

# the arts

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## Come Together

In 2006, Austin turned out for the arts by the tens of thousands

BY ROBERT FAIRES

For anyone who ever worried that the local arts scene is supported by only about 50 people, 2006 was the year that proved otherwise – in a big way. On the streets and at the polls, Austinites demonstrated their interest in the arts in numbers beyond what you'd find at the most crammed of Longhorn football games. This stunning level of cultural support was evident from the very first day of the year – well, okay, technically, the last day of 2005 – when the debut of the cultural festival First Night drew more than 100,000 people (by some estimates, 130,000 people) over a 10-hour period. That was followed just a few months later by the if-you-build-it-they-will-come phenomenon when the new Blanton Museum of Art opened its doors; more than 22,000 folks showed up for the first day, and they've just kept coming in the eight months since: more than 100,000 of them. Then in November came the vote on Proposition 4, the part of the city's 2006 bond package dedicated to cultural facilities. It was the first vote on the arts in almost a decade and, as with First Night, no one really knew what to expect in terms of turnout. The results were similarly impressive: Just less than 90,000 Austinites said yes to the arts, delivering a decisive victory for the proposal.

The Blanton garnered the most media attention (and deservedly so), but it was hardly the only cultural facility to debut in 2006. Also coming online were City Theatre, ColdTowne Theater, Donkey Show, the Larry L. King Theatre at Austin Playhouse, Mass Gallery, Okay Mountain, Salvage Vanguard Theater, and Volitant Gallery, to name a few. Their addition to the scene helped take some of the sting out of the loss of other spaces, most notably Center Studio, the downtown home for dance that Ellen Bartel managed for a decade, which was closed after a fire in January; and the State Theatre, which was damaged by a flood in June and six months later is still empty, its staff having been dismissed.

On a more positive note, the year saw significant recognition for local artists and arts companies keep coming from outside sources: a Grammy nomination for choral ensemble Conspirare; the Osborn New Play Award for Steven Tomlinson's *American Fiesta* from the American Theatre Critics Association; massive grants for Conspirare, Tapestry Dance Company, and the Zachary Scott Theatre Center from the National Endowment for the Arts to support their work with American masterpieces. New York's Public Theater tapped the Rude Mechanicals to bring their production of *Get Your War On* (which the Rudes have toured to Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Houston; and Marfa) to its Under the Radar festival, and Disney tapped Austin High to help premiere its stage version of the megasuccessful *High School Musical*.

And lest we forget, 2006 was the year Austin got to know Dmitri Shostakovich. Thanks to an idea by Austin Lyric Opera Artistic Director Richard Buckley, more than a dozen area arts organizations joined forces to commemorate the Russian composer's 100th birth anniversary with performances of his work all year long. From January through December, audiences could experience every kind of work by Shostakovich from every stage of his career. Given that the festival wasn't driven by any one group or individual, it called for an extraordinary level of cooperation and community among artists and organizations. How fitting that in a year notable for so many Austinites coming together for the arts, the artists came together, too. ■

## Top 10 Theatrical Treasures and Pleasures of 2006

BY ROBERT FAIRES

**1) *Urinetown: The Musical* (Zachary Scott Theatre Center)** This unlikeliest of Broadway hits – a parody of Thirties political musicals, laden with bad puns, musical theatre in-jokes, and that put-you-off-your-lunch title – landed in town with a mighty splash, thanks to director Dave Steakley and his polished production team, who not only got all its obscure jokes but served them up in a flood of high spirits and comic verve that left us breathless and giddy.

**2) *Decameron Day 7: REVENGE* (Rude Mechanicals)** While it toured the wide world of vengeance, portraying the settling of scores in ghost stories, soul-killing office jobs, *Star Wars*, and, most hilariously, the invented soap opera *Harbor Cove*, this Rudes premiere was wickedly entertaining. But ultimately the show was a call to forgiveness, a ceremony of mercy shared with bread, wine, a toast, and a flash of fire, making it the year's most generous and stirring production.

**3) *Red Cans* (Rubber Repertory)** As unsettling as it was to watch tiny red laundry hampers with human appendages – no heads, no legs, just arms or feet – this audacious production was absolutely absorbing, like a nature documentary from *The Twilight Zone*, in which we observed the social behavior and customs of these strange creatures: scuttling like crabs across the stage, stealing shoes, killing one another. Surreal, hilarious, and haunting.

