



Arts: January 2, 2009

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=721382>

Top 10 Theatrical Treasures and Pleasures of 2008

By Robert Faires

- 1) ***Porgy and Bess* (Zach Theatre)** George Gershwin's 1930s folk opera rescored for the 21st century. Arranger Greg Bolin distilled the original's grand orchestra to an intimate combo, over which director Dave Steakley laid richly personal rhythms of jazz and gospel, as well as some deeply evocative visuals, to bring this American classic home with freshness and immediacy.
- 2) ***The Casket of Passing Fancy* (Rubber Repertory)** As audacious a theatrical work as this city has seen, I think, one that crafted 500 individual experiences for its audience and made each member choose just one. You couldn't help but confront your own desires, but ultimately, the show was wondrously communal, as audience members lingered to share their experiences.
- 3) ***Elaine Stritch: At Liberty!* (Austin Cabaret Theatre)** What becomes a legend most? An autobiographical solo show that is as meticulously crafted, as personally illuminating, and as 11-o'clock-number all-stops-out gloriously entertaining as this one. There's life in the old girl yet. *Toujours gai, Stritchy, toujours gai!*
- 4) ***Five in the Morning* (Rotozaza at Fuse Box Festival)** Bare stage. Three swimmers. One disembodied voice issuing curious commands. Less was assuredly more in this London troupe's astonishing performance piece that navigated through issues of authority and identity and community in surprising and surprisingly nuanced ways.
- 5) ***The Red Balloon* (Tongue and Groove Theatre)** Our most whimsical stage company doing what it does best: infusing a work of theatre with a sense of wonder. This children's classic was delivered with a disarming innocence, theatrical ingenuity, gorgeous animation by Leah Sharpe, and a captivating score by Justin Sherburn.
- 6) ***Doubt* (Zach Theatre)** In terms of craft, an airtight script, but it gives the audience plenty of room to breathe – and form its own doubts – as it ponders a priest's guilt or innocence over accusations of molestation. Taut direction by Steven Dietz and an ensemble on fire proved traditional drama can still enthrall.
- 7) ***The Method Gun/I've Never Been So Happy* (Rude Mechanicals)** The acting guru may have been fake, but the Rudes' tribute to everyone who acts – onstage and in life – was real and as touching as it was funny. And the first workshop for their new musical, a Western tall tale with cowgirl romance and racing dachshunds, was a giddy whirl across the saloon floor that left me grinning.
- 8) ***Ophelia* (Tutto Theatre Company)** Hamlet refracted through the eyes wherein lie all his sins remembered. Shakespearean investigator Dustin Wills proved again how much can be accomplished with imagination and a fiercely committed ensemble.
- 9) ***Still Life With Iris* (UT Department of Theatre & Dance)** Steven Dietz's fanciful fable about the uses of memory was realized with lush imagination in its designs and an affecting tenderness in performance.
- 10) ***The Clean House* (Zach Theatre)** Love is messy, life messier, and death messier still, we learned here, but crisp direction and keen leading performances (my wife's among them, I confess) washed the pain away with comedic bliss.

Honorable Mentions

***Bomb Shelter: or the Modern Pinocchio* (Tongue and Groove Theatre)**

***The Nina Variations* (Gobotrick Theatre Company)**

***The Brats of Clarence* (The Bedlam Faction)**

***Art* (Penfold Theatre Company)**

***Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil* (ProArts Collective/Austin Community College Drama Department)**