

The Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards

Antoinette “Tony” Perry and the Origins of the Tony Awards

The Tony, named in honor of Antoinette Perry, has been one of the theatre’s most coveted awards and is annually bestowed on professionals for “distinguished achievement” in theatre and not for the “best” in any category.

When Antoinette Perry died in 1946 at the age of fifty-eight, many people who knew her were determined that she would not be forgotten. As chairman of the board and secretary of the American Theatre Wing throughout World War II, Antoinette Perry insisted on perfection and high standards of quality. Her dedication and tireless efforts to broaden the scope of theatre through the many programs of the American Theatre Wing affected hundreds of people.

Antoinette Perry made her first impact on the theatre in 1906, when she was only eighteen. She played opposite David Warfield in *MUSIC MASTER* and, the following year, in David Belasco’s *A GRAND ARMY MAN*. Only two years later, and at an age when most actresses are still waiting for that first big break, Antoinette Perry retired, a star, to marry and raise a family.

Her daughters, Elaine and Margaret, pursued acting careers in the theatre. Elaine became an active member of the American Theatre Wing as well, and Margaret, who understudied Ingrid Bergman in *LILIOM*, stage-managed the touring production of *THE BARRETTS OF WIMPOLE STREET*.

In 1922, after the death of her husband, Antoinette Perry returned to the stage and appeared in many plays, including *MINICK*, by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, in 1924, and Margaret Anblin’s 1927 production of *ELECTRA*. In association with Brock Pemberton, she then turned her talent to directing, enriching the theatre with several memorable plays, including Preston Sturges’ comedy *STRICTLY DISHONORABLE*, in 1929 and Mary Chase’s classic, *Harvey*, in 1944.

When Antoinette Perry died, it was Jacob Wilk who first suggested the idea of an Antoinette Perry Memorial to John Golden. He, in turn, presented the idea to the Wing. Brock Pemberton, a long-time personal friend as well as business associate, was appointed chairman of the committee, and suggested that the Wing give a series of candidates for the award in each category. The members who made the final selections in the first year were: Vera Allen, Louise Beck, Jane Cowl, Helen Hayes, Brooks Atkinson, Kermit Bloomgarden, Clayton Collyer, George Heller, Rudy Karnolt, Burns Mantle, Gilbert Miller, Warren P. Munsell, Solly Pernick, James E. Sauter, and Oliver Sayler.

The first awards were made at a dinner in the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1947. With Vera Allen, Antoinette Perry's successor as Wing chairwoman, presiding, the evening included dining, dancing, and a program of entertainment whose participants included Mickey Rooney, Herb Shriver, Ethel Waters, and David Wayne.

The following year, Mrs. Martin Beck, one of the Wing's founders, succeeded Vera Allen as chairwoman of the board. When Mrs. Beck retired, the distinguished actress Helen Menken presided in that office until 1957 when she became president of the Wing. She succeeded Helen Hayes, who was elected in 1950. Until her death in 1966, Helen Menken devoted herself to the Wing and its numerous programs, including the yearly presentation of the Tony Awards. Mrs. John Stevenson, an active board member for seventeen years, was elected president and remains so today.

During the first two years, there was no official Tony award. The winners were presented with, in addition to a scroll, a cigarette lighter or a compact. The United Scenic Artists sponsored a contest for a suitable design for the award and Herman Rosse's entry, depicting the masks of comedy and tragedy on one side and the profile of Antoinette Perry on the other, was selected. In 1949, the medallion was initiated at the third annual dinner. It continues to be the official Tony Award.

From 1947 until 1965, the dinner and Tony Award presentation were held in various ballrooms of such hotels as the Plaza, the Waldorf Astoria, and the Hotel Astor. The ceremonies were broadcast over WOR radio and The Mutual network and, in 1956, televised for the first time on Du Mont's Channel 5. Brock Pemberton, Mrs. Martin Beck, Helen Hayes, and Ilka Chase presided over the ceremonies and award presentations and entertainment was provided by such notables of the theatre as Katherine Geraldine Page, Anne Bancroft, Sidney Poitier, Fredric March, Robert Goulet, Gig Young, Anna Maria Alberghetti, Henry Fonda, Patricia Neal, and many others.

In spite of the death of Helen Menken in March of 1966, the awards were presented at the Rainbow Room the following month. The ceremony was subdued and, for the first and only time, held in the afternoon without public attendance or entertainment. Both factors have, since the inception of the awards up to the present day Tony ceremony, been important to the program.

Considered a vital influence in the theatre, representing quality and distinction, the League of New York Theatres—renamed the League of American Theatres and Producers, Inc.—was authorized by the American Theatre Wing to present the Tony Awards in 1967 when the ceremonies were moved from the traditional hotel ball room setting to a Broadway theatre at the suggestion of Alvin Cooperman, who was vice president of special programs at NBC-TV. Alexander H. Cohen produced the nationwide television show and organized the ball and supper dance after the awards. The American Theatre Wing continues to preserve the original quality of intimacy by holding a party each year at Sardi's for Wing members and friends that salutes the Tony and the Stage Door Canteen.

In 1971, Alexander H. Cohen, producer of the American Theatre Wing's Tony show, marked that twenty-fifth anniversary of the Antoinette Perry Awards. In celebration of such an auspicious event, the entertainment for that year was an extraordinary, show-stopping recapitulation of the past. David Wayne, Nanette Fabray, Alfred Drake, Ray Walston, Vivian Blaine, Sam Levene, Yul

Brynner, Patricia Morrison (subbing for the late Gertrude Lawrence), Edie Adams, Gwen Verdon, John Raitt, Stanel Holloway, Robert Preston, Richard Kiley, Tom Bosley, Florence Henderson (subbing for Mary Martin), Paul Lynde, Zero Mostel, Carol Channing, Angela Lansbury, Jill Hayworth, Leslie Uggams, William Daniels, Virginia Vestoff, and Lauren Bacall magically and magnificently recreated musical moments of the roles for which they had been awarded the Tony in past seasons.