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## **Crush of talent: Top high school musical actors collect Blue Star Awards on Starlight stage**

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Only three minutes to show time. Kat Sodders' body courses with adrenaline. Her hands fidget. Her stomach churns. Her eyes flash.

"I feel like throwing up," says the Olathe South High School senior, nominated this night as one of the best high school musical actresses in the Kansas City area.

Will she win for her lead role in "Hello, Dolly!"? She looks around backstage.

It's May 24, the night of the Blue Star Awards, a Starlight Theatre event that began five years ago involving 18 area high schools. The event, underwritten by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Kansas City, has become the equivalent of the Tony Awards for high school musicals regionwide.

Forty high schools entered; 44 musicals judged; 950 student nominees from Blue Springs to Barstow, Olathe to Lee's Summit, Park Hill South to Shawnee Mission North.

### **Opening number**

Sodders, 18, stands elbow to elbow surrounded by a crush of talent. Students in "Brigadoon" kilts bustle next to swing girls from "Wonderful Town." Cast members from Park Hill's "Beauty and the Beast" mass near kids from Spring Hill's "Working" and "Seussical the Musical," "The Music Man," "Big River," "Damn Yankees," "Annie," "Hair," "Chicago," "Jekyll & Hyde" ...

"We've been nominated before, but we've never won," Meredith Boydston, 18, of Spring Hill, says, adding with hope, "until now!"

*Shhhhh. Two minutes! Get to your off-stage places,* a production coordinator shouts.

A herd of 90 actors, dancers and singers shuffles silently into the darkened wings of Starlight's open-air stage, poised to bound out for the awards show's opening number, "A Comedy Tonight" from "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum."

Seventeen hundred students, parents and teachers jam the front of the house.

*Ladies and gentlemen!* Anne Johnston, Starlight's education director and the director of this night, booms from a backstage microphone. *Welcome to the 2007 Blue Star ceremony — a night to remember!*

Chords from "A Comedy Tonight" strike the air. Students dance onto the stage, smiling, arms and voices raised.

"When it was announced that I was nominated," Kat Sodders said before this evening, "I cried."

## Honor and bragging rights

From its start in 2003, the spirit of the Blue Star Awards has been about recognition for students who often receive little other than the applause on show night. Some — like the hundreds of students who create sets, props, lighting, sound, costumes, makeup — never receive that.

“Walk into the main entrance of any high school in the country, and what do you see? Sports trophies,” says Starlight president Bob Rohlf. “You rarely see recognition of other activities.”

The Blue Stars are meant to correct that.

Yet as much as Starlight’s brass plays it down, the Blue Star Awards are also a competition. In recent years simply receiving a Blue Star nomination, let alone winning one of the star-shaped trophies, has become a coveted possession, imbuing winners with both honor and bragging rights.

In its own way, theater teachers say, it has helped coalesce the world of high school theater into a single community.

“It’s been a bonding factor,” says Olathe South’s drama teacher, David Hastings.

More and more, he says, students are traveling to other high school shows to get ideas, to see how they measure up.

“Win or lose, a nomination reaffirms that what we are doing is right on par with our peers, that we are on top of our game,” says Lee’s Summit North drama teacher Shayne Daniel, whose production of “Copacabana” received six nominations.

On stage Kat Sodders and the massive cast spread their arms, smile and sing the last high notes — “*co-me-dy to-niiiiight*” — of the opening number.

## The red carpet

Picking the Blue Star nominees (see story Page 17) means winnowing 1,000 nominated actors, dancers, choreographers and techies down to five top nominees in 22 categories, ranging from most outstanding lead actor, actress, director and overall production to the most outstanding lobby design.

On this night, modeled on Emmys, Tonys and Academy awards, the winners are announced.

*And the Blue Star for outstanding featured performance goes to ... Raymore-Peculiar, “Anything Goes,” Tiffany Marin as Bonnie.*

Kids dash up the red carpet to applause to thank their friends, parents and teachers.

In between, the five nominated actors sing a medley from their roles. The actresses do the same. The massive casts from the five schools nominated for best show — Central High School in St. Joseph for “Brigadoon,” Lee’s Summit for “Wonderful Town,” Lee’s Summit North for “Copacabana,” Olathe South for “Hello, Dolly!” and Shawnee Mission Northwest for “Bye Bye Birdie” — each take to the stage to perform a separate production number.

