For 2006's Year in Theatre recap, I included a list of 12 talents whose gifts couldn't help but be noticed, as they had performed exemplary work on a number of theatrical offerings during the year, oftentimes at a number of area venues.

It's the list so nice I'm doin' it twice!

And, quite possibly, for years hence. Even though last year's mentions Brad Hauskins, Jennifer Kingry, Adam Lewis, Jeremy Mahr, and Andrea Moore did enough collective area work in 2007 to fill *several* seasons' worth of shows, it was surprisingly easy to find a whole new batch of theatrical "essentials" to praise; the following dozen individuals - all of whom took part in at least four area productions this year - are worth a grateful " *Hmmm ...* !" whenever you see their names in a program.

Kay Ann Allmand

For 2007's summer-stock season at the Clinton Showboat, artistic director Craig A. Miller recruited a batch of performers he'd previously worked with at Houston's Texas Repertory Theatre. Houston's three-month loss was our gain. Among vibrant actors that included Joshua Estrada, Jennifer Gilbert, Mark X. Laskowski, Alison Nicole Luff, Will Morgan, and Joshua Wright, Allmand was the most vibrant of all. Amidst the familial eccentricity, her *You Can't Take It with You* ingé nue was blessedly sensible, and her goofily romantic heroines in *Lend Me a Tenor* and *Guys & Dolls* - Allmand's Showboat *coup de grâce* - were comedically inventive *and* to-die-for adorable. Bonus points for her charming choreography in *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* ; it turned out Allmand could enchant us even from *off* -stage.

Jeremy Day and Cassandra Marie Nuss

Unlike at the Showboat, there was no clear choice for the most memorable Timber Lake participant this season, and a reasonable case could be made for Samantha Joy Dubina, Jenny Guse, Ben Mason, Zack Powell, Jacqui Pugh, Jay Reynolds Jr., and several others deserving of

the title - Timber Lake employed a *helluva* strong ensemble this summer. Forgive me, then, for declaring a tie. Among *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, Dracula, Bat Boy: The Musical, Funny Money, Irving Berlin's White Chistmas*, and *Smokey Joe's Café*, there wasn't a single show in which Day and Nuss (incredibly, even better here than she was at the Showboat in 2006) weren't focused, inventive, vocally assured, touching, or fall-down-funny ... frequently all at the same time. (Actually, Day didn't appear in *Smokey Joe's*, but as he played two memorable roles in *White Christmas*, I'm thinking it evens out.)

Jeff De Leon and Maggie Woolley

Talk about the difficulty in picking the best among equals ... . These continually excellent Prenzie Players were given extraordinary opportunities this year and more than lived up to expectations. Prior to his vital Cassio in *Othello*, De Leon's Hal in *King Henry the Fourth* and *Fif th* was a remarkable feat of carefully delineated character growth - his work felt like witnessing the stage equivalent of Pacino's Michael Corleone in the first two *Godfather* films - and after assuming (superbly) a number of female *and* male roles in the *Henry* plays, Woolley's *Othello* turn was the passionate, heartbreaking Desdemona of your dreams. Extra thanks to both for sharing their gifts outside of the Prenzies' Masonic Temple space; De Leon was a flawless romantic ideal in St. Ambrose's *Crème de Coco*, and Woolley provided delightful lightness of spirit - and earned sorely needed laughs - for Richmond Hill's knotty *Arcadia*.

Patti Flaherty

Ever since her wonderful performance in 2005's *Enchanted April* at Playcrafters, I've looked forward to seeing Flaherty in every production she's been attached to. Who knew I'd enjoy her work just as much when I *didn't* see her? Flaherty's helming of New Ground's *Bad Dates* proved just how much variety and movement a director can lend to a one-person show, she handled the tricky tonal vacillations of Genesius Guild's *The Winter's Tale* with frequent imagination, and her portrayal of the Guild's *Medea* - with Flaherty's face hidden behind a mask throughout - was a master's class in vocal nuance; five months later, I can still hear her viciously bone-dry reading of, "Go home - your wife needs to be buried." We did, by the way, get to *see* the actress once, too, during New Ground's one-act quintet *Living Here*. In the hysterical *Fudge!*, she performed charmingly opposite her real-life hubby, Pat, who was an "essential" *last* year. Should I just go ahead and reserve a spot here for one of the Flahertys' relatives in 2008?

