

Uncategorizable highlights as 2004 reaches final curtain

Inside Bay Area

THEATER in the Bay Area is many things — occasionally thrilling, frequently quirky, almost always original and very rarely dull.

Herewith some "achievements" that don't fall neatly into a Top 10 list.

Best new venue — Berkeley's Shotgun Players have been gypsies for too long. In spite of some less-than-stunning venues and a frustrating quest for a home of its own, Shotgun finally settled into The Ashby Stage, formerly the Transparent Theatre. If the first production in the space — Tom Stoppard's "Travesties" — is any indication, the marriage of Shotgun and its new home will yield some great theater.

Another promising pairing of company and venue is TheatreFirst's partnership with Mills College. This is another strong, ambitious company that likely will benefit from being anchored in one place.

Most interesting celebrity appearances — Rita Moreno in "Master Class" at Berkeley Repertory Theatre; Lea DeLaria in 42nd Street Moon's "Once Upon a Mattress."

Least interesting celebrity appearances — Olympia Dukakis in American Conservatory Theater's "A Mother"; a sweet but non-dancing Mikhail Baryshnikov in Rezo Gabriadze's "Forbidden Christmas or the Doctor and the Patient."

Least successful movies-turned-musicals — Sometimes it's better for a good movie to remain on the silver screen. This was proven by Willows Theatre Company's musical "The Night of the Hunter" and the Magic Theatre's "The Opposite of Sex."

Most promising "American Idol" future — Frenchie Davis was kicked off the popular TV talent show, but she showed ample talent in her Bay Area musical theater debut in American Musical Theatre of San Jose's "Dreamgirls."

Most dazzling duets — Laurie O'Brien and Norbert Weisser gave ferociously good performances in John O'Keefe's "Times Like These" at San Francisco's Traveling Jewish Theatre. Another dynamic pairing came from Danny Wolohan and Sean San Jose's verbal jousting in "Sacrament!", the Campo Santo/Intersection of the Arts adaptation of Dave Eggers' novel "You Shall Know Our Velocity."

Biggest big-deal disappointment — David Mamet made his Bay Area directorial debut at the helm of his own "Doctor Faustus." The Mamet name sold a lot of tickets for the Magic Theatre, but the show was a depressing dud.

Perkiest puppets — With "The Lion King" in town for most of the year, it was a puppet-heavy season. But as intriguing as those Disney puppets were, more intriguing were Chris Brown's life-size creations for "The Comedy of Errors" at California Shakespeare Theater and Wendy T. King's for Word for Word's "Three Blooms."

Best Stoppard — The Bay Area just can't seem to get enough of British playwright Tom Stoppard. Among his plays produced in these parts during the year, TheatreWorks' "Arcadia" and Shotgun Players' "Travesties" were the best. ACT's "The Real Thing" was surprisingly inert.

Solo show spotlight — The Bay Area is rife with one-person shows. Among this year's crop, the winners were Mike Albo's "Spray" at Theatre Rhinoceros, Mark Lundholm's "Addicted" at the Marines Memorial Theatre, Ron Campbell in Terry Tarnoff's "The Boneman of Benares" at Encore Theatre Company and Eve Ensler's "The Good Body" at ACT.

Most welcome return — Comedian Carrie Snow was all the rage in the '80s and '90s before she withdrew to write for a sitcom and lose a bunch of weight. This fall she returned with a solo show in progress and a sense of humor that is as sharp as it ever was.

Horsiest actors — The stars of "Cavalia" didn't need applause so much as hay, carrots and the occasional apple. This equine version of Cirque du Soleil dazzled local audiences in February, then trotted back in late summer. With any luck, the show will canter back sometime soon.

Most promising new play factory — Magic Theatre artistic director Chris Smith introduced the Hot House this year, a rotating repertory of three new plays to be done each spring. This year's entries, "The Thirteen Hallucinations of Julio Rivera," "Drifting Elegant" and "Relativity," weren't brilliant, but there's tremendous potential here for discovery and delight.

Most intriguing title — Todd Pickering and Diane Karagianakos' "Come Fly with Me Nude."

Most promising new musical — While not perfect in its Bay Area debuts, TheatreWorks' "Memphis" showed promise and may yet turn into a dazzling piece of musical theater.

Most underrated musicals — Several smaller musicals revealed themselves to be worthy of a second look. Among them were "Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story" at the Post Street Theatre, "A Man of No Importance" at New Conservatory Theatre Center and "The Last Five Years" at Playhouse West.

Most disturbing musical trend — They're called jukebox musicals. The best example at the moment is "Mamma Mia!" which turns ABBA songs into a silly story. In the coming year, expect to see "All Shook Up" (Elvis), "Good Vibrations" (Beach Boys), "The Jersey Boys" (Four Seasons), "Lennon" (John Lennon), "Hott Feett" (Earth, Wind & Fire), "Colour My World" (Chicago), "The Wall" (Pink Floyd) and an as-yet untitled project involving Bob Dylan and director/choreographer Twyla Tharp.

Saddest theater losses — The musical theater took a big hit this year with the deaths of lyricist Fred Ebb, half of the Kander and Ebb partnership that produced "Cabaret," "Chicago" and "Kiss of the Spider Woman" among others, and Cy Coleman, the jazzy composer of "Sweet Charity," "City of Angels" and "The Life" among others.

Although he hadn't been on a stage in decades, the death of Marlon Brando inspired reflection on just how much he and the Method he used so well changed American acting as we know it.

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