

Year in theatre a cut above

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As 2009 clicks over to 2010, I'm looking at some interesting numbers. I saw well over 100 shows this year and there were many more than that on offer. I reviewed about 98 per cent of what I saw. My personal top 10 list started off with 17 productions plus 17 honourable mentions. Together, that represents about 34 per cent of the reviews published in the *Courier* this year. Pretty impressive percentage.

More numbers: the provincial government's own statistics show that for every \$1 given in grants to theatre and dance companies, \$1.38 comes back into general revenue. Yet in spite of that impressive return, B.C. Liberals plan to cut up to 80 per cent of grant money to some companies. Shock waves are spreading through the theatre community. Companies will fold. Others will have to scale back seriously: smaller casts, lower production values, less risk-taking. Slow death. Unless Premier Gordon Campbell can be persuaded to restore funding, the number and range of shows available to us in 2010 will be significantly reduced. So write, speak up, show you care.

In the spirit of that \$1.38 for every \$1 formula, my 10 favourite shows of 2009 will be my 13.8 favourites. Make that 14 starting back in January.

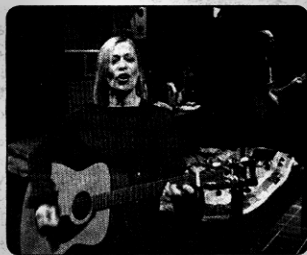
- *East of Berlin*: under the banner of Touchstone Theatre/Chutzpah! Festival and the Firehall Arts Centre, this award-winning play by Canadian playwright Hannah Moscovitch provocatively explored the guilt felt by a privileged young German upon discovering the brutal part his father played in the Holocaust. Chillingly underscored by Joseph Haydn's "Deutschland über Alles."

- *Blackbird*: co-produced by Rumble Productions and Theatre Conspiracy, *Blackbird* was a shocking look at pedophilia. Or perhaps it was a love story. Searing performances by Russell Roberts and Jennifer Mawhinney made this *Blackbird* fly. Director Norman Armour's final touch—the sound of children playing—was chilling.

- *The Erotic Anguish of Don Juan*: Alberta's Old Trout Puppet Workshop dragged legendary lover Don Juan back from Hell to explain himself. Gorgeous. Macabre. A wonderfully imagined look at love both sacred and profane. When the Old Trouts come to town, go fishing! What a feast.

- *Antigone Undone*: Leaky Heaven took a page from Sophocles with this one. Steven Hill directed Tanya Marquardt, Billy Marchenski and Lesley Ewen in this quirky, inventive take on an old tragedy. Soundscape by HEBEGEBE was marvelously eclectic from Dave Brubeck to Sinead O'Connor. Leaky Heaven: as close to heaven as some of us will ever get.

- *Les Misérables*: Arts Club's Bill Millerd really flexed his directorial muscles on this lavish production and it was gorgeous in every respect. Costume designer Alison Green earned



Clockwise from top left: *The Erotic Anguish of Don Juan*, *Midsummer*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *after the quake*.

in this Bard on the Beach production, directed by David Mackay. Pairing effervescent Jennifer Lines with then six-months-pregnant Colleen Wheeler was divinely inspired. A cameo performance by Bard artistic director Christopher Gaze—beard and all—as Elizabeth was hilarious, but Ryan Beil, as one of the Dromio twins, kept us in stitches through both acts.

- *Via Béatrice*: written by Jenn Griffin with music composed by Peggy Lee, this experimental opera was challenging for performers Lucia Frangione, Marco Soriano and Laura Di Cicco as well as for audiences but the payoff was fantastic. Two parallel stories—one present-day and one 16th century—were equally compelling and the best word to describe Frangione was luminous. Or possibly luscious.

- *Midsummer*. This Traverse Theatre Company (Scotland) "play with songs" was as fresh and smart as the newly renovated Historic Theatre at the Culch where it played. Bob and Helena weren't an obvious match but we were pulling for them all the same. Totally hilarious was the tongue-lashing Bob got from his own cock (disguised as Elmo, the fuzzy stuffy) and the weary, doggie-style sex. Hmm, doesn't sound as smart and funny as it was. But it was. Really.

- *Any Night*: from the creative team of Daniel Arnold and Medina Hahn (*Tuesdays & Sundays*) came this show to creep us out right before Halloween. No ghouls or ghosts but lots of psychological and surveillance elements to scare you. Terrific set and lighting design by Peter Pokorny and David Fraser give this show a shadowy, spooky feel. Next time someone says, "I will take care of you," run!

- *A Picasso*: a trip to North Vancouver's Presentation House was well

rogator looking for verification that at least one painting, forfeited by the Nazis, was a real Picasso. A cat and mouse game, it kept us on the edge of our seats right to its surprise, gotcha! ending.

- *The Vertical Hour*: British playwright David Hare makes the perfect marriage of the personal and the political in this penetrating play. Directed by Tamara McCarthy for United Players, this semi-professional production (like UP's excellent *Democracy*) would look good, or any professional stage—as is. Cross-generational, cross-cultural, this show had something for every thinking person.

- *After the quake*: Pi theatre and Rumble Productions pooled their talent for this strange little play by Haruki Murakami. Oddball and surreal, after the quake looked at the power of imagination especially after unfathomable disasters—emotional or physical. It also provide a showcase for actor Alessandro Juliar who, as both Superfrog and the write Murakami himself, was green, amphibious and simply marvelous.

- *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*: under the direction of Max Reimer, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* banished the winter blaf down at the Playhouse. Pair mature ar sexy Andrew Wheeler with cute ar cocky Josh Epstein, throw in dynam Elena Juatco and what do you have A hit, a veritable hit. Epstein stole the show with his hilarious physicalist loose-jointed dancing and wicked grip

- *A Beautiful View*: Diane Brov and Colleen Wheeler (pregnant durir Bard, now a mother to Lily) made a beautiful viewing in this Ruby Slippe production written and directed Daniel MacIvor. It was funny and honest and these two superstars brought more to the play than MacIvor ever imagined. The script needs a new era imagined but up to that point, it's perfect