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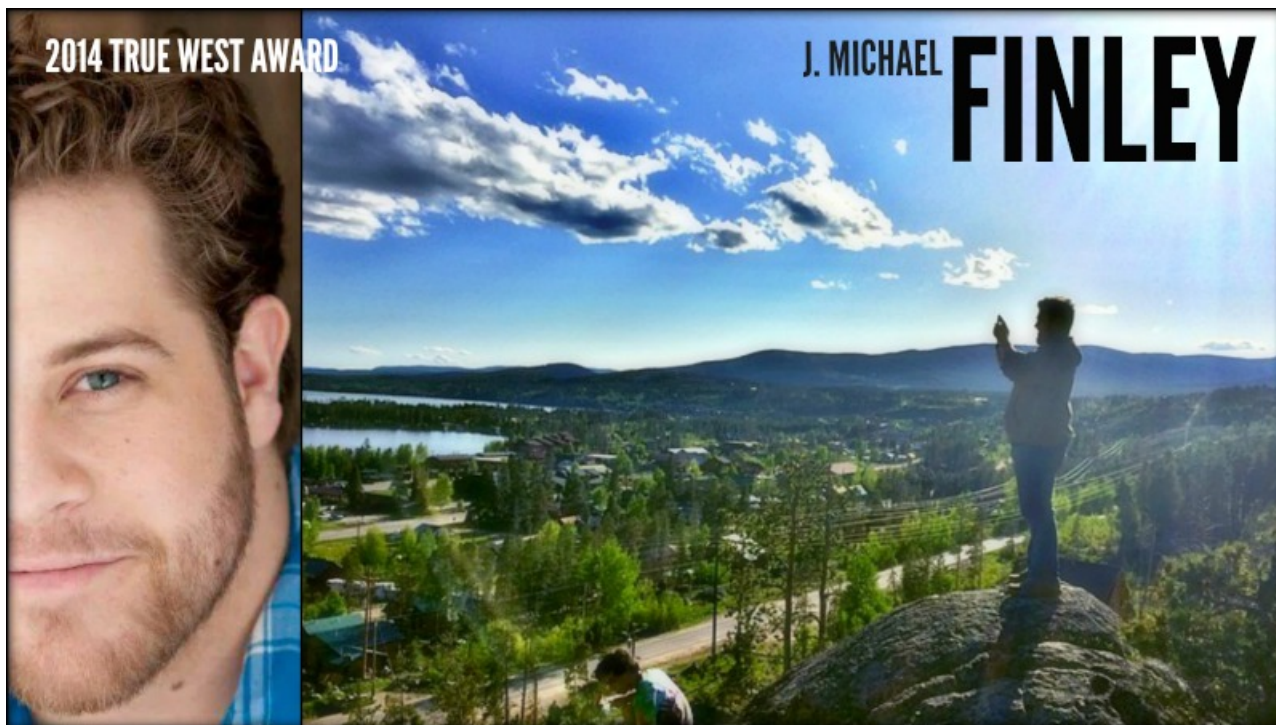
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2014 True West Award: J. Michael Finley

by John Moore | Dec 24, 2014

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TRUE WEST AWARDS: 30 DAYS, 30 AWARDS

As the new musical *Hands on a Hardbody* opened on the second night of my weekend visit to the Rocky Mountain Repertory Theatre last summer in Grand Lake, I couldn't help but wonder where the distinctive actor playing a burly, bearded and blue-collar Texas cutthroat named Benny was the night before, when many of these same actors were tackling a little monster called *Les Misérables*.



What's that, you say? He was Valjean? The most famous and principled bread thief in literary history? ... Nah. So, wait. The guy wearing shorts and tube socks an NBA headband and talking in a redneck Texas twang is the same guy who was tickling the rafters 24 hours earlier with that *Bring Him Home* falsetto of his? The same guy who sang "Who am I?" at pretty much the exact same time I was asking myself, "Who *is* that guy?"

I guess that's a testament to the power of transformation.

That's J. Michael Finley, 2014's poster child for why summer theatre in Grand Lake has been a delightful Colorado summer tradition going back to 1967. Every year, about 1,500 rising young professional actors from around the country audition to join the company at auditions in Chicago, St. Louis, Memphis and Denver. We may not know who they are when they perform in Grand Lake, but we sure do hear about many of them after they leave. People like Kurt Hellerich, who went straight from playing Rocky Mountain Rep's Peter Pan to the DCPA's butchered boy in *Lord of the Flies*. Colorado Springs native Josh Franklin went from Grand Lake to Broadway's *Anything Goes*, *Ghost the Musical* and others.

When the 2014 season opened last June, five Rocky Mountain Rep alumni were appearing on Broadway.

