

Dramatic emergence of Pulitzer winner **BOARD SNUBS JURY'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

By Mike Boehm

Los Angeles Times

San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched: 04/22/2007 01:34:40 AM PDT

David Lindsay-Abaire is safely in the record books as a Pulitzer Prize winner for drama, having been honored last week for "Rabbit Hole," a critically praised but stylistically conventional play - scheduled for production at San Jose Rep in May - about an investment banker and his wife trying to restart their lives and rescue their marriage after the death of their 4-year-old son.

But Lindsay-Abaire might be the first Pulitzer-winning playwright to benefit from a seldom-invoked rule that enabled a board made up mainly of high-ranking news editors to snub the choices of a nominating jury of theater experts for the second consecutive year. (The jury included Mercury News theater critic Karen D'Souza.)

"Rabbit Hole," which had a Broadway run with "Sex and the City" star Cynthia Nixon in a Tony-winning turn as the grieving mother, was not among the three finalists submitted by the five-member jury made up of theater critics from New York and Minneapolis-St. Paul as well as D'Souza, along with Kimberly Benston, a professor of English at Haverford College and author of a book on black performance styles, and playwright Paula Vogel, winner of the 1998 Pulitzer for "How I Learned to Drive."

The finalists all were little-known, even to many theater insiders: "Bulrusher" by Eisa Davis; Rinde Eckert's "Orpheus X"; and "Elliot, a Soldier's Fugue" by Quiara Alegria Hudes.

The 17-member Pulitzer board tossed them and picked "Rabbit Hole" instead. And Lindsay-Abaire is not complaining.

"There's a lot of luck involved, and this time I was lucky," he said. "I don't know what happened in that room, and frankly, I don't care. All I care about is somebody called me up and said, 'You've won the Pulitzer.'"

Lindsay-Abaire long has been a brand name in regional theaters and off-Broadway with "Fuddy Meers" and "Kimberly Akimbo," quirky comedies about women with strange, life-changing disabilities.

While "Rabbit Hole" lacked a nomination from the jury chaired by New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley - who said through a representative of his paper that he couldn't comment on deliberations - it didn't just get plucked out of a hat, said Sig Gissler, the non-voting administrator of the Pulitzer prizes.

"It had been mentioned favorably in the jury report, and the board decided to take a look at it," Gissler said. Jury reports list finalists in alphabetical order, with comments on why each would be prize-worthy. But they can include mentions of other plays that were considered.

When none of the drama finalists received the majority vote needed to win, Gissler said, the Pulitzer board, which included New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, Miami Herald Executive Editor Anders Gyllenhaal and Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism Dean Nicholas Lemann, was free to invoke a provision allowing it to consider a different choice as long as three-fourths of the members agreed to do so.

"Rabbit Hole" secured the super-majority needed to be discussed, then the simple majority needed to win the prize.

Still, the awarding of a Pulitzer to a play that was not one of the finalists appears to be unprecedented, Gissler said, at least since finalists were disclosed starting in 1983. In 1992, Robert Schenkkan's "The Kentucky Cycle" was chosen over four finalists, but Gissler said that was a case in which the jury nominated all five plays. Nowadays, he added, jurors are under orders to name only three.

Donald Margulies, who won the Pulitzer in 2000 for "Dinner With Friends" but was a bridesmaid in 1992 (to Schenkkan) and when no drama prize was awarded in 1997, speculated last week that the Pulitzer board didn't want to give the prize to an unknown but, "for fear of losing credibility," could not tolerate two years in a row with no prize for drama.

Last year's lack of a prize left Craig Lucas, a much-praised playwright who hasn't won a Pulitzer, fuming to the Times that the Pulitzer board wouldn't recognize quality "if it ran over them with a truck."