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Theater: The Best Shows of 2013

Posted: 12/31/2013 2:59 pm EST | Updated: 03/02/2014 5:59 am EST

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Here's a look back at my favorite shows of the year. The truly frustrating, wonderful thing about theater is how ephemeral it is. Performances are slightly different every night depending on the actors, the audience, the weather and a million other factors. Of course, when the cast changes, the show changes even more. So already shows like *Matilda* and soon *After Midnight* are very different (better, worse, just as good but in different ways) as the shows I saw and reviewed. And despite seeing three shows a week, I've still managed to miss some of the most acclaimed shows of the year. Maybe it was the title -- it sounds like an Off Broadway revue designed to be commercial -- but I never saw *Bad Jews*, only to have a friend see it on closing night and tell me I'd missed the best play of the year. Argh!

So of the shows I actually saw, here are my favorites. And thanks again to the actors and writers and directors and artisans and stage hands who make it happen, even on shows I didn't like. No one gets into the theater to become rich. A bad movie can be annoying; a bad play should make you empathize with the actors who must go onstage every night and try and kick some life into a dead mule. I try to reflect that in reviews that never avoid calling a flop a flop but always try to pan for gold and celebrate a particular performance or element of even the worst show that offers a glimmer of talent.

THE BEST SHOWS OF 2013

1. and 2. **Julius Caesar/Twelfth Night**
3. **Parsifal** at the Met
4. **August Wilson's American Century Cycle**
5. **Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike**
6. **Passion** at CSC
7. **Matilda The Musical**
8. **The Weir** at Irish Rep
9. **The New York Musical Theatre Festival**
10. Savion Glover's **STePz**

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11. A Gentleman's Guide To Love And Murder

12. The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner at BAM

13. Isaac's Eye/Year Of The Rooster

1. and 2. JULIUS CAESAR AT ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE/ TWELFTH NIGHT

-- The trappings for this *Julius Caesar* are boldly innovative: an all-female cast! An immersive experience with armed guards taking you to your seat! A setting of a prison! But all of that melted away and what I remember most is a Shakespeare play I've never been terribly fond of brought to vivid, brilliant life led by a brilliant cast. Not a brilliant cast of women -- though that they were -- but a brilliant cast of actors. I couldn't imagine anyone male or female better in these roles than Frances Barber, Harriet Walter, Cush Jumbo and the rest. A triumph for director Phyllida Lloyd and her entire team.

In contrast, the London Globe Theatre's production of *Twelfth Night* was thoroughly traditional. The staging was done as in Shakespeare's time, the actors donned their makeup and costume in sight of the audience and it was an all-male cast. But just like *Julius Caesar*, the casting was not a stunt but an approach to the work that drew out riches and insight into the play that no other casting would do. This troupe also performed a solid *Richard III* in repertory and it was a treat to see actors in dramatically different roles from one night to the next. But *Twelfth Night* was the highlight, with even the movement of an actor from one part of the stage to another handled in hilarious fashion. (The women glide across the stage as if on a moving sidewalk with their feet hidden under voluminous dresses; the effect is invariably striking and amusing, while the speed at which they move reveals the character's state of mind -- it's not just a gimmick.) At the heart of it was Mark Rylance, one of the great stage actors of this or any time. He's smart enough to surround himself with the best so this show had many pleasures, including the unexpected delight of seeing Stephen Fry on stage (!) and Samuel Barnett in two delicious turns as women. He's a handsome man and a fetching woman and one would hate to choose -- luckily, with live theater we can have him either way.

3. PARSIFAL AT THE MET -- My first experience of Wagner's gorgeous masterwork was overwhelming in its beauty. A religious experience indeed, overseen by director Francois Giraud and sung by an impeccable cast including Rene Papa, Peter Mattei and Jonas Kaufmann as Parsifal.

4. AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE -- One of the theatrical triumphs of the year didn't take place on Broadway. It happened at a radio station. The Greene Space is a performance venue shared by WNYC and WQXR. They partnered with the August Wilson estate to stage readings of all ten plays in Wilson's epic look at the 20th century, with one play for every decade. They'll be edited and aired on public radio in 2014 and the audio recordings will be made available in various ways through libraries, academic institutions and the like (though one has to hope a commercial release of all ten will also happen). Overseeing this endeavor was playwright, actor and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who brought together a dream team of veterans of Wilson's plays to perform them for posterity. I attended three of the readings -- *Jitney* (which is the only Wilson play yet to debut on Broadway, a fact Santiago-Hudson is determined to change), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Gem Of The Ocean*. Each had their pleasures and each made me eager to see them again in fully staged productions. Since I hadn't seen the latter two (I've seen the other eight in the cycle at least once), this event offered me exactly what it intended -- a chance to experience Wilson's great words performed by great casts. They stand on their own but they're also invaluable for those who have yet to see them on stage. Since Wilson was the second most produced playwright in America last year (after Shakespeare), clearly most everyone has the chance to see at least some of his plays. That will surely make them all the more hungry to read and hear the rest. And then they'll discover this resource, this archive, this work of art.

