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Top 10 Stage Performances of 2013 -- and more theatrical highlights

By Ronni Reich
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On theatrical and operatic stages, classics were in the spotlight this year — from Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams to Wagner and Mozart — and they were given worthy productions. Ensemble casts presented performances that enthralled from start to finish and directors embraced fresh perspectives. There were also some contemporary works that broke out of the pack and managed to make as much of an impact as the legendary playwrights and composers that loomed over the season. These are the 10 theatrical experiences I found most memorable in 2013:

"Twelfth Night" (Belasco Theatre): This is Shakespeare that can make you smile until it hurts. Mark Rylance's Olivia is masterful — hilarious, sympathetic and wonderfully detailed, and Samuel Barnett's Viola and Paul Chahidi's Maria are also a joy to watch in their gender-flipped roles. The attention to detail in this historically informed production is also stunning, from the music to the set, which features onstage seating for those who want to be