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Theaters retrench, but still produce good work in 2009

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Craig Schwartz Patrick Page, foreground, starred in the Old Globe's "Cyrano de Bergerac." (courtesy photo)



As the recession dragged on in 2009, local theaters saw a decline in donations and in many cases a decline in ticket sales. Unsafe times tend to make for safe theatrical choices, so many local theaters opted to program classics, light comedies and musicals with a better chance of luring ticket-buyers. In some cases, theaters even recycled successful shows from their past (North Coast Rep brought back "Don't Dress for Dinner" and "Talley's Folly," Moxie revived "Dog Act," and Cygnet restaged "Bed and Sofa" and "Hedwig and the Angry Inch"). But every theater took a risk with some edgy, new work that was often rewarded with big audiences.

Here's a look at the year in San Diego theater, including my picks for the best (and worst) productions of 2009.

The year's best

Here's a subjective list of my favorite shows and performances of 2009, along with a few of the flops.

1. "Cyrano de Bergerac," The Old Globe. Patrick Page was profoundly moving in Darko Tresnjak's exquisitely directed production of Edmund Rostand's classic French tragicomedy. The play's poetry soared in a nearly four-hour staging that flew by as if it were on wings.

2. "The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later, an Epilogue." La Jolla Playhouse was one of 100 theaters worldwide that presented a one-night reading of this updated version of Tectonic Theater's documentary-style drama (about the aftermath of gay student Matthew Shepard's slaying in Laramie, Wyo.) on the 11th anniversary of Shepard's death. Also directed (in town-hall style) by Tresnjak, the Playhouse reading was jammed with stars (Richard Dreyfuss, Mare Winningham, Bruce Vilanch, playwright Doug Wright) but the most moving performance was delivered by San Diego Republican mayor Jerry Sanders,

who played a Wyoming Republican congressman who refused to endorse the Defense of Marriage act because he has a lesbian daughter. Last year, Sanders, a Republican, refused to support California's Prop. 8 because he, too, has a lesbian daughter (who also took part in the reading). When Sanders finished his speech, the audience broke into sustained applause.

3. "Angels in America," Palomar College. Director Michael Mufson produced Tony Kushner's epic, two-part play on gay identity over two semesters, using the same excellent cast and production crew/design. The result was a thought-provoking, expansive, risk-taking and cohesive theatrical experience that was as good as (if not better than) any professional theater could do.

4. "42nd Street," Moonlight Amphitheatre. The dazzling tap-dancing musical was a perfect curtain-raiser for Vista's new Moonlight Amphitheatre. The dancing, cast and costumes were almost (but not quite) as spectacular as the company's new state-of-the-art stagehouse.

5. "Bonnie and Clyde," La Jolla Playhouse. Frank Wildhorn, Ivan Menchell and Don Black's world premiere musical about the bank-robbing duo of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker looked beyond the guns, violence and the couple's grisly end to thoughtfully examine what turned them bad and the impact their choices had on their families. Jeff Calhoun's direction was detailed and seamless and the countrified score was tuneful and refreshing.

6. "Twelfth Night," The Old Globe. Shakespeare's comedy was redone in '50s doo-wop style by director Paul Mullins in a hilariously costumed production that had perfect casting in every role from large to small.

7. "The Dresser," North Coast Repertory Theatre. Veteran actors Jonathan McMurtry and Sean Sullivan led a superb cast in this wistful comedy about an aging thespian in 1940s England. It was hard to tell where the actors ended and the characters began in this well-staged love letter to the actor's craft.

8. TIE: "Killer Joe" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," Compass Theatre. The intimate, 50-seat Compass space is known for putting actors practically in the audience's laps. The immersive experience was fully realized in two well-crafted, well-acted, in-your-face productions that I found hard to choose between. Tracy Letts' trailer trash tragedy "Killer Joe," directed by Lisa Berger, oozed with ugliness, and Edward Albee's fiery domestic drama "Virginia Woolf," directed by Shana Wride, peeled the paint off the walls.

9. "Good Boys," Mo'olelo Performing Arts. Although the script for Jane Martin's tense gun violence drama is sketchy, Seema Sueko's production was perfectly calibrated, particularly the heart-rending performance of Robert Barry Fleming as a man whose son dies in a senseless schoolyard shooting.

10. "The Seafarer," San Diego Repertory Theatre. Conor McPherson's Irish holiday comedy about a

devilish Christmas visitor crackled with laughs and emotion. Delicia Turner Sonnenberg directed the play that featured a standout performance by Armin Shimerman.

Honorable mentions: Ion Theatre's well-cast "Frozen"; Cygnet's hilarious "Noises Off"; La Jolla Playhouse's disturbing "Creditors"; the Globe's bold "Six Degrees of Separation"; San Diego Rep's ambitious "Threepenny Opera"; Poor Players' finely crafted (but unfortunately poorly attended) "Measure for Measure"; Welk Resort Theatre's robust "Scarlet Pimpernel"; and the Globe's edgy, urban musical "Kingdom."

Best performances: Besides the above-mentioned, I enjoyed kooky Howard Bickle in Moonlight's "The Foreigner"; quirky Tim Parker in New Village Arts' "Bulrusher"; brainy Karson St. John in Diversionary's "The Little Dog Laughed"; sinister Robert Foxworth in the Old Globe's "Cornelia"; superb Alan Mandell in the Playhouse's "Restoration"; the understated Richard Thomas in La Jolla Playhouse's "Unusual Acts of Devotion"; the electric Rhona Gold in Moxie Theatre's "Drink Me"; versatile Sara Chase in the Globe's "First Wives Club"; tireless Obba Babatunde in the Globe's "Sammy"; zany Jason Heil in Cygnet's "Noises Off"; understated Walter Ritter in Diversionary's "Bent"; talented-beyond-his-years Ian Brininstool in North Coast Rep's "Over the Tavern"; and goofy utility player Paul Maley in Lamb's Players Theatre's "Leaving Iowa."

