

Critics' Forum

Theater

A Look Back ...

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

Initially, I had hoped to write a year-end article looking back on the best and worst of Armenian theater that I had experienced during the last twelve months. This lofty intention, however, was soon met with the sobering realization that the entire pool of choices consisted of four plays – and one of them was my own.

Despite the paucity of productions, however, Armenian theater was marked by several highlights this year. The inspired Armenian Center for the Arts project, aiming to construct a complex of performance halls and exhibition galleries, was launched. Major donations by Armenian benefactors led to the establishment, on both coasts, of theaters with names ending in “ian.” The Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance unveiled its richly informative webpage www.armeniandrama.org. And Contemporary Armenian American Drama, edited by Nishan Parlakian, added a valuable resource to our library of theater publications.

Progress, indeed. Still, in order to compile my “best of” and “worst of” lists, I had to widen my pool of choices to all the productions I had seen over the year – a count approaching 50.

The Best ...

The year's most accomplished productions certainly included an over-the-top and hilarious Tartuffe, presented by the Actors' Gang in the commedia dell'arte style; a provocative and perfectly-cast Yellowman at the Fountain Theatre; the Road Theater Company's Bunbury, an exceedingly clever and witty distortion of literary classics; and Doubt, John Patrick Shanley's acclaimed drama about suspected priestly abuse, starring Oscar winner Linda Hunt at the Pasadena Playhouse.

Indeed, narrowing my “best of” picks proved difficult enough that I had to manipulate seven selections into my list of the Top Five:

5. Mother Courage and Her Children (The Antaeus Company) and Happy End (Pacific Resident Theatre)

The year was teeming with productions of Bertolt Brecht's works of “epic theater.” The Antaeus Company in NoHo (North Hollywood, California) contributed a solid staging of Mother Courage about a war profiteer who finds financial opportunity in the battle between nations, but ultimately pays a the supreme price: the loss of her children. Over in Venice, a sentimental premise (saintly girl meets not-so-saintly boy and turns him around) and the Happy End promised by its title did not detract one bit from Brecht's

musical with Kurt Weill, finely crafted and sung in this Pacific Resident Theatre production.

4. *The Paris Letter* (Kirk Douglas Theater)

A tad long, often too literate, and perhaps even a bit messy, this altogether engrossing three-act marvel by Jon Robin Baitz told an ambitious story about a married businessman's life-long struggle with his repressed homosexuality. I harbor a particular affinity for Baitz's scripts (having directed *The Substance of Fire* and *Three Hotels*), though he can occasionally misfire (*Ten Unknowns*). Here, his intelligent writing was on full display, and the play pulsed with dramatic tension among compelling characters entrusted to a stellar cast led by Baitz mainstay Ron Rifkin.

3. *Play Without Words* (Ahmanson Theater)

Whether choreographer Matthew Bourne's stylish dance piece even qualifies as a play may be subject to question. It certainly had an intriguing plot, which traced the complex power shifts in the relationship between a wealthy man and his servant. And it definitely had well-drawn characters, triple-cast by Bourne to maximize the visual flair of dance moves, which managed to be slick, evocative, sexy, and mischievous all at the same time.

2. *Macbeth and Saint Joan* (Bighead Theater)

While "concept" productions of classical works can often portend disaster, director Eric Tucker's environmental stagings of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Shaw's *Saint Joan* – performed in a warehouse, no less – were nothing short of revelatory. In *Macbeth*, Tucker had the audience seated on movable bleachers which would be dragged to different points of the industrial space, allowing for fascinating changes in perspective. Equally inventive was the play's unconventional lighting, designed with little more than ordinary contraptions found at a hardware store. Plus, Nigel Gore and Joanna Beecher made a potent pair as the titular king and his infamous Lady. In *Saint Joan*, Tucker proved his own impressive acting skills, as he and the talented David Neher tackled nearly two dozen roles, generating precise, energetic performances that achieved brilliant moments of physical comedy, while turning on a dime to nail the play's more profound moments.

1. *The Pillowman* (Booth Theater / Broadway)

Young Irish playwright Martin McDonagh's superbly-composed new work was a brutal, yet darkly comic, piece about the interrogation of a short story writer (named Katurian Katurian) in a totalitarian state after the discovery of a string of crimes resembling the macabre violence described in his stories. Director John Crowley's Broadway production was always in tune with the play's moods, deftly shifting from violent tension to absurd comedy, and, ultimately, haunting emotion. Complementing Crowley's taut direction were the production's technical elements, particularly Scott Pask's stunning scenic design, which had inserted in the drab walls of the interrogation room secret

compartments that would open up to reveal stylized flashback scenes (and even panoramas), brilliantly lit by Hugh Vanstone. They created the perfect setting in which a flawless cast – led by film actors Billy Crudup (in perhaps the year’s best performance) and Jeff Goldblum (deliciously droll, as ever) – could soar.

The Worst ...

3. Thom Pain (The DR2) / Echo’s Hammer (The Theatre @ Boston Court)

Bad existentialist writing defined the Off-Broadway production of the aptly named Thom Pain (based on nothing). Will Eno’s solo play was, in fact, painful for most of its 60 minutes (despite the valiant efforts of actor James Urbaniak) as it rambled to a final message that had the depth of a t-shirt slogan. Echo’s Hammer at least had interesting visual elements, thanks to its incorporation of unique set pieces and props in the action, although Ken Roht’s script, while pretending to be weighty and meaningful, was, at its core, trite, banal, and even crass.

2. Waiting for Lefty (Sanford Meisner Center for the Arts)

In a weaker year, this dismal revival of Clifford Odets’ play about union unrest during the Depression would capture the “Worst of” prize, thanks to amateurish acting, clunky direction, and gimmicky environmental staging, including the ridiculous sight of actors in period costume “striking” on Lankershim Boulevard (in North Hollywood). However, this year’s dubious honor undoubtedly belongs to ...

1. Frozen (Pilot Light Theater)

This wretched production seemed to do everything possible to ruin Bryony Lavery’s rather excellent play about a serial killer and his connection to a young girl’s disappearance. The fact that Lavery’s writing (despite being plagued by accusations of plagiarism) could even be discerned in this fiasco speaks to its power. Although the matinee performance I attended was scheduled to begin at 3:00 pm, the doors to the theater did not open until after the appointed hour and after the actors had carted the box office table onto the stage to be used as a set piece. The set budget could not have been more than \$2.50, since not a single item on stage matched another. These red flags were precursors to the dreadful acting unleashed by the three-actor cast that barely outnumbered the four of us comprising the entire audience. The numbers evened out by Act 2, however, when the guy in the front row high-tailed it at intermission. I myself would have followed suit had it been possible to look away from this train wreck.

Come January, the new year will bring such anticipated local fare as Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell* at the Geffen and Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* at the Mark Taper, where Annette Bening is due to take center stage. I am hopeful that Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* at the American Conservatory Theater will be worth the trip to San Francisco,

and I've already booked my ticket to catch Cate Blanchett's turn as Hedda Gabler in New York.

And what of Armenian theater? Well, there's certainly promise. Little Armenia is currently in development at the Fountain Theatre. Vahe Berberian is polishing the script of his as-yet-untitled new play, and David Grillo may remount his lovely Off-Broadway production of *Beast on the Moon* on the West Coast, while over on the East, the Barrington Stage Company prepares to revive the musical adaptation of William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy*.

So here's my wish for Armenian theater in the new year, reduced to a mere three words:

“Excellence – and plenty.”

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