It's easy to see how a versatile guy like Finley might be next. He's from Lebanon, Mo., and graduated from Roosevelt, the same Chicago university that matriculated Denver native Tucker Worley on his way to the national tour of *Mamma Mia*. Finley's Valjean was both vocally impressive and substantively performed. I later got an email from a random audience member insisting that Finley "was better than the guy on Broadway."

The Rocky Mountain Repertory Theatre is the real deal. Director Jeff Duke's *Les Mis* sported 28 actors, an elaborate barricade and great costumes, making it the largest undertaking company history. The cast included Town Hall Arts Center leading man Russell Mernagh (*Rent, Damn Yankees*) as Enjolras. The season also included *Shrek* and *Double Trouble*.

The *Hardbody* premise is slight, and one that practically begs for satire. Ten cookie-cutter character types sliced from the pie of Americana have been selected to participate in a degrading radio contest at a local shopping mall. It's a grueling, marathon test of endurance with one choreography-crippling rule: Whoever can keep one hand on the new truck the longest, wins it.

After playing Valjean, you might expect Finley to take more of a hands-off approach to *Hands on a Hardbody*. Instead, Finley brought real-life returning champ Benny to calculating life, playing him a kind of cutthroat small-town philosopher without making him look like foolish. Because a musical about poor small-town folk this desperate must a thin red line between championing them and satirizing them.

And in a bizarre-o twist of musical one-upmanship, there are actually two competing (and strikingly similar) musicals inspired by this very same, very dumb contest, perhaps because it was the subject of a 1997 documentary.

You may remember that *Slow Dance with a Hot Pickup*, which got its world premiere at Boulder's Dinner Theatre in 2011, was written by John Pielmeier (*Agnes of God*) and Emmy winner Matty Selman (*The Simpsons*). *Hands on a Hardbody* was written by Pulitzer-winner Doug Wright (*I Am My Own Wife, Grey Gardens, The Little Mermaid*), Trey Anastasio (of jam-band Phish) and Amanda Green (NBC's *Peter Pan*). I guess *Hands on a Hardbody* wins, because it made it to Broadway, and the score was nominated for a Tony Award.

John Moore's 2011 video report from the opening of the new theatre in Grand Lake:



2014 TRUE WEST AWARDS TO DATE:

1. Norrell Moore
2. Kate Gleason
3. Amanda Berg Wilson and Jeremy Make
4. Ben Cowhick
5. Robert Michael Sanders
6. David Nehls
7. Adrian Egolf
8. Emma Messenger
9. Buntport's *Naughty Bits*
10. Tim Howard
11. Gleason Bauer
12. Daniel Traylor
13. Aisha Jackson and Jim Hogan
14. Cast of 'The Whipping Man'
15. Rick Yaconis
16. Michael R. Duran
17. Laura Norman
18. Jacquie Jo Billings
19. Megan Van De Hey
20. Jeremy Palmer
21. Henry Lowenstein
22. Sam Gregory
23. Wendy Ishii
24. J. Michael Finley
25. Kristen Samu and Denver Actors Fund volunteers
26. Matthew D. Peters
27. Shannan Steele
28. Ludlow, 1914
29. *Spring Awakening* and *Annapurna*

ABOUT THE TRUE WEST AWARDS

The True West Awards, which began as the Denver Post Ovation Awards in 2001, are the longest-running continuously administered awards program in Colorado theater. This year, the awards have been re-conceived to simply recognize 30 award-worthy achievements in local theatre, without categories or nominations.

A different honoree will be singled out each day for 30 days.

The True West Awards are administered by arts journalist John Moore, who was named one of the 12 most influential theater critics in the U.S by American Theatre Magazine, and is a past recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts Fund and the National Arts Journalism Award.

*The DCPA TheatreFest awards, which are administered by the Denver Center for Performing Arts, are a community effort.

More information about the True West Awards can be found at [www.truewestawards.com](#)

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ABOUT THE EDITOR



John Moore

Award-winning arts journalist John Moore has recently taken a groundbreaking new position as the DCPA's Senior Arts Journalist. With The Denver Post, he was named one of the 12 most influential theater critics in the US by American Theatre Magazine. He is the founder of the **Denver Actors Fund**, a nonprofit that raises money for local artists in medical need. John is a native of Arvada and attended Regis Jesuit High School and the University of Colorado at Boulder. Follow him on Twitter [@moorejohn](#).

DCPA is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating unforgettable shared experiences through beloved Broadway musicals, world-class plays, educational programs and inspired events. We think of theatre as a spark of life — a special occasion that's exciting, powerful and fun. Join us today and we promise an experience you won't soon forget.