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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

The Best Theater of 2017: On Stage, Vitality in Every Way—But One

While theater thrives—especially off Broadway and out of town—the musical continues to falter.

By Terry Teachout

Dec. 13, 2017 12:15 p.m. ET

Theater in America is as vital as it's ever been—with one grim exception. I saw impressive new plays, imaginative revivals and virtuosic acting in 2017, not just in New York but throughout the country. The musical, though, is in dire creative straits: Not only did I cover no first-rate premieres in the year just past, but I reviewed fewer noteworthy revivals than ever before.

The best new plays, all of them mounted off Broadway or out of town, included Zoe Kazan's "After the Blast" at New York's Lincoln Center Theater, Tracy Letts's "Linda Vista" at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, John Patrick Shanley's "The Portuguese Kid" at Manhattan Theatre Club and the long-overdue New York premiere of Brian Friel's masterly "The Home Place" at New York's Irish Repertory Theatre.

Broadway did a bit better by revivals, presenting exemplary versions of Noël Coward's "Present Laughter" (directed by Moritz von Stuelpnagel and starring Kevin Kline) and John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation" (directed by Trip Cullman). No less noteworthy, though, were the Florida Repertory Theatre's profoundly comprehending production of Mr. Guare's "The House of Blue Leaves" (directed by Chris Clavelli) and an *extremely* rare revival of Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" (smartly staged by Arin Arbus for Brooklyn, N.Y.'s Theatre for a New Audience).

As always, I saw plenty of great acting, most notably from Allison Janney in "Six Degrees of Separation," Jin Ha in an otherwise problematic Broadway revival of "M. Butterfly," Andy Karl in the ill-fated Broadway transfer of "Groundhog Day," and five terrific regional-theater actors: Jim DeVita in "A View From the Bridge" at Wisconsin's American Players Theatre, Frank Ferrante in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" (which he also directed) at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre, Annette Miller in "4000 Miles" at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Mass., and Leo Finnie and Gladys Ramirez in "Between Riverside and Crazy" at Florida's GableStage.

Now, the best of the best:

Best performance in a play

Nehassaiu deGannes was fiercely impassioned in Shakespeare & Company's production of "Intimate Apparel," Lynn Nottage's 2003 play about a turn-of-the-century black seamstress who falls for the wrong man.

Best performance in a musical

In Pittsfield, Mass., Aaron Tveit gave the best sung, most moving performance I've ever seen on stage as the ambivalent Bobby in Julianne Boyd's Barrington Stage Company production of Stephen Sondheim's "Company."

Best ensemble

The Transport Group's off-Broadway revivals of William Inge's "Come Back, Little Sheba" and "Picnic," directed by Jack Cummings III and presented in rotating repertory, featured a cast whose members—14 actors, six of whom appeared in both shows—made a powerful case for Inge's sad tales of Midwestern loneliness.

Best classical production

Eric Tucker's crowd-pleasing outdoor staging of "Pericles" at Wisconsin's American Players Theatre was a riotous explosion of pure joy.

Best revival of a modern play

Up in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, the Shaw Festival presented small-scale productions of Brian Friel's "Dancing at Lughnasa" (directed by Krista Jackson) and Alan Bennett's "The Madness of George III" (directed by Kevin Bennett) so fine that I couldn't choose between them.

Best revival of a musical

Another tie: Jenn Thompson's "Oklahoma!" at Connecticut's Goodspeed Musicals and Maria Friedman's production of Mr. Sondheim's "Merrily We Roll Along" (in which Eden



Nehassaiu deGannes and Medina Senghore in 'Intimate Apparel' PHOTO: STRATTON MCCRADY

Espinosa was astonishingly good) at Boston's Huntington Stage put a bright new shine on two important shows that were both in need of a fresh directorial approach.

Best new play

Amy Herzog's "Mary Jane" opened at New Haven's Yale Repertory Theatre,

then moved to New York Theater Workshop, in both cases to well-deserved acclaim. Sensitively directed by Anne Kauffman and starring Emily Donahoe in New Haven and Carrie Coon off Broadway, it's the story of a single mother with a severely disabled child who finds within herself the capacity for everyday heroism.

Best "new" musical

"The Band's Visit," which opened off Broadway at the Atlantic Theater Company in 2016 and transferred to Broadway last month, looks like a solid hit, proving that it's still possible to breathe life into a venerable genre that is otherwise showing few signs of good health. It's full of sweet hopefulness and superlative craft.

Playwright of the year.

Kate Hamill followed up her acclaimed 2014 stage version of "Sense and Sensibility" with identically ingenious adaptations of "Vanity Fair" (at New York's late, lamented Pearl Theatre Company) and "Pride and Prejudice" (co-produced by the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival and New York's Primary Stages). Between them, all three shows are putting Ms. Hamill on the map of American theater.

—*Mr. Teachout is the Journal's drama critic.*



Aaron Tveit in Harold Prince's 'Company' PHOTO: DANIEL RADER



David T. Patterson and Hannah Elles in a scene from William Inge's 'Come Back, Little Sheba' PHOTO: CAROL ROSEGG



Tracy Michelle Arnold, Cher Desiree Alvarez and Juan Rivera Lebron in 'Pericles, Prince of Tyre' PHOTO: LIZ LAUREN



Sarena Parmar, Fiona Byrne, Diana Donnelly and Tara Rosling in 'Dancing at Lughnasa' PHOTO: DAVID COOPER



Eden Espinosa, Mark Umbers and Damian Humbley in 'Merrily We Roll Along' PHOTO: T. CHARLES ERICKSON



Liza Colón-Zayas and Carrie Coon in 'Mary Jane' PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS



Katrina Lenk and Tony Shalhoub in 'The Band's Visit' PHOTO: MATTHEW MURPHY



Kate Hamill PHOTO: SUB/URBAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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