Combs


with the total wins; despite *Assassins* five awards, *Avenue Q*, a comical musical with

slight political undertones, came away with the top honors of the night, including Best Musical, Best Original Score, and Best Book of a Musical. Claims *Avenue Q's* producers, "Broadway got its heart back tonight."

And who better to show heart than host Hugh Jackman himself, the nights most anticipated and ingenuous winner for his portrayal of Peter Allen in *The Boy From Oz*. And eerily enough, Jackman's Tony Awards dressing room was once filled by the late Allen. "I'm thrilled, not just for the award, but the night was a blast." He reflected on friend Nicole Kidman's presentation of his award for Best Leading Actor in a Musical. "She said, 'If the name is not yours, I think I'm going to read yours anyway.'" "For her to be here tonight meant the world to me."

Truly an historical evening, the 2004 Tony Awards proved there are an abundance of hard acts to follow. The upcoming summer season will leave theatergoers satisfied and penniless, as the addition of new productions will only contribute to the tremendous amount of enthusiastic and entertaining works displayed at this year's award show. ■





Cast of Avenue Q

Winner Hugh Jackman

thought, you mean nowhere in the show are they gonna mention D-Day? Because Ronald Reagan just died, who was in the beaches in Normandy, which allowed us to be here doing this stuff. Someone should say something about all the casualties," he said of his preparation for the remembrance.

In what was only the beginning of a night for African-American women to shine, Joel went on to present Anika Noni Rose, of *Caroline, or Change* with the coveted prize. "There are a lot of people on Broadway from a lot of different ethnicities, and I think that if nothing else [my win] will inspire a lot of hope. A lot of people think it's the great white way, I think it's absolutely not true," said Rose, as her words were proven accurate with the wins of Audra McDonald and Phylicia Rashad for *A Raisin in the Sun*. Nominated four times, and winning for

to none other than Sean (P. Diddy) Combs. "No matter what generation, gender or ethnicity an audience member is, there is something of family that everyone can recognize and identify with in *A Raisin in the Sun*. I think that there were people who questioned [Combs'] abilities, but there were so many people who love him, and who were eager to see him as an actor on stage."

Combs garnered reviews on all ends of the spectrum this season, but continued to enjoy the unique acting experience that Broadway entails. "This has been an incredible experience, I would love to come back, there's really no place in the world like Broadway. This has been the least stressful thing I've ever taken on!" He quoted Macaulay Culkin when defining the art of theater. "A movie is like mastur-