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Top 9 Theatre Productions of 2009 That Did Ascend the Brightest Heaven of Invention

By Robert Faires

- 1) 'BOBRAUSCHENBERGAMERICA' (MARY MOODY NORTHEN THEATRE)** Modern art's master of collage celebrated in a theatrical mash-up of chicken jokes, picnics, pingpong ball cloudbursts, lovers' spats, boot-scootin' Whitmanesque rhapsodies, and more. As offbeat, vibrant, and eager to see wonder in the mundane as Rauschenberg's work, this boisterous joyride was so exhilarating that when it ended, I wanted it to start all over again.
- 2) 'SPRING AWAKENING' (TEXAS PERFORMING ARTS)** Even the vastness of Bass Concert Hall couldn't diffuse the raw, intensely personal energy of this Broadway touring show as its 19th century teens suffered their adolescent angst and sexual confusion. Duncan Sheik's pumping pop/rock score and Bill T. Jones' thumping choreography caught the racing pulse of youth in revolt.
- 3) 'DIONYSUS IN 69' (RUDE MECHANICALS)** The Rudes' archaeological expedition into Sixties avant-garde theatre – re-creating, move for move, the Performance Group's boundary-busting original production – proved as full of life as the group's original works, drawing us inside an ancient Greek drama to experience its tragedy personally. Bravely performed by a committed cast.
- 4) 'HOUSE OF SEVERAL STORIES' (IMAGINE THAT PRODUCTIONS)** A family portrait from the Albee album, i.e., caustic verbal combat drenched in booze with a double shot of absurdism. John Boulanger's homegrown prize-winning script was made thrilling by Lauren Lane, Martin Burke, and Meredith McCall, three of our top actors, playing off one another in breathtaking style.
- 5) 'THE PSYCHE PROJECT' (UT DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE & DANCE)** The mythic romance of a mortal and the god of love rebooted in modern times with an irreverent wit and a questioning air. This imaginative, whip-smart, wickedly funny student work wondered provocatively if an ancient myth of love still has meaning in 21st century America.
- 6) 'CYRANO DE BERGERAC' (MARY MOODY NORTHEN THEATRE)** A grand romantic adventure grandly realized. Michelle Polgar's staging flowed as smoothly as poetry from the lips of Rostand's hero with the prodigious proboscis, played here with rousing verve and panache by David M. Long.
- 7) 'THE JUNGLE' (TROUBLE PUPPET THEATER COMPANY)** Connor Hopkins distilled

Upton Sinclair's novel of immigrants ground up by the meatpacking industry into a sepia-tinted tone poem, made hauntingly human by puppets of paper and string.

8) 'BLACK SNOW' (TUTTO THEATRE COMPANY)/'MURDER BALLAD MURDER MYSTERY' (TUTTO THEATRE COMPANY/VORTEX REPERTORY COMPANY) The link is director Dustin Wills, who seems able to forge theatrically ingenious, tautly acted ensemble pieces from any work, be it a dusty satire of show folk in Moscow or a new musical of ghost-faced killers in the swamp.

9) 'THE LAST FIVE YEARS' (PENFOLD THEATRE COMPANY/AUSTIN PLAYHOUSE)/'SHOOTING STAR' (ZACH THEATRE) A pair of two-handers, each an anatomy of a failed romance etched in performances of heartbreaking virtuosity, the former by David Gallagher and Annika Johansson, the latter by Jamie Goodwin and Barbara Chisholm (full disclosure: my wife).

HONORABLE MENTIONS

'SPACEMAN:DADA:ROBOT' (ELECTRONIC PLANET ENSEMBLE)

'ARTHURIOSIS' (GETALONG GANG PERFORMANCE GROUP)

'THE GRAPES OF WRATH' (ZACH THEATRE)

'THE METHOD GUN' (RUDE MECHS)

'I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY' (RUDE MECHS)

'CONFIDENCE MEN: IMPROVISED MAMET' (CONFIDENCE MEN)

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