

THE YEAR IN REVIEW: THEATER



DAVID HOW LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE

THE ROCK OPERA "Jesus Christ Superstar" seemed fresh and vital at La Jolla Playhouse.

CHARLES McNULTY

BEST OF 2011

The theater gave us plenty to celebrate in 2011. In fact, it was a better year by theatrical standards than by most other measures. Here's what had me clapping loudest at home and abroad.

"Blackbird," Rogue Machine. Scottish playwright David Harrower's fierce psychodrama about the confrontation between a young woman and the man who sexually abused her when she was 12 took such unpredictable turns that Robin Larsen's unsparingly intimate staging starring Corryn Cummins and Sam Anderson left audiences questioning their sympathies and momentarily doubting their moral compasses.



JOHN FLYNN

CORRYN CUMMINS and Sam Anderson in the fierce "Blackbird."

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The year in photos

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A J.S. TOURING PRODUCTION

"Jesus Christ Superstar," La Jolla Playhouse. Des McAnuff pulled off something of a minor miracle in making this Broadway-bound revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera seem as fresh and vital as when it first appeared in all its hippie glory in the early '70s.

"Let Me Down Easy," the Broad Stage in San Monica and the Lyceum Stage in San Diego. Anna Deavere Smith lent her protean genius to the hotly contested subject of healthcare in a stirring documentary collage that asked us to put aside our ideological conflicts and contemplate instead the vulnerability and resiliency of the all too mortal bodies that define us.

"Peace in Our Time," the Antaeus Company at Dear West Theatre. The more serious side of Noel Coward's dramatic imagination provided an opportunity for the Antaeus Company to display its ensemble brilliance in a musically enhanced production directed by Casey Stangl that convincingly brought to life a counterfactual portrait of Britain under Nazi occupation.

"Luise Miller," Donmar Warehouse, London. Michael Grandage's exquisitely acted revival, featuring a radiant Felicity Jones as the doomed life chaser caught in political cross hairs, made this domestic tragedy by Friedrich Schiller seem like the best-kept theatrical secret of the 19th century.



LAWRENCE K. HO LA JOLLA TIMES

LAURENCE KINLAN in a revival of "The Cripple of Inishmaan."

"The Mother... With the Hat," Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, New York. Stephen Adly Guirgis' punning comedy about love and other periphrastic addictions was enacted with such ferocity by a cast that included Bobby Cannavale, Chris Rock and Elizabeth Rodriguez that Broadway has rarely seemed so authentically — and assaultively — street-wise before.

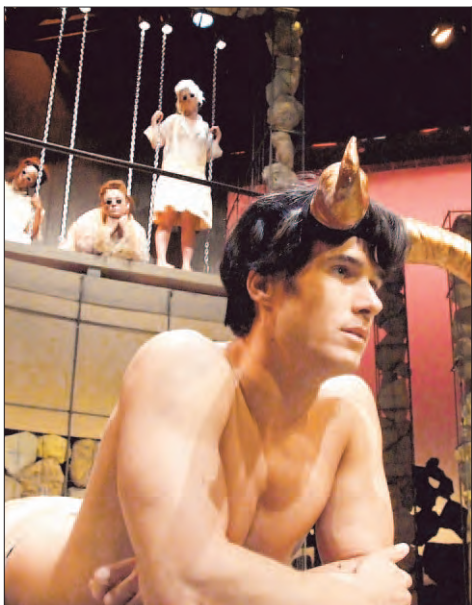
"The Normal Heart," John Golden Theatre, New York. Larry Kramer's momentous *cri de coeur* over the laggard public response to the AIDS epidemic in this country in the early '80s lost none of its urgency in this potent Broadway production directed by George C. Wolfe and Joe Grey that starred a devastatingly good Joe Mantello as Kramer's surrogate crusading self and a rousing Ellen Barkin as a doctor fighting a mysterious tide of death with few drugs but an enormous store of courage and empathy.

"One Man, Two Guvnors," National Theatre, London. Richard Bean's British romp, inspired by Carlo Goldoni's classic Italian comedy "The Servant of Two Masters," unleashed one of the greatest feats of clowning in recent memory in James Corden's performance that left grown men weeping with laughter at the National and will likely do the same when Nicholas Hytner's production arrives on Broadway this spring.

