

A Year of Living Theatrically

By Sam Hurwitt | Dec 17, 2013

Every time I look back on a year of theatergoing, I can't help but think how insanely lucky we Bay Area residents are to live in one of the top theater centers in the country. When I realized I'd gone to 138 different plays this year, that seemed like way too much; it averages to a little more than one show every three days, which just makes me want to apologize to my wife. At the same time, there are still plenty of productions that I wish I could have caught, but there simply aren't enough days in the week to see all the great theater that's going on around the Bay Area at any given time.



Marissa Keltie in Magic Theatre's *Terminus*;
Photo: Jennifer Reiley.

The great thing about covering local arts is that a look back over the previous year winds up being more about artists who are doing great work and whom you should watch out for in the future than about particular shows you might be glad you caught or sorry you missed. It's telling that as much as I enjoyed distinguished visitors such as Sirs Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart in [No Man's Land](#) at Berkeley Rep or the touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, it was the homegrown productions that really stayed with me. In most cases, the people who made these shows great are making some other show great right now, or will be again soon. These are the people in your theatrical neighborhood, and it's useful to know how incredibly badass they are.



Fortunate Daughter

Impact Theatre

There's always a ton of autobiographical solo shows being developed in the Bay Area, most of them at The Marsh. But my favorite was at Berkeley's Impact Theatre: [Fortunate Daughter](#), Thao P. Nguyen's story about trying to decide whether or not to come out to her loving but traditionally minded Vietnamese family. Nguyen has a winning presence that makes you want to come along on whatever journey she's recounting, whether it's traveling to a remote Vietnamese village to meet her grandmother for the first time at 25 or taking her still-unsuspecting mother to the Dyke March. Her character portraits of friends and family were hilarious, endearing and well-drawn, and the story was beautifully constructed, capturing not just her own personal journey but also the often absurd contradictions of Bay Area liberal culture. I can't wait to see what's next for this talented solo performer.



The Fourth Messenger

Ashby Stage

A self-produced musical about a modern-day female Buddha and the young reporter who's out to expose her as a fraud sounds like the sort of thing that could easily be an exercise in saccharine new age spirituality, but local playwright Tanya Shaffer imbued the story with a generous helping of humor, and the song-and-dance numbers created with composer Vienna Teng were marvelously entertaining. Between that and the terrific ensemble in director Matt August's dynamic production (headed by Annemaria Rajala as guru Sid and Anna Ishida as muckracker Raina), [The Fourth Messenger](#) proved to be a remarkably solid new musical, the good news of which seems bound to spread.



Ideation

San Francisco Playhouse

SF Playhouse had a strong year of shows on its main stage, from [The MF with the Hat](#) to *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, but a surprise treat was this small-scale world premiere as part of its second-stage new works series, the Sandbox. Aaron Loeb, playwright of past Playhouse hits *First Person Shooter* and *Abraham Lincoln's Big, Gay Dance Party*, returned with [Ideation](#), a taut suspense thriller that was often gut-bustingly funny as well. A cabal of corporate consultants grappling with death-camp logistics gradually succumbed to entirely reasonable paranoia in this terribly clever comedy directed by Josh Costello.



Lady Windermere's Fan

California Shakespeare Theater

I hadn't planned to see this Oscar Wilde classic, but I was lured to [Lady Windermere's Fan](#) by a truly irresistible cast of some of the Bay's best actors, and as one of the play's well-known lines puts it, "I can resist everything except temptation." Emily Kitchens as the proper young society wife, Aldo Billingslea as her devoted husband and Stacy Ross as the scandalous woman he invites to their party -- they would have been reason enough to go, but add Danny Scheie, L. Peter Callender, Rami Margron and James Carpenter in supporting roles and it became an embarrassment of riches. Oregon Shakespeare Festival regular Christopher Liam

Moore's direction nicely brought out not only the sparkling Wildean wit but also the bitter hypocrisy of society's notion of what constitutes a "good" or "bad" woman.



The Language Archive

Symmetry Theatre Company

Julia Cho's [The Language Archive](#) was the second play about a linguist who specializes in dying languages produced in Berkeley in less than a year, after Madeleine George's [Precious Little](#) at Shotgun Players in 2012. But *Archive* was very much its own creature, a fanciful fable about a language specialist (Gabriel Grilli) who can't find the words to save his marriage. But what really brought it to life in director Chloe Bronzan's sensitive staging is the deep emotion brought to outsize roles such as the wife consumed by a terrible sadness (Elena Wright) and the hopelessly devoted assistant (Danielle Levin). Stacy Ross shone in this one too, teamed

with Howard Swain as part of an unforgettable older couple of native speakers of a dying language brought in to record it for posterity, only they can't speak it right now because they're fighting, and they won't sully their native tongue with unkind words.



