

## Top 10 NJ Theater productions of 2016: ‘Disgraced,’ ‘Daddy Long Legs,’ ‘West Side Story’ and more



Caroline Kaplan and Maboud Ebrahimzadeh co-starred in my favorite NJ theater production of the year, “Disgraced” at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton.

By: **JAY LUSTIG** | December 28, 2016

When I was a rock critic at The Star-Ledger, I used to marvel at the sheer number of plays that one of our theater critics, Peter Filichia, used to go to. He seemed to be attending something every night, whereas I was going to maybe two or three shows a week.

This wasn't necessarily because he was more conscientious than I was. It was because being a rock critic and being a theater critic are two very different things. As a rock critic, you can find out a lot about an artist by listening to CDs and/or watching videos, and you spend a lot of time writing CD reviews. For a theater critic, there is no way to know what a production is all about except by going there. Something may sound great, or terrible, on paper, but if you don't see it in person, you really can't have anything to say about it.

At NJArts.net, I am both a rock critic and a theater critic. And though I still go to a lot of Jersey concerts, I very possibly go to more Jersey plays: I attended 59 this year.

Here is a look back at my 10 favorites, in order of preference, with links to my reviews.

1. **“Disgraced” at McCarter Theatre Center, Princeton.** Maboud Ebrahimzadeh gave a wrenching performance in Ayad Akhtar’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama about a Pakistani-American lawyer living an upper-class lifestyle in New York City, and feeling conflicts at work and at home, and with friends who come over for what turns out to be a dinner-party-from-hell. Timely, and unforgettable.



PHOTOS BY T. CHARLES ERICKSON

Elise Vannerson and Ben Michael co-starred in “Daddy Long Legs” at the George Street Playhouse.

2. **“Daddy Long Legs” at George Street Playhouse, New Brunswick.** A charming and uplifting musical about an poor young woman who falls in love with her rich, young benefactor — and vice versa — told, mostly, through the letters they write to each other.

3. **“West Side Story” at Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn.** The Paper Mill offered a traditional, straightforward take on this all-time-great musical, but the cast and crew did everything so well I still felt like I was seeing it for the first time.

4. **“Red Velvet” at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Madison.** Lindsay Smiling was suitably intense and charismatic as actor Ian Aldridge — an American-born actor of African descent who broke an unspoken color line in 1833 when he played the title role in “Othello” in London — in British writer Lolita Chakrabarti’s 2012 play (making its New Jersey premiere here) about those who try to push society forward and those who resist change.

5. **“Exit the King” at Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Madison.** An all-powerful monarch confronts his own death — and runs, screaming, in the other direction — in this funny and profound 1962 gem of a play, written by Eugène Ionesco.

6. **“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” at Two River Theater, Red Bank.** Arnetia Walker was a force of nature as headstrong blues diva Ma Rainey in this production of August Wilson’s 1982 play. Brandon J. Dirden was even better as the play’s central character, the forward-thinking, abrasive and, ultimately, doomed trumpeter, Levee.

7. **“A Bronx Tale” at Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn.** “A Bronx Tale” was originally a one-man play by Chazz Palminteri, drawing on his own childhood experiences. Then it was a movie. And now it’s a somewhat conventional but still satisfying musical, co-directed by Robert De Niro (who directed the movie and co-starred in it), with a good batch of songs by composer Alan Menken and lyricist Glenn Slater, and a lot of heart. It opened at the Paper Mill Playhouse in February and is now on Broadway.



JIM COX. From left, Desmond Newson, Damian Thompson, Omar Edwards, Terrell Wheel and Brooks Brantly in “Fly.”

**8. “Fly” at Crossroads Theatre, New Brunswick.** Four Tuskegee Airmen — African-American pilots who flew in World War II — fight, and bond, in this lively, emotionally resonant and occasionally very funny play, originally presented at Crossroads in 2009.

**9. “Old Love New Love” at Luna Stage, West Orange.** Love blossoms, unexpectedly, in a senior citizens facility — with various complications ensuing — in this new play written by Laura Brienza. It’s a sweet and humorous play, but Brienza manages to inject a dose of reality into a story that, in the hands of a lesser playwright, might have descended into simple sentimentality.

**10. “Start Down,” presented by the Centenary Stage Company at the Sitnik Theater, Hackettstown.** A thought-provoking and, ultimately, chilling play about technology, education and troubles between two men (who are trying to develop some wildly revolutionary software) and their girlfriends (who aren’t so sure that that software will be good for the world).