

Ten reasons to be grateful in another sputtering theatrical year

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By Charles McNulty Theater Critic Dec. 17, 2021 4:06 PM PT

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(Illustration by Martina Ibañez-Baldor / Los Angeles Times; Nina Goodheart ; Matthew Murphy; Craig Schwartz Photography)

A year that begins with an insurrection isn't off to an auspicious start. In retrospect, it should have been clear that 2021 was going to have a hard time living up to the expectation that it had to be better than 2020.

Promise was riding high with vaccines and a new president. But then the Delta variant stormed onto the scene, scuttling the best-laid plans for reopening.

Entertainment & Arts

The best of 2021: In entertainment and the arts, a year of cautious reemergence

Dec. 16, 2021



The theater, ever resilient, creatively persevered. Zoom performances slowly but surely gave way to outdoor shows until finally it was deemed safe enough for us to gather indoors, albeit with masks, proof of vaccination and some lingering paranoia. The emergence of Omicron darkens this picture, but one thing we've learned is that the art form won't be defeated.

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UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance tested the waters in May with 600 Highwaymen's "A Thousand Ways (Part Two): An Encounter." The piece, a curious psychological experiment conducted without an audience, brought a pair of strangers into an empty Royce Hall to sit opposite each other behind a pane of plexiglass and answer personal questions printed on index cards.

It was a small yet emotionally stirring step in the process of becoming a theatergoer again. But it wasn't until I sat outside in the Fountain Theatre's parking lot for Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' "An Octoroon" in June that I truly felt like an audience member again. And it wasn't until the end of August that I took the momentous leap of entering a packed indoor venue for the opening night of "Hamilton" at the Hollywood Pantages.

No one could pretend that we're back to normal yet. There likely is no going back — and after a year of overdue cultural reckonings, that may be for the best.

Institutions are being held to account like never before. Playwright Jeremy O. Harris threatened to withdraw his acclaimed “Slave Play” from the Mark Taper Forum in protest of the paucity of women playwrights in the season. The absorbing Geffen Playhouse production of “Paradise Blue” closed early after author Dominique Morisseau pulled her play over the treatment of Black women artists following a problem that began internally with the creative team. Since the Hollywood Reporter’s Tatiana Siegel’s blockbuster report on the abusive behavior of Broadway mega-producer Scott Rudin, the theater community has become less tolerant of workplace exploitation and mistreatment that were once an open secret in showbiz.

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By LAT Giving Guide

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A ranking of the best productions of 2021 makes little sense in light of what we’ve been through, but there were memories that cry out for commemoration. The following is a personal record of gratitude for the productions, performers, visionaries and venues that have kept the art form dazzlingly alive on our stages and screens during yet another impossibly difficult year.



Janet Dacal and Sasson Gabay in the Tony-winning musical “The Band’s Visit” at the Dolby Theatre.

(Evan Zimmerman
)

1. “The Band’s Visit”

Composer-lyricist David Yazbek and writer Itamar Moses’ Tony-winning music drama at Dolby Theatre renewed my flagging spirit with its story about a group of Egyptian musicians forced to depend on the kindness of reluctant strangers when they’re stranded overnight in an Israeli backwater. Music bridges historical differences in a work that lifts the ordinary into a wistful sublime.



Michael Breslin, Jakeem Dante Powell and Patrick Foley star in “This American Wife.”

(Nina Goodheart
)

2. Fake Friends’ “This American Wife”

Fake Friends makes digital theater the way Charles Ludlam might have made it if the force behind the Ridiculous Theatrical Company had survived the AIDS epidemic. Conceived, written and performed by Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley, the show (which also starred a winning Jakeem Dante Powell) took its inspiration from the “Real Housewives” franchise to explore, with queer insouciance, the masquerade of identity in a contemporary America in which the continually rolling cameras make it hard to untangle real life from reality TV.



