

The 2016 Tony Nominations: Not All About the Hamiltons

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By Michael Schulman

Lin Manuel-Miranda's "Hamilton" received sixteen Tony nominations, including for Best Musical. Credit Photograph by Joan Marcus/Courtesy Atlantic Records



Yesterday, the [Asian American Performers Action Coalition](#) released its annual report of "Ethnic Representation on New York Stages." On Broadway and Off, thirty per cent of available roles went to actors of color during the 2014-15 season, a record high in the nine years the survey has been conducted. But the news wasn't all so promising. On Broadway alone, the numbers actually dipped two per cent from the previous year, and African-American representation dropped from twenty-one to nine per cent. (The Asian-American percentage shot up from two to eleven, thanks to "The King and I"—hardly a groundbreaker.) Off Broadway, the Public Theatre was by far the most diverse of the major nonprofits, with sixty-two per cent of its casts made up of minority actors. The Public also claimed the largest percentage of black actors, owing mostly to its production of Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton," which has since moved to Broadway and, this morning, was nominated for a record-breaking sixteen Tony nominations.

I bring this up not to dampen the musical's historic showing—another well-deserved honor, after its Grammy Award, Pulitzer Prize, Michelle Obama endorsement, and surround-sound hype. This year's Tony nominations (here's the [full list](#)) provide a refreshing antidote to the #OscarsSoWhite fiasco: fourteen out of the forty nominated performers are actors of color, among them, from "Hamilton," Leslie Odom, Jr., Phillipa Soo, Renée Elise Goldsberry, Christopher Jackson, and Daveed Diggs (plus Miranda himself), as well as Lupita Nyong'o ("Eclipsed"), Sophie Okonedo ("The Crucible"), and the astounding Cynthia Erivo ("The Color Purple"), who stands as good a chance as anyone to deny "Hamilton" a win. But what the A.A.P.A.C. study suggests is that diversity on Broadway is precarious and far from complete, and it can rise and fall with the fates of individual shows. "Hamilton" is a revolution. What comes next?

As for every other new musical that opened on Broadway this season: Sorry, folks! As it turns out, a lot of them are terrific. The presumptive runners-up for Best Musical include the winning, pie-scented "Waitress," with its gorgeous songs by Sara Bareilles and powerhouse performance by Jessie Mueller; Andrew Lloyd Webber's exuberant "School of Rock," which boasts a gaggle of kick-ass child rockers; "Bright Star," Steve Martin and Edie Brickell's swinging (if predictable by a mile) bluegrass parable; and George C. Wolfe's dazzling production of "Shuffle Along, Or the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed." Not included: Duncan Sheik and Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's buff and blood-soaked "American Psycho," which has intriguing elements (particularly in design) but never quite found its tone, between cartoonish and moody. (Its tighy-whitey-clad leading man, Benjamin Walker, was snubbed, too.) The race for Best Revival of a Musical includes John Doyle's [stunning reinvention](#) of "The Color Purple" (poor chap, he's up for Best Direction of a Musical against Thomas Kail, of "Hamilton"), Bartlett Sher's fine production of "Fiddler on the Roof," Deaf West Theatre's imaginative sign-language staging of "Spring Awakening," and Scott Ellis's so-charming-it-hurts production of "She Loves Me." In another year, Laura Benanti, of "She Loves Me," would sail to victory as Best Actress in a Musical, but this year she has Erivo, Soo, Mueller, and Carmen Cusack ("Bright Star") to contend with. And there wasn't even room for Audra McDonald ("Shuffle Along"), who usually coughs and gets a Tony for it.

The play categories, meanwhile, are an alternative universe of close races that have nothing to do with "Hamilton."

The front-runner for Best Play is probably Stephen Karam's bleak and revelatory drama "The Humans," which has [much to say](#), albeit indirectly, about the disquietude driving this election season. It's a play of big ideas writ small, and it has two brilliantly understated performances by Reed Birney and Jayne Houdyshell, who are both nominated. Another strong contender is Danai Gurira's "Eclipsed," which also originated at the Public; it's the rare Broadway play [to pay any mind to contemporary Africa](#) and has a sterling cast, led by Nyong'o. Still, I was glad that the Tony nominators remembered Mike Bartlett's excellent "[King Charles III](#)," a "future-history" play in verse that imagined Prince Charles's ascent to the British throne.

The contest for Best Revival of a Play is perhaps the strongest of the bunch. It includes not one but two avant-garde reinventions of Arthur Miller classics by the Flemish stage auteur [Ivo van Hove](#): "[A View from the Bridge](#)," which closed in February, and "The Crucible," which is still running. Then there's "[Blackbird](#)," David Harrower's wrenching anatomization of trauma, starring Michelle Williams and Jeff Daniels (both nominated); the Roundabout's [sublime remounting](#) of Michael Frayn's backstage farce, "Noises Off"; and Jonathan Kent's acclaimed revival of "[Long Day's Journey Into Night](#)" starring Jessica Lange, who has a good chance at the Tony for Best Actress in a Play. (She's up against Nyong'o, Williams, Okonedo, and Laurie Metcalf, whose performance in "Misery" opposite Bruce Willis should be counted as a one-woman show.)

Among all these heavy-hitters, there are reminders throughout the categories of the season's grace notes. Jennifer Simard (nominated for Best Featured Actress in a Musical) is irresistible as a gambling-addicted nun in the spoofy "Disaster!" Richard Goulding (Best Featured Actor in a Play) was a waggish dead ringer for Prince Harry in "King Charles III." Megan Hilty and Andrea Martin (both up for Best Featured Actress in a Play) out-funnied each other in "Noises Off." Alex Brightman (Best Actor in a Musical) somehow has more kinetic energy in "School of Rock" than Jack Black did in the movie version. Ann Roth's costume designs for "Shuffle Along" are as eye-catching as they are numerous. David Rockwell's [jewel-box set](#) for "She Loves Me" is a stunner. And Savion Glover's tap choreography for "Shuffle Along" is a ten-ton feast for the eyes and the ears. (I would have liked to see a choreography nod for Casey Nicholaw, for his balletic, wordless, and lovely finale for "Tuck Everlasting.")

Still, when the Tony ceremony is broadcast, on June 12th, it'll be a "Hamilton" night. I've heard whispers of "Hamilton" fatigue among Tony voters, but I hope they don't give in. As excellent as many of its competitors are—especially "Waitress"—I can't imagine a score like Miranda's, a supporting performance like Goldsberry's (I'm still in recovery from "Satisfied"), or direction as pitch-perfect as Thomas Kail's not earning Tonys. It's not every year that a Broadway show so decisively conquers the culture, and for that let's be glad. But, jeez, good luck getting a ticket *now*.

Watch: From *Vanity Fair*, "Hamilton" star and Tony nominee Christopher Jackson gets quizzed on lyrics from the musical.

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