

The Connection

Editorial, June 13, 2001

A Night to Remember

Sunday evening was a gala affair for many of the area's teenagers who flocked to the Kennedy Center for their very own version of Broadway's Tonys.

The Critics and Awards Program, otherwise known as The Cappies, is the brainchild of Bill Strauss of McLean, the director of The Capitol Steps and the parent of a high school student.

His idea to honor aspiring singers, dancers, actors, musicians, and back stage people was simple but striking.

For two years now, high schools in Northern Virginia have participated in the program. Each high school designates one play or musical for review by Cappies critics, high school students from other schools. These students attend the designated shows and write reviews on deadline for local publications, including The Connection. Each one reviews at least five shows and then participates in a balloting process to select first the nominees and then the winners. Two panels of theater professionals serve as judges to review the ballots and certify and seal the awards results.

The whole process is conducted the same way any professional award program would be. The results have been encouraging, an increasing number of participating schools and increasing recognition of these very talented students.

All too often recognition and publicity goes only to athletes, except for the once a year acknowledgment of scholars. This program not only recognizes and awards talent, it gives teenagers, both those performing and those writing about it, the opportunity to take part in a real world process.

For some of these students, the Cappies may be the inspiration for a future career, but for all it was a memorable experience culminating in a night of glamour in Washington, D.C.

Congratulations to Bill Strauss for a program which has begun to spread to other areas and one that enables our children to aspire to be the very best.

The Journal

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Hats Off to the Cappies

by Ivy Main

Here in the suburbs, we know what we want for our kids' future, and it boils down to a single word: college. The better the college, the more secure we'll feel about our children's prospects.

And we know of only three main ways to ensure admission to a top college: brilliant academics, large sums of money or team sports.

Given the choice, some of us would opt for brilliant kids, others for money. But considering how hard those are to come by, we'll settle for sports.

We are, as a result, just a little obsessed with kids' athletics. And this isn't only the parents; it's our whole culture.

Judging simply by the numbers of newspaper articles, anyone would assume that high school sports were more important to society than kids' intellectual achievements, musical proficiency, artistic talents and all other creative endeavors combined.

You'd think adults would know better. By the time we're old enough to have kids in high school, very few of us are in any kind of shape to play competitive team sports ourselves. The closest we come is the competition to see which of us can claim the most knee surgeries.

Yet it's the people who developed their creative talents that often have the most rewarding lives as adults. Whether they've paid off their student loans, of course, is another matter.

So while it would be nice if schools, society and the media made as much of our talented teen actors, musicians, artists and dancers as they do of our athletes, we're not holding our breath.

In the meantime, though, there's the Cappies, short for the "Critics and Awards Program" for high school theater. Through this program, student critics write reviews of plays and musicals held at other schools around the region, then vote on awards that are given out at a Tony Awards-style extravaganza.

Founded only four years ago, the Cappies program has grown to include 48 public and private high schools in Virginia, Maryland and the District, and has been adopted by half a dozen other metropolitan areas across the United States.

Last week's Cappies Gala filled the concert hall of the Kennedy Center to capacity with elegantly dressed students, teachers and parents. Indeed, they looked so unlike the high school students we know that it was a relief to spot a young lady who had secured the straps of her evening gown with a twisted candy wrapper.

And while they brought with them a level of energy and enthusiasm rarely seen in a Kennedy Center audience, their behavior also reflected the maturity and professionalism with which they approached their theater work all through the year.

The results were on display between awards, as a dozen schools presented scenes from the productions that had earned them award nominations.

The adults in the audience could only be impressed by the tremendous talent and hard work these scenes revealed. Let's face it: Most of us are not used to thinking of teenagers as artists dedicated to their craft.

To us, teen culture generally means rap music, moronic movies and way too much hanging out at the mall. If we've been reading media reports, we also are thinking sex, drugs and psychopaths.

In one sense, this is good: It sets our expectations so low that we're bound to be impressed when the kids achieve something to be proud of.

But on the other hand, it's not precisely flattering.

So we couldn't help wondering how the kids felt when more than one award presenter assured the crowd, with a tone almost of relief, that this evening represented the "real teen culture." When you hear it once, it's rather nice. Twice, and you wonder who they need to convince.

The kids themselves didn't say anything on the subject, though that may have had something to do with the fact that the award winners were limited to speeches of no more than six words apiece.

Can you imagine adults complying with a limit like that? We can only be grateful that the kids are still young enough to take rules seriously.

We also suspect that these kids don't need to be reassured about themselves. Though we'd love to see college scholarships flow from their performances, we've seen something that will be quite as valuable in the long run, young actors, singers, dancers, designers and writers developing their talents and supporting each other with the respect and recognition they've earned.

And for this, our caps are off to them.