5. VANYA AND SONYA AND MASHA AND SPIKE -- I missed its first incarnation at Lincoln Center, so while many critics had this on their list last year, I caught up with it on Broadway. It's Christopher Durang's warmest, most human comedy and the funniest show of the year. The entire play is perfectly cast and it's great to see stars like David Hyde Pierce and Sigourney Weaver make room for Kristine Nielsen's remarkable turn in the role of a lifetime. I look forward to the revivals sure to come.

6. PASSION -- The revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Passion* was the highlight of Classic Stage Company's season. It wasn't a revelation for me -- I loved the show

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when it debuted on Broadway -- but the excellent cast and staging combined with the gift of CSC's intimate space to make this a truly memorable evening of theater. Judy Kuhn and Melissa Errico were triumphant and Ryan Silverman (new to me) was their match as Giorgio. Over the years, I've been heartbroken that a number of shows that premiered at CSC didn't transfer and get a longer life, if only for the selfish reason that I wanted to see them again. Here's one more to add to my list.

7. MATILDA THE MUSICAL -- It came from London wrapped in hype and lived up to expectations. This, for me, is the family show of the moment, with a wickedly black sense of humor, great and eye-catching production design and solid songs that offer plenty of opportunity for witty and engaging performances. They improved on Roald Dahl's novel in ways both large and small, adding some emotional depth without sacrificing his rather nasty worldview and it's all perfectly wonderful for kids and their parents. The score isn't great enough to send me into heaven, but it's solid and funny. I'll be remembering and laughing and shivering just a bit over Bertie Carvell's brilliant embodiment of Miss Trunchbull for the rest of my life.

8. THE WEIR AT THE IRISH REP -- I seem to be alone in finding Conor McPherson's new play *The Night Alive* underwhelming. It's sure to be on many other Best of the Year lists. But I am a big fan of his work in general and this impeccable revival of *The Weir* is a case in point. I loved it when I saw the show well into its run on the West End. Here it was even better and an excellent way to celebrate the Irish Rep's 25th anniversary. I'm only astonished it isn't still running, though Off Broadway is such a puzzle for commercial producers I suppose I shouldn't be surprised this didn't transfer.

9. THE NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL -- This annual celebration of new musicals wisely moved to the summer where it could get more attention. NYMF is an institution now and 2013 was a banner year in terms of quality. *Bend In The Road* was a Broadway worthy production of *Anne Of Green Gables*, with Alison Woods a delight in the central role. *Volleygirls* was a seriously commercial and fun look at high school volleyball bursting with talent in its largely female cast. (I suppose the flops *Lysistrata Jones* and *Bring It On!* scared investors off sports musicals but they missed a winner here.) Other shows almost as good included another high school set story *Crossing Swords*, a look at the making of a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movie named *Castle Walk* and Onalea Gilbertson in another terrific turn in *Mata Hari in 8 Bullets*. Can't wait for 2014.

10. SAVION GLOVER'S STePz -- Every year, dancer, director and choreographer Savion Glover has a three week residency at the Joyce and offers up a new show. *STePz* is the latest and one of the best from this enduring talent. He did everything imaginable with steps and stairs, aided by an excellent cast including above all the marvelous Marshall Davis Jr. From the opener set to John Contrane's "Miles' Mode" to the penultimate triumph of a haunting "Mr. Bojangles" sung by Sammy Davis Jr., it was an evening of pure delight.

11. A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO LOVE AND MURDER -- Like *Catch Me If You Can* a few seasons ago, this is a great production of a merely good musical. But it out-Droods *The Mystery Of Edwin Drood* in its music hall silliness, the set design is brilliant, the cast strong and Jefferson Mays a wonder in playing virtually half of the characters in the show. It's a show-stopper of a turn and more than that because Mays never hijacks the show to show off; he creates individual characters and brings them to life. If no one told you what he was doing, you might not even notice until half way through the night. (My god, isn't that the same actor??!!) Great fun.

12. THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER AT BAM -- Just as the year came to an end, actress Fiona Shaw, dancer-actor Daniel Hay-Gordon and director Phyllida Lloyd (yes, the same talent behind *Julius Caesar*) delivered theater at its most elemental and powerful. Their performance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner* at the Brooklyn Academy Of Music used subtle, centuries-old craft to tell the story of a sailor haunted by the killing of an albatross and doomed to tell his tale of woe to passers-by seemingly for all eternity. Shaw and Hay-Gordon did a delightful dance, with Shaw voicing all the parts and the two seamlessly trading off the physical parts with clarity and grace. One moment Shaw is playing the Wedding Guest and the next the Mariner, one moment Hay-Gordon is the Guest and the next he's a sailor or the albatross and they never miss a beat. Impeccably done and hopefully the latest in what will continue to be an exploration by Shaw and Lloyd of great poetry on stage.

13. ISAAC'S EYE/YEAR OF THE ROOSTER -- It was the year of Ensemble

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Studio Theatre for me. This small house nurtures new playwrights with care and passion. They introduced me to the distinctive voices of Lucas Hnath and Eric Dufault, two talents I'll be following for years to come. (Indeed, Hnath already delivered a fascinating piece on Walt Disney, confirming his promise.) Good writing attracts good actors so I also had the pleasure of watching Bobby Moreno strut around the stage like the cock of the walk as he embodied the confused, angry, preening rooster Odysseus.

