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Top 10 (plus one) Theatrical Treasures and Pleasures of 2007

By Robert Faires

1) *Present Laughter* (Zachary Scott Theatre Center) "I've been to a marvelous party," sang Noël Coward once upon a time, and that was my thought after seeing Dave Steakley's high-gloss, high-spirited revival of this Coward comedy. Cliff Simon's set and Susan Branch's costumes had style to burn, the cabaret numbers were intoxicating, and the comic verve of the cast – led by an uproarious Jamie Goodwin, giving a master class in theatrical vanity – left me positively elated. Propriety should keep me from including the show on this list, much less leading off with it – my wife was in the cast, and I worked with Goodwin on a Zach show later in the year – but I honestly didn't have a better time in the theatre in 2007.

2) *Full Circle* (Mary Moody Northen Theatre) Dramatist Chuck Mee hijacked Brecht's *Chalk Circle* for a mad joyride across reunified Germany, and director David Long put the pedal to the metal. With a student cast in high gear and game guest Jill Blackwood leading the pack as a dizzy socialite, the St. Ed's show raced along like a BMW on the autobahn, its scenes and riotously inventive bits of staging flying by.

3) *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (Austin Community College Drama Department/ProArts Collective) Few directors could – or would care to – rescue Adrienne Kennedy's one act from obscurity; its knotty exploration of racial identity, spun in a feverish dreamscape, might seem best left to the Sixties. But Marcus McQuirter's resurrection of this bold work proved that its nightmare visions still have the power to disturb and to make us think. The year's most potent show, with a compelling performance by Feliz Dia McDonald.

4) *Elephant's Graveyard* (UT Department of Theatre & Dance) The grim, if unlikely, execution of a circus animal in the Old South serves as the foundation for George Brant's new drama, which plays like an oral history – all interwoven monologues in past tense – but the vivid writing, coupled with Laura Kepley's deft staging, made the fate of Mary the elephant immediate and heartbreaking.

5) *Take Me Out* (Zachary Scott Theatre Center) This smart, savvy baseball drama reminded us that no individual's actions are without ramifications for the team, and Zach's tightly directed production – Dave Steakley again – reminded us that theatre is also a team sport. All-star ensemble work and a Hall of Fame turn by Martin Burke as an accountant newly besotted with baseball.

6) *Big River* (TexARTS) TexARTS made good on its vow to mount quality productions of classic musicals with this all-singin', all-dancin' *Huckleberry Finn*. Rousing music, a lively cast, and Daniel Adams lighting up the entire Paramount stage as Mark Twain's irrepressible hero made rollin' on the river a rollicking joy.

7) *Macbeth* (Actors From the London Stage) Something wondrous this way came when five players from Shakespeare's homeland visited to present his darkest tragedy. Shifting smoothly among characters on a bare stage, this masterful quintet seized the cursed play by the throat, pierced its haunting text, and let it bleed.

8) *Fefu and Her Friends* (UT Department of Theatre & Dance) Rooted as it is in Seventies feminism and theatrical experimentation, Maria Irene Fornes' drama might have come off as dated, but the commitment of eight strong UT actresses and Leslie Swackhamer's staging, especially in the intimate scenes staged around the Winship Building, drew us into the characters' lives and made these women matter.

9) *Liz and Ann Hampton Callaway/Faith Prince* (Austin Cabaret Theatre) Six years in, Stuart Moulton's gift of cabaret keeps on giving, lavishing Austin with more and more exquisite singers in a setting that has them as close as your heartbeat. This year, enchanting jazz chanteuse Ann Hampton Callaway made a welcome return with Broadway-belted sister Liz in tow for her first visit; they blended their varied styles into a creamy, dreamy sound that just melted you. Also new to town was another Broadway baby, Faith Prince, whose powerhouse voice, stunning control, and cheery good humor made every number blaze like the sun.

10) *Ashes, Ashes* (UT Department of Theatre & Dance) A fable about the dangers of pollution and forgetting set in a Seussian universe, Eve Tulbert's new play was brought to life with wildly fanciful design work and inventive staging by Dustin Wills. The result: a triumph of imagination and a world like no other onstage this year.

11) *Voices Underwater* (Salvage Vanguard Theater) Drenched in atmosphere and history, this Abi Basch drama was a ghost story of the Old South to steep in. The dense script required time to absorb, but moody design work and Jenny Larson's resourceful direction got its spooky vibe under our skin right away and for good.

Honorable Mentions

***Jesucristo Superestrella* (Zachary Scott Theatre Center)**

Disney's High School Musical (Zach Performing Arts School)

Far Away (Austin Community College Drama Department)

Happy Days (Capital T Theatre)

My Child, My Child, My Alien Child (Hyde Park Theatre)

Slaughter City (UT Department of Theatre & Dance)

A Thought in Three Parts (Rubber Repertory)

Special Honorable Mention: *The Lion King* (Disney Theatrical) In a class by itself. Eleven years on Broadway and five on tour has done nothing to dim the wonder of Julie Taymor's visionary reinvention of the animated film. The blend of her imagery and the skill and fullness of spirit displayed by the performers made this long-time-coming road version feel thrillingly fresh.

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