Bête noire

Can we call for a moratorium on Jane Austen stage adaptations? The Old Globe's kitschy "Jane Austen's Emma — A Musical Romantic Comedy" and South Coast Repertory's lightweight "Pride and Prejudice" suggest that film is a better vehicle for these tales, but why not just read them instead?

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ED KRUMHOLTZ

THE CHORUS Of Ashanti Brown, Teya Patt and Katie Locke O'Brien watch Nick Ballard, foreground, in Steve Yockey's "Heavier Than..."

NOTES ON THE YEAR

BIG LEAGUE

Smaller productions were diamonds in the rough.

CHARLES McNULTY THEATER CRITIC >>> Despite all the evidence to the contrary, bigger is still often mistaken for better in the theater. One would have thought that the colossal debacle known as "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark," which finally had its official opening in June, would have settled the matter, but the show continues to draw crowds even after all the bad press and withering pans.

Still, this season is memorable less for its grandiose spectacles than for its smaller, offbeat offerings, of which there has been an unusual

bounty. Mind you, not all the blockbuster were train wrecks. The daff cleverness of "The Book of Mormon" ebulliently demonstrates that large-scale concoctions needn't always spring from generic imaginations.

But much of the best work of 2011 flew under the radar. The play that made the biggest impression on me was Annie Baker's "Circle Mirror Transformation" at South Coast Repertory. Unfolding as a series of creative drama workshop exercises, this sprightly, seemingly improvisational piece isn't the kind of ponderous, throat-clearing effort that nabbs Tonys or a Pulitzer. It does, however, restore faith, as did Melissa Gibbs' "This" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, that original dramatists are breaking through a system that has been by and large stacked against them.

This is why any year that twice brings the loopy Austin, Texas-based troupe Rude Mechs and the disarmingly unconventional British writer and performer Tim Crouch to Los Angeles has to be considered a banner one. Radar L.A., the inaugural international theater festival that turned downtown L.A. (and select outposts) into a zone of groundbreaking performances in June, helped consolidate this innovative energy with a lineup that included the Rude Mechs' "The Method Gun"



JOAN MARCUS

"THE BOOK OF MORMON" Andrew Rannells.

at the Kirk Douglas, where the group's free-wheeling western musical, "I've Never Been So Happy," and Crouch's "The Author" were also produced. (Nice to see the Douglas intermittently come alive in 2011, but is there any way to resuscitate Center Theatre Group's flagship space, the Mark Taper Forum, which seems so resistant to taking risks these days?)

Again and again it was work that strayed from the beaten path — Païtaux Productions' electrically flamboyant "Cyclops: A Rock Opera," the Aristodote portion of David Greenspan's "Poetics and Plays" — that galvanized theatergoers, at least those adventurous enough to seek out

such nontraditional fare. Steve Yockey's bouncy retelling of the myth of the Minotaur, "Heavier Than..." may not have been vying for a place in the canon, but it received such a lively production at the Theatre at Boston Court that it brought a disproportionate amount of delight for its scope.

The same could be said for Guy Hollingworth's "The Expert at the Card Table," which Neil Patrick Harris directed at the Broad Stage's Edge, an occasion for such mesmerizing legderman that I'm still marveling at the card-sharp magic. (Here was a summer sleeper that made those in attendance feel like they had just been dealt three aces.) And nothing this year better exemplifies the concentrated power of bantamweight drama than "Blackbird," a two-hander by David Harrower at Rogue Machine that was more resonant than productions 10 times its size.

Happily, my theater highlights could easily have been twice as long as the accompanying list. My biggest regret is that some of the most inventive offerings, such as Crouch's "England" at the Skirball Cultural Center, were seen by only a select few. Let's hope this encourages all of us to be a bit more daring in our theatergoing for 2012.

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BEN HOKAR SCR

AN ENSEMBLE CAST brought "Circle Mirror Transformation," about secrets that emerge during drama workshop exercises, to life at South Coast Repertory.