A Maze

Just Theater

Rob Handel's play [A Maze](#) is appropriately mazelike in itself, with several seemingly separate stories that gradually wind together into one: the abducted girl who becomes a media sensation after decades in captivity, the one-hit-wonder rock stars trying to rekindle their creative spark after rehab, the reclusive graphic novelist who insists he's just channeling the story in his books, and the fantastical parable about a king building an endless maze around his castle to protect his family. Just Theater's West Coast premiere of the play was marvelously realized in director Molly Aaronson-Gelb's sharp staging. Folks who missed it at

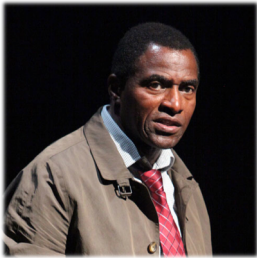
the Live Oak Theatre last summer are in for a treat, because Shotgun Players presents a [revival of the Just Theater production](#) in mid-February with its terrific original cast intact.



The Taming

Crowded Fire Theater

Sometimes a show sticks with you just because it was so damn fun. That's certainly the case with [*The Taming*](#), the latest in a rapid-fire series of shows by local playwright Lauren Gunderson, who also premiered plays with Shotgun Players and Marin Theatre Company in 2013 (the latter the same week that this play debuted with Crowded Fire). But *The Taming* was by far the best of the bunch. Well directed by Marissa Wolf, this hilarious romp featured a pricelessly polished beauty queen (Kathryn Zdan) taking a powerful and secretly lesbian GOP aide (Marilee Talkington) and a firebrand far-left activist blogger (Marilet Martinez) prisoner in a hotel room to rewrite the US Constitution. There was also some kind of time-traveling dream sequence with the Founding Fathers involved, but mostly there were so many hysterical lines in the play that you'd hardly finish laughing at one before the next hit you. Crowded Fire did terrific work all year with challenging and highly enjoyable pieces from Thomas Bradshaw's [*The Bereaved*](#) to Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's [*\[410\]GONE*](#). Next up for Gunderson is TheatreWorks' regional premiere of [*Silent Sky*](#) in January, followed close at heels by the world premiere of [*Bauer*](#) at SF Playhouse in March.



Terminus

Magic Theatre

Going into [*Terminus*](#) I knew that director Jon Tracy and actors Carl Lumbly, Stacy Ross and Marissa Keltie were a dream team of reliably excellent artists, but nothing could have prepared me for the impact of Mark O'Rowe's play. Told in hypnotically poetic language, the often gruesome stories recounted by the three nameless narrators interwove in shockingly unexpected ways, and it couldn't have felt more dynamic despite being just three people standing around telling us their stories. You can see Lumbly right now in [*Storefront Church*](#) at SF Playhouse, Keltie will costar in [*Pardon My Invasion*](#) at the Phoenix Theatre in January, and Ross is just finishing up [*Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol*](#) at Marin Theatre Company and can be seen next in [*Gidion's Knot*](#) at Aurora Theatre Company in February, both directed by Tracy.



This Is How It Goes

Aurora Theatre Company

It was a good year for Neil LaBute plays, between this one and SF Playhouse's [*reasons to be pretty*](#). But it's not a LaBute play unless it's very, very uncomfortable and usually downright cruel, and [*This Is How It Goes*](#) was all that in spades. An unabashedly unreliable narrator (Gabriel Marin) told us all about moving back to his Midwestern hometown and reconnecting with his high school crush (Carrie Paff), now married to their class' star athlete (Aldo Billingslea), who also happened to be the only black guy in town. As the tension and hostility mounted, the atmosphere became more and more obviously racially charged in Tom Ross' pitch-perfect production of a difficult and potentially infuriating play.



Troublemaker, or The Freakin Kick-A Adventures of Bradley Boatright

Berkeley Repertory Theatre

It was a good year for plays inspired by comic books, from Katie May's theatrical graphic novel [*Manic Pixie Dream Girl*](#) to 42nd Street Moon's revival of the musical [*It's a Bird ... It's a Plane ... It's Superman*](#). But the first of these was the most kick-A so far. [*Troublemaker*](#) took on the frustrations and anxieties of middle school life in outsize heroic style as self-styled superhero Bradley Boatright lived out fantasies where his middle school rival was a sneering Bond villain and the school staff was made up of crazed Nazis. But the real star of the show was playwright Dan LeFranc's delightfully idiosyncratic dialogue, mixing noir snappy patter with constant faux-cussing such as "funny as farts but loyal as freak." The superhero theater trend will continue at least into February, with the Wonder Woman play [*Lasso of Truth*](#) at Marin Theatre Company.