If the Blue Star nominees are any indication, low-budget high school musicals are dead. Budgets today often range from \$7,000 to \$10,000. Sometimes more.

“When I started doing research for this show, I immediately started contacting places for costumes — teacups, candle-sticks that light up. We built a two-story castle on stage. We wanted the spectacle. We wanted a great show,” says theater teacher Kelley Davis, whose Gardner-Edgerton High School production of “Beauty and the Beast” received three nominations.

## **Dreams of Broadway**

For students, musicals often go beyond the extracurricular these days. They're part of a career. Of the 10 actors and actresses nominated for outstanding leads, eight plan to attend college for theater, some in New York. They've been taking dancing lessons since they could walk. Some have professional credits. They dream of Broadway.

"I think I did my first show when I was 3 years old," says Lee's Summit's Brian Duncan, nominated as outstanding lead actor in "Wonderful Town."

Last year he appeared in "Geppetto & Son" at the Coterie Theatre. He has been in "A Christmas Carol" at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre. Practically every lead has performed at Theatre in the Park in Shawnee. Sodders will be starring as Dolly in "Hello, Dolly!" there this summer.

"I cannot imagine waking up and not singing a show tune in the morning. I'm dreaming about being on Broadway, or national tours, or European tours. It's what I want to do," Sodders says.

On stage a presenter announces the recipient of the outstanding supporting actor award ...  
*Brennan Caldwell, Pembroke Hill...*

The five nominees for outstanding lead actor stand in the shadows and wait to take their places on stage for their medley.

Brian Duncan begins with a love song from "Wonderful Town." Then Grandview High's Alex Herrera picks up with his own ballad as Tony from "West Side Story."

*Could be! Who knows? There's something due any day; I will know right away, soon as it shows ...*

## **Honored to be nominated**

What few in the audience know is what it takes for these students to be here — the hours of rehearsals, singing and dancing into the night, memorizing lines, struggling to find the characters' emotions.

The Blue Star judges call Michael Tomlinson "outstanding" as the Beast in Olathe North's "Beauty and the Beast." "A heartbreakingly beautiful voice," one judge says. In his first leading role, Brian Vaughn of Rockhurst croons vibrant and deep about the muddy Mississippi as the slave, Jim, in Rockhurst's production of "Big River."

"It was crazy," Vaughn had said earlier. "One of my big songs is 'Free at Last.' It is just this moment where Jim is dreaming of when he will be free. It was a feeling, the cheering afterward, I don't know how to describe it. I just remember being out of breath and shaken."

At the end of the medley, Eric Huffman from Shawnee Mission West launches into "Confrontation" from "Jekyll & Hyde," his voice switching in tone and timbre in a tortured battle between the good and evil within himself.

The Blue Star judges call Huffman's performance "truly perfect and a thrill to watch." Later in the night, he would be named the winner of this category.

But he seems to speak with great sincerity when he says, as did all the nominees, "I was just honored to be nominated."

In so many ways, that's what the Blue Star Awards are about.

## **Applause erupts**

During their medley, the nominees for outstanding actress span the stage. There stands Raleigh Cain as Belle from Gardner-Edgerton's "Beauty and the Beast" and Sodders from "Hello, Dolly!"

and Natalie Baughman as the vamp Velma Kelly from North Kansas City High's "Chicago" and Cayla Sols-berg as the sassy Ruth Sherwood from "Wonderful Town."

Then comes Kaitlin Mesh as Rosie Alvarez in Shawnee Mission Northwest's production of "Bye Bye Birdie." At 5 foot 3, she is a powerhouse headed for New York this fall..

*... Now that my feet are on the ground again, she belts out, Now that my senses have been found again, What did I ever see in him? ...*

"One of the biggest fears is to grow up and know I didn't try for my dream, never know what would be," she had said. Soon the Blue Star would be hers.

All night, applause erupts.

Outstanding orchestra ... *Lee's Summit North!*

Outstanding hair and makeup ... *Grandview!*

Just before Rohlf, the president of Starlight, reveals the winner of the Blue Star for the best overall show, he looks out at the audience.