**4) *Cymbeline* (Spotlight Music Theatre Ensemble)** Shakespeare's rarely produced, often derided romance got a shot in the arm from UT theatre student Dustin Wills, who pasted over its less-inspired text with better passages by the Bard and served it up under a starry spring sky in the School of Architecture courtyard. Inventively staged and energetically performed, this was Shakespearean enchantment.

**5) (tie) *Hamlet* (Actors From the London Stage)/*The Assumption* (Refraction Arts)** Two takes on the tragedy of the Danish prince, as different as night and day yet both theatrically daring and engrossing. The former presented the drama Shakespeare wrote but played by just five actors, whose grasp of the text gave even the most familiar speeches a fresh ring and who shifted between characters on the bare stage with an ease that was mesmerizing. The latter transported the play to a hillbilly holler at the end of the universe, improbably peopled by dudes in mullets and women in kimonos, all belting Seventies power ballads. But it was so thoroughly imagined and original (not to mention hysterical), the ride was exhilarating – and still amazingly true to Shakespeare's story.

**6) *Hairspray* (UT Performing Arts Center)** You can't stop the beat, boasts the signature song of this Broadway block-



Urinetown:  
The Musical

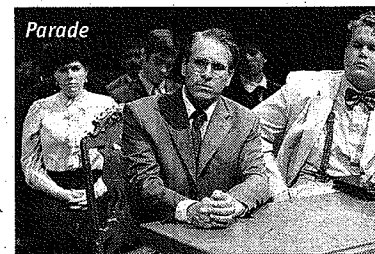
buster, and you sure couldn't stop it when the national tour roared into Bass. From the opening blast of "Good Morning Baltimore," this staging of the feel-good musical drawn from John Waters' film raced along on the score's irresistible rhythms and the infectious energy of a couldn't-quit cast.

**7) *When Something Wonderful Ends* (UT Department of Theatre & Dance)** Recounting her quest for the moment our way of life began unraveling, playwright Sherry Kramer's remarkable monologue moved between 1963 and now, between Tehran and Springfield, Mo., between radicalized mullahs and vintage Barbies, to unearth truths about America's pursuit of Middle Eastern oil and her personal history, before arriving at her mother's grave and the intersection of geopolitical interests and individual responsibility. As timely as it was revealing and as witty as wise.

**8) *As You Like It* (Austin Shakespeare Festival)** Another Shakespeare, another small cast, another bare stage under a starry sky, another enchanting evening. Played with both cast and audience on the Zilker Theatre stage, ASF's show was buoyed by a freewheeling attitude among the eight actors, their palpable joy in the Bard's comedy and language, clever staging, and Ed Kliman's whimsical original score.

**9) *Where Are They Now?* (Shrewd Productions)** From the same New Zealand murder that inspired the film *Heavenly Creatures*, playwright Cyndi Williams mined her own fascinating drama: a psychologically complex charting of the crime's effects on the women who committed it, with the pair vividly portrayed by Shannon Grounds and T. Lynn Mikeska, and the tension between them ratcheted up in riveting fashion.

**10) (tie) *Parade* (Mary Moody Northern Theatre)/*I Am My Own Wife* (Zachary Scott Theatre Center)** Two shows that made history come alive, but from opposite approaches: *Parade*'s was epic, retelling the tragedy of Leo Frank's trial for murder and lynching in 1913 Atlanta on a grand canvas, with the large cast of St. Edward's University students and faculty members, all on the same historical page, catching us up in the sweep of history. *Wife*'s was personal, dramatizing the life of the fascinating transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who survived both Nazi and communist regimes, through a single actor, with Glenn Peters' marvelously clean performance and Dave Steakley's intimate staging drawing us close and catching us in this mystery man-woman's spell.



Parade

## Honorable Mentions

***Have You Ever Been Assassinated?* (Rude Mechanicals)**  
**Judith Ivey in *Women on Fire* (Paramount Theatre)**  
**Anna Deavere Smith (Zachary Scott Theatre Center)**  
**Karen Mason (Austin Cabaret Theatre)**  
***Static* (Salvage Vanguard Theater)**  
***Get Your War On* (Rude Mechanicals)**