Kimberly Furness

This exquisite performer has one of the most dazzling smiles you're likely to find on *any* stage, and if you visited Circa '21 this year, you almost couldn't help but notice it. Furness, reprising her 1998 portrayal of Ado Annie, was a spectacularly dim bulb in *Oklahoma!*, a faultless deadpan comic (and gleeful drunk) in *Don't Dress for Dinner*, and ceaselessly winning in *Almost Heaven: Songs of John Denver*; her rendition of "Annie's Song" was particularly glorious. Yet Furness' best work - perhaps the best by *any* local actress in 2007 - was in a role where she practically *never* smiled, as designer Coco Chanel in St. Ambrose's *Crème de Coco*. Aging decades in the span of 80 minutes, and enacting everything from youthful vigor to aching debilitation, she was needy, witty, haunted, and, in the end, emotionally overwhelming; if the debuting play ever makes it to New York, it would be more than wise for producers to secure Furness for the journey.

Bob Hanske

You know how there are character actors who routinely pop up in minor roles in movies and TV, and you can never remember where you've seen them before, but you do remember liking them in everything you've seen them *in*? That's Bob Hanske at Genesius Guild. Sometimes it only takes a few minutes of stage time to make a sizable impression, and this year, Hanske always made the most of his few minutes; his Adam in *As You Like It* and Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* proved him effortlessly adept at Shakespeare, his thunderous Messenger in *Medea* soared beyond the restrictions of his mask (he has a great voice for the classics), and the annual Don Wooten burlesque - this year's was *The Frogs* - showed Hanske to be something that theatre is always in need of: a happily unapologetic goofball. Other Guild actors had larger roles this summer; no one else was so consistently good back to back to back to *back* .

Jackie Madunic

Appearing at three different area venues, Madunic bookended her 2007 with Tina Turner and Rodgers & Hammerstein, and found time in the middle to play a Johnny Burke chanteuse, a deaf-mute chef, and Tennessee Williams' Amanda Wingfield. Did any other area actor enjoy such a variety of roles, or appear to have more fun playing them? One would think that knocking the audience out with a riveting take on "Proud Mary" in *Beehive* would be enough for any performer, but no - at Playcrafters, she was a smooth, confident vocalist in *Swinging on a Star* and a fearless physical comedienne in *Flaming Idiots* , and at the Green Room, Madunic's heartfelt theatricality in *The Glass Menagerie* was matched by her vibrant, eventually devastating turn in

Carousel
. I'm not sure if the actress is willing to keep up this pace in 2008, but I'm crossing my fingers; this year, Madunic was easily area theatre's performing MVP.

Jason Platt

By including him here, I'm cheating a bit on my self-imposed "must have participated in four shows or more" rule, as I only saw Platt in Richmond Hill's *Death Takes a Holiday,* New Ground's *Living Here*, and Music Guild's *Anything Goes*. But if you count the fact that this tirelessly dynamic actor appeared - as two wildly disparate figures - in both the *And So to Bed* and *About Earnest* one-acts for New Ground, that brings the tally to four. And if you count the fact that *Anything Goes'* Moonface Martin frequently found Platt assuming all manner of slapstick disguises, that brings the tally to about a dozen. This last performance, by the way, had me laughing 'til I cried, but even in his more dramatic portrayals this year (and his adulterous lover in *Holiday* was especially fine), I smiled every time Platt spoke; he continually - even as Moonface - delivered subtlety, ingenuity, and *beyond-*commendable naturalism.

Tristan Tapscott

It took quite a while to get the terrifically engaging and committed Tapscott on an area stage this year, but once he landed, he made up for lost time; over two weekends beginning November 30, the actor was a jovial Fred, a tortured Marley, and a creepily mute Christmas Future in Circa '21's *A Christmas Carol, and* delivered a smashingly effective - and beautifully well-sung - Enoch Snow in the Green Room's *Carousel*. (On December 7, you could actually see him in *three* local venues, as he also appeared in the Theo's Java Club film premiere of *Your Favorite Band*, by co-founder Tapscott's My Verona Productions.) Prior to his busy winter, though, Tapscott was a significant behind-the-scenes force, directing My Verona's *Oleanna* and (with C.J. Langdon) co-directing the group's splendid *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Next up: playing drums in the Circa '21 production of *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. Yes, it appears. He *can* do everything.

Tom Walljasper

This year, the much-loved and endlessly creative Walljasper lent his considerable talents to Circa '21's *Goldilocks & the Three Bears* and *Almost Heaven: Songs of John Denver*. Oh, wait - my mistake. Those were the two Circa '21 shows he *didn't* lend his considerable talents to. Frequent guests to the theatre are no stranger to Walljasper's buoyant, eccentric, and fiercely thought-out portrayals, and this year saw him adding new productions of *West Side Story, Church Basement Ladies, Oklahoma!, Don't Dress for Dinner,* and *Irving Berlin's White Christmas* to his intimidating résumé. Yet, wearing directorial shoes, he was also responsible for two joyous family musicals; the *Charlotte's Web* and *A Christmas Carol* matinées were first-rate - funny and surprisingly moving - and easily held their own with any of

the venue's evening presentations. It seems ungrateful to ask for even more from Walljasper in 2008, but still ... more, please!