The not-so-good list: The Old Globe produced my favorite show of the year, but it also produced three big-budget musicals that were disappointments. Last summer's "First Wives Club" had an amazing cast but a bad script and forgettable score; last fall's "Sammy" had a great lead actor in Obba Babatunde, but once again a weak script and clunky direction; and last winter's "Working" revival just didn't work for me.

And weak scripts dimmed my enthusiasm for Mo'olelo's "9 Parts of Desire"; Moxie's "Drink Me"; La Jolla Playhouse's "Restoration," "Unusual Acts of Devotion" and "Continuous City"; and New Village Arts' "Bulrusher."

Comings and goings

* The biggest news in San Diego's theater community in 2009 --- good and bad ---- happened at the **Old Globe**.

This month, the Globe's CEO/Executive Producer Lou Spisto unveiled its \$22 million **Conrad Prebys Theatre Center**, the centerpiece of a five-year \$75 million capital campaign. The project includes a new two-story building housing a state-of-the-art, 250-seat theater-in-the-round, classrooms and meeting spaces, and a new cafe/pub. The project also includes a new outdoor plaza/courtyard.

On the down side, **Darko Tresnjak** ---- the multiaward-winning founding artistic director of the Globe's

revived Summer Shakespeare Festival and the Globe's co-artistic director ---- resigned at the end of September. He'll be replaced (at least for the 2010 Shakespeare season) by **Adrian Noble**, the former longtime head of England's Royal Shakespeare Company. While Noble's credentials are impressive, Tresnjak was a favorite with critics and audiences, and his departure (which followed the 2008 resignation of Tresnjak's fellow co-artistic director Jerry Patch) is a disappointment.

* Vista's **Moonlight Stage Productions** opened its beautiful new amphitheatre stagehouse on time and on budget in July. Vistans love their Moonlight so much that they paid for the stagehouse (which includes a fly system, dressing rooms, costume storage and state-of-the-art sound and lighting equipment) with a voter-approved sales tax increase.

* Three men who had a huge impact on North County theater died in 2009.

Tom Blakistone, who co-founded North Coast Repertory Theatre in Solana Beach 27 years ago with his wife, Olive, died March 6 because of complications of a fall. He was 91.

Marvin Read, who taught theater at Oceanside's El Camino High for three decades and was a board member, volunteer, director and supporter of local theaters for nearly 50 years, died from a heart attack at his home on Feb. 27. He was 73.

And **Joe Sasway**, who founded MiraCosta College's theater department and taught there for 35 years until his retirement in 1992, died from a cerebral hemorrhage at Palomar Medical Center. He was 75.

* Continuing in a long tradition of locally born musicals moving to Broadway, La Jolla Playhouse's 2008 hit "**Memphis**" opened in October in New York to mostly positive reviews. Playhouse artistic director Chris Ashley, who directed, earned especially high praise for his work on the 1950s-themed musical.

* Cautious about the economy, **Cygnnet Theatre** decided to give up the lease on one of its two theaters (the Rolando Theatre near San Diego State) and focus all of its energies on its Old Town Theatre. San Diego's Moxie Theatre happily assumed the lease and is now midway through its fifth season there.

* San Diego's **Compass Theatre** announced this month that it will fold after nearly nine years. Compass producer Dale Morris will turn over the Hillcrest theater's lease to San Diego's Ion Theatre so he can focus on his acting career.

* Veteran Orange County theater producer/actor/director Joshua Carr was appointed as the new artistic director of Escondido's **Welk Resorts Theatre** in May. Carr announced plans to move the theater away from the standard fare of classic Broadway musicals in 2 1/2-month runs to a mix of plays and musicals, star-powered special engagements and a mix of material for all ages. His first season gets under way in January with the play "Steel Magnolias" starring Cathy Rigby and Michael Learned, and a short run of

"Vicki Lawrence & Mama: A Two Woman Show."

* After a couple of seasons in the red, San Diego's 63-year-old **Starlight Theatre** almost folded last winter. Longtime artistic director Brian Wells was let go and replaced by Carlos Mendoza, and the theater's board made a desperate appeal to the public for donations to stave off bankruptcy. The company survived and staged a shortened, low-budget season that included two musicals staffed almost entirely with child actors ("High School Musical" and "Annie") and sold much of its costume collection to pay overdue bills. Mendoza said that Starlight's board of directors is planning to proceed with a 64th season, but he's not sure whether he will be involved because he's busy with another job, serving as choreographer for "Dos Y Dos," a television show produced by the Latin American Multimedia Corp.

* Three new theater groups debuted in 2009. Escondido-based **PaccoArts**, a collaboration between North County community theater vets Sean Tamburrino and Bruce Blackwell, plans to offer theater classes and to produce plays and musicals starring children and adults. Carlsbad resident Jacinto Aganza launched **A Peoples Theatre**, dedicated to producing socially conscious works, in November. And **Intrepid Shakespeare Company**, co-founded by soon-to-wed actors Sean Cox and Christy Yael, plans to produce bold, edgy productions of the Bard's plays.

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