"Why don't we all applaud one time for everybody included in high school musicals?" he says.

The audience does As he announces that Lee's Summit High has won the award for outstanding overall production, the clapping turns into a standing ovation. Students, parents and teachers from about 40 high schools remain there, applauding for another school, just as if it were their own.

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## **2007 BLUE STAR RECIPIENTS**

**Overall production:** Lee's Summit, "Wonderful Town."

**Actress in a leading role:** Kaitlin Mesh as Rosie Alvarez, Shawnee Mission Northwest, "Bye Bye Birdie."

**Actor in a leading role:** Eric Huffman as Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde, Shawnee Mission West. "Jekyll & Hyde."

**Actress in a supporting role:** Brittany Church as Martha, Blue Valley Northwest, "The Secret Garden."

**Actor in a supporting role:** Brennan Caldwell as Edward Hyde, Pembroke Hill, "Jekyll & Hyde."

**Character performance:** Kate Weidmaier and Caleb Hoffman as Audrey II, Kearney, "Little Shop of Horrors."

**Featured performance:** Tiffany Marin as Bonnie, Raymore-Peculiar, "Anything Goes."

**Ensemble member:** Courtney Pennington as Info Booth Girl, Shawnee Mission East, "Sweet Charity."

**Group ensemble:** Blue Springs, barbershop quartet, "The Music Man."

**Chorus:** Shawnee Mission Northwest, "Bye Bye Birdie."

**Director:** Olathe South, "Hello, Dolly!"

**Musical direction:** Park Hill, "Beauty and the Beast."

**Choreography and staging:** Lee's Summit, "Wonderful Town."

**Orchestra:** Lee's Summit North, "Copacabana."

**Scenic design, tier I:** Lee's Summit, "Wonderful Town."

**Scenic design, tier II:** Central of St. Joseph, "Brigadoon."

**Lighting design:** Shawnee Mission South, "Once on This Island."

**Technical crew:** Lee's Summit West, "Violet."

**Costume design:** Excelsior Springs, "Jekyll & Hyde."

**Hair & makeup design:** Grandview, "Pippin."

**Graphic design:** Shawnee Mission North, "Hair."

**Lobby design:** Central of St. Joseph, "Brigadoon."

**Technical achievement:** Kristina Banton, Olathe North.

**Blue Star scholarship, male:** Phillip Helt, Rockhurst

**Blue Star scholarship, female:** Melissa Rhodes, St. Teresa's

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## **NINE-MONTH PROCESS**

The Blue Star Awards ceremony occurs in one night. The process takes nine months.

- In August, Anne Johnston, Starlight's education director, sends schools a 20-page packet of Blue Star applications, rules, deadlines. Forty "adjudicators," judges who are mostly theater professionals, are conscripted to assess future shows.
- Schools submit details on fall and spring shows: dates, cast sizes, budgets, professional or amateur choreographer... "I don't ever want to tell a school on a smaller budget that it can't compete. Because it can," Johnston says. "Kearny once didn't have a budget for costumes. They were student-made. They were nominated for costume design."
- Fall shows: Half of the musicals (22 this year) occur just before Thanksgiving. Three judges see each show. Judges evaluate every show in 22 categories: quality of program, lobby design, hair, makeup, acting ... Shows are given a number grade in each category.
- Spring shows occur from January through April. Process is the same. Schools are sent a compilation (without the number grades) of judges' comments for their own references.
- April: Crunch time. Evaluations are reviewed, scores tabulated. Judges vigorously debate top scoring schools and decide five nominees in each of 22 categories and the winning recipients.
- Early May. In a single day, Starlight representatives deliver a banner to each nominated school inscribed with their nominations. Winners are not revealed until show night.
- Three weeks to showtime, fourth Thursday in May: In the midst of finals and graduations, each of the five schools nominated for best overall production prepares one large production number to be re-created from its show. The five actors and actresses nominated for best lead submit one song each to be turned into a medley.
- Final four days to showtime: Each nominated school sends up to five students to be part of an opening number to be learned, blocked and choreographed in a few hours. Top-nominated schools and leads have less than three hours to rehearse.
- Blue Star Awards night.

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