Pam Trotter, Vanessa Claire Stewart and Matthew Hancock in the Fountain Theatre's "An Octoroon" by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

(Jenny Graham)

3. The Fountain Theatre

L.A.'s most enterprising intimate theater continues to punch far above its weight. Thanks to the discernment of co-founder and artistic director Stephen Sachs, Angelenos got to experience Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' "An Octoroon" and Lucy Kirkwood's "The Children," two profoundly original works by dramatists forging new paths. No L.A. theater has done a better job of asking us to reexamine our lives through the lens of acute contemporary drama this year than the Fountain.



Jamael Westman and company in the “Hamilton” national tour.

(Joan Marcus)

4. “Hamilton”

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Tony-winning blockbuster hasn’t lost a step in its return to Hollywood Pantages Theatre, where a kinetic cast pounced onto the stage on opening night and delivered what everyone in the room had for too long been missing.



Emily Skeggs and Tiffany Mann in “Head Over Heels” at Pasadena Playhouse.

(Jeff Lorch
)

5. “Head Over Heels”

Pasadena Playhouse reopened not with a play but with a dance party. The show, a Broadway musical mashup of an English Renaissance pastoral romance and classic hits from the Go-Go’s, was reconceived to welcome theatergoers back with a high voltage shock of communal joy.



Jordan Hull and Ann Noble in the Echo Theatre Co. production of “Poor Clare.”

(Cooper Bates)

6. Jordan Hull in “Poor Clare”

Chiara Atik’s deliciously eccentric saint’s play, set in a 13th century Italian town, couldn’t have felt any more contemporary, thanks in no small measure to the timeless radiance of Jordan Hull (“The L Word: Generation Q”). Her portrayal of Clare of Assisi may have spoken in the clipped cadences of a spoiled Brentwood teen, but the example of another future saint, Francis (a delightfully outré Michael Sturgis), forces her to rethink her privilege in a society as riven by economic inequality as our own. This Echo Theater production continued the company’s tradition of balancing quirky comedy with social conscience.



American playwright Adrienne Kennedy in August 1967.

(Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

7. Adrienne Kennedy

Round House Theatre and McCarter Theatre Center joined forces to produce “The Work of Adrienne Kennedy: Inspiration & Influence,” a digital festival honoring one of the most influential yet under-produced American dramatists with a series of stage readings. Attention matters. One of the plays that was performed, “Ohio State Murders,” will be marking the 90-year-old Kennedy’s Broadway debut when Audra McDonald stars in an upcoming production.



“Lizastrata’ at the Getty Villa. Left to right: Jess Coffman , Cloie Wyatt Taylor and Suzanne Jolie.

(Craig Schwartz)

8. “Lizastrata”

Leave it to Troubadour Theater Company to meld Aristophanes’ anti-war sex farce “Lysistrata” and the fabulousness of Liza Minnelli. The combination proved to be a giddy delight at the Getty Villa in September, motored by the music hall pizzazz of the show’s Lizastrata (Cloie Wyatt Taylor), the inexhaustible camp of director-performer-adapter Matt Walker and the army of phalluses conjured into droll existence by costume designer Halei Parker and “additional phallus designer” Joe Seely.



Jessie Buckley as Juliet and Josh O'Connor as Romeo in the National Theatre production of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" that aired on "Great Performances" on PBS.

(National Theatre)

9. "Romeo & Juliet"

This National Theatre film, directed by Simon Godwin and starring Josh O'Connor and Jessie Buckley as Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, aired on PBS in the spring and instantly set a new bar for stage-screen hybrids with its breathless ardency and bracing fluidity.



Composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim in 2004.

(Charles Krupa / Associated Press)

10. Stephen Sondheim

As the world mourned the death of [Stephen Sondheim](#), tributes to the Broadway lyricist and composer reminded us of the indelible legacy he left us. His music lent aesthetic dignity to our collective grief, nowhere more movingly than when the Broadway community gathered in Times Square on the Sunday after his death to [sing](#) “Sunday” from “Sunday in the Park With George.” It’s only fitting that, in a year exploding with [movie musicals](#), Steven Spielberg’s [new](#) “West Side Story,” part of Sondheim’s priceless lyric-writing estate, has become 2021’s 11 o’clock number.

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