OTHER MEMORABLE MOMENTS

GILBERTO SANTA ROSA IN *FOREVER TANGO* -- I came for the tango and stayed for the salsa. Santa Rosa -- the Gentleman Of Salsa -- came onto the stage of this revival of the dance show to a wave of applause from the knowing Latino/Hispanic audience and you immediately understood why. He was a magnetic presence, a brilliant singer and an effortless showman. *Forever Santa Rosa* -- now that's a show I'd go see again and again.

NATHAN LANE IN *THE NANCE* -- Douglas Carter Beane's play about a closeted gay man playing effeminate gay characters in vaudeville -- the "nance" of the title -- was an ambitious work that didn't quite hit a home run for me. But Nathan Lane was a marvel. He literally did it all: singing and dancing, comic routines, vaudevillian energy, comedy, drama, pathos. If he burst into a high c at some point, I might have missed it but I wouldn't be surprised. Lane's ability to make lightning fast switches between old school shtick and dramatic intensity was a gift to the show and the audience. They don't make 'em like that anymore, except sometimes they do, thank goodness.

NELLIE MCKAY IN *OLD HATS* -- I'm eager to see Bill Irwin and David Shiner any time they want to clown around. Their evening of vaudeville and silent comic gems was great fun indeed. But the icing on the cake was the presence of the absurdly gifted Nellie McKay as the musical guest. She didn't just lead a band in terrific renditions of her songs. McKay also interacted with Irwin and Shiner as they compete for her attention, lasering in on the retro vibe of the show but always maintaining a key intelligence as well. She strolled the aisles during intermission, playing the ukelele and delivering weird facts, like whose birthday it was that day or exclaiming apropos of nothing that we should be kind to our waitress. "Try the tofu!" she burred. What a delight. No wonder those two men fight for her affection.

CHRISTINE GOERKE IN *THE WOMAN WITHOUT A SHADOW AT THE MET* -- I was mixed on this production of Strauss's opera. But no one could deny it was a thrilling night of theater to see Christine Goerke's triumphant return to the Met after years of vocal issues and proceed to tear it up as the Dyer's Wife. Any fool could see she would be a great Brunnhilde and literally as I posted my review the Metropolitan Opera announced Goerke would be doing exactly that when the Ring Cycle returned in 2018.

AARON COSTA GANIS -- The play *The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County* didn't come close to working for me. But Ganis played a carnival barker of a guy who hosted stage performances by a man with a freakish memory. His energy and audience improv woke the play up (briefly) and made me laugh. I've been saying, "The Mnemonist! Of Dutchess County!" ever since and that has to count for something.

DEBORAH COX IN *JEKYLL & HYDE* -- Who knew pop star Deborah Cox would be such a winning stage presence? Get her a good show right away, Broadway producers! (And god willing some day Constantine Maroulis will get a good show, too.)

ROGER REES IN *THE WINSLOW BOY* -- Seeing Roger Rees age before our eyes in this strong revival of *The Winslow Boy* by Roundabout was one of the highlights of the year and a timely reminder of his talents on stage. Rees has become so adept as a director with the success of *Peter and the Starcatcher* that we might have forgotten what a terrific actor he is as well. No one seeing this chestnut brought vividly to life will forget about Rees the actor ever again.

FANTASIA IN *AFTER MIDNIGHT* -- I'd love to return to this re-imagining of a night at the Cotton Club when kd lang is the guest singer. But boy am I glad I caught Fantasia. She looked great. She sounded great. And she sang some classic tunes with the aplomb of a star and the insight of a world-weary soul. Sometimes people like their divas tragic but here's hoping Fantasia continues to give her fans a happy ending.

HAMISH MCCANN IN LA SOIREE -- I'm not a natural fan of burlesque (too uptight!) but I was won over by the entire cast of this sexy, silly edition. Hamish McCann is in the duo The English Gents with Denis Lock. But it was his solo spot climbing up a rope while holding his body parallel to the ground that stopped the show for me -- McCann was physically impressive, gymnastically precise and winningly charming to boot. As a bonus, I spent the show captivated by the beguiling person across the way from me who seemed to be enjoying the antics in exactly the same manner as myself. Theater in the round can be tricky, but it does allow you to check out audience members just as easily as you check out the talent on stage.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice **no stars**
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical **no stars**
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **
Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met ***
Little Miss Sunshine **
Souvenir ** 1/2
A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2
Twelfth Night *** 1/2
King Richard The Third ***
Lies My Father Told Me **
Regular Singing **

And Away We Go **
Analog.ue at St. Ann's Warehouse ** 1/2
Oliver! at Papermill **
Waiting For Godot ** 1/2
No Man's Land ***
The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner *** 1/2
Macbeth w Ethan Hawke **
How I Learned What I Learned ***
The Curious Case Of The Watson Intelligence ***
The Night Alive **

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Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

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