

Reflections on an Eventful Theatre Year

Looking back at a year of theatre in Los Angeles always evokes fond memories, thoughts of some shows that failed to live up to expectations, and ruminations on the overall state of the local scene and where it might be headed from here.

Economic concerns, of course, currently loom large for all disciplines in the arts. We're hopeful that all of L.A.'s theatre companies--whether the large groups focusing on more commercial fare, or the ever-struggling small theatres, steadfastly plying their trade against the odds--can withstand the current economic challenges and continue to survive and grow.

Among the year's most satisfying events was the unveiling of the gorgeously remodeled Mark Taper Forum, giving this superb venue a sparkling face-lift and improved functionality, kicking off with a wonderful revival of the John Guare classic *The House of Blue Leaves*.

It's encouraging that West Coast Ensemble, which has been homeless the past few years after losing its space, has found a venue it will rent for another year, the El Centro Theatre (site of the legendary Cast Theatre) and the group has announced a very interesting 2009 bill of fare. (Watch for more news on that in an upcoming post.) This year, the group offered a superb revival of Sondheim's *Assassins*.

In another happy arrangement, John Perrin Flynn's highly promising Rogue Machine Company, which debuted this year with three fine productions, continues in its arrangement to sublease the Theatre/Theater space six months a year to present an annual season--with the upcoming bill of fare soon to be revealed. There are other small startup groups hoping to gain a foothold, and hopefully they'll be as successful as Rogue Machine has been.

Blog spider 2009 also brought the smashing premiere season of Nick DeGruccio and Chad Borden's itinerant Havok Theatre Company, which offered terrific L.A. premieres of *Thrill Me: The Leopold and Loeb Story*, *Dog Sees God: Confessions of Teenage Blockhead*, and the Kander and Ebb/Terrence McNally musical marvel *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (see photo, by Michael Lamont, featuring Terra C. Macleod and Chad Borden). More exciting yet, Havok forgoes the traditional 99-Seat Plan program of Actors Equity Association in favor of paying more actors more money under the Hollywood Area Theatre agreement, a highly laudable local development. Another scintillating debut just occurred last week, as the brand-new group Jaxx Theatricals unveiled a galvanizing local premiere of Cy Coleman's little-known musical *The Life at the Stella Adler Theatre*.

Following are other shows that particularly stand out in my memory as the finest I saw this year.

Drama: Long Day's Journey into Night at Theatricum Bontanicum, with a haunting performance by Ellen Geer, leading a brilliant ensemble; VS. Theatre Company's stunning staging of John Kolvenbach's On An Average Day, with dynamic portrayals by Johnny Clark and Stef Tovar and the company's production of the harrowing wartime drama Pugilist Specialist; Gangbusters Theatre Company's riveting revival of the Vietnam War drama Tracers; Writer-performer Nilaja Sun's inspired solo play No Child...at the Kirk Douglas Theatre; Furious Theatre Company's lacerating revival of the apartheid drama Saturday Night at the Palace; Theatre of NOTE's premiere of Erik Patterson's near-watershed gay-themed drama He Asked For It, featuring a knockout performance by Joe Egender; Noise Within's luminous revival of the fanciful classic The Rainmaker; Athol Fugard's Victory in a shattering production at the Fountain; Jeanette Scherrer's March On Dream Normal, a resonant antiwar drama, offered by Lucid by Proxy; Celebration Theatre's memsmerizing revisit to Chay Yew's Porcelain, brilliantly directed by Michael Matthews, who unfortunately has stepped down from his artistic director post with the company, but thankfully remains as a resident director. Michael Shepperd has now at the helm, and we wish him continued success in leading this veteran, highly regarded company.

Comedies and Dramedies: The aforementioned Dog Sees God, directed by Nick DeGruccio; The Little Dog Laughed, Douglas Carter Beane's delicious Broadway satire in its West Coast debut at the Kirk Douglas; the surprisingly clever and spry Girl's Room, starring Carol Lawrence and Donna McKechnie at the El Portal; director Damaso Rodriguez' swell revival of Orson's Shadow at Pasadena Playhouse; Blank Theatre's hilarious and thoughtful production of Steven Karam's Speech and Debate at the Blank Theatre, under the ever-reliable direction of Daniel Henning; Jonathan Tolins' charming and insightful Secrets of the Trade at the Black Dahlia Theatre; the Celebration Theatre's fascinating Stupid Kids; Son of Semele's divine staging of Sarah Ruhl's wacky Melancholy Play.

Blog 9 to 5 Musicals: There were so many stellar productions this year, I won't even try to salute them all. But let's start the recollections with Havok's aforementioned Spider Woman and Thrill Me, and segue to the Ahmanson's splendid world premiere of Dolly Parton's Broadway-bound 9 to 5 and its terrific tour engagements of Spring Awakening and A Chorus Line. There was a brilliant staging of of Jason Robert Brown's long-neglected Parade at the Neighborhood Playhouse in Palos Verdes. Musical Theatre West in Long Beach gave us four-star productions of All Shook Up, The Wizard of Oz, and The Andrews Brothers. Reprise did itself proud with Li'l Abner and I Love My Wife, while Musical Theatre Guild dusted off the chesnuts Seesaw and Most Happy Fella, to most felicitous effect.

More Musicals: Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities gave us delectable revivals of Bye Bye Birdie and Fiddler on the Roof and premiered a fun-filled new tuner, Twice Upon a Time, by British farce-master Roy Cooney. Cabrillo Music Theatre offered great revivals of The King and I and Singin' in the Rain, and Downey Civic Light

Opera was at its best in South Pacific. Fullerton Civic Light Opera offered one of the best West Side Story mountings I've ever seen, courtesy of Sha Newman's masterful direction and choreography and some great performances. Four debuting works-- South Coast Repertory's An Italian Straw Hat, Antaeus Company's American Tales, Kirk Douglas Theatre's Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson, and Theatre at Boston Court's Chekhov adaptation Gulls--were all magnificent. Pasadena Playhouse's Vanities offered great promise, but its move to Broadway this spring has reportedly been stalled by economic roadblocks. **Last but far from least, how could anyone forget Sacred Fools' inspired Louis & Keely Live at the Sahara, a combination cabaret show/heartbreaking bio-musical that's clearly destined for a fabulous future.**

Come to think of it, it was a damn fine year. Here's hoping 2009 can match it, and then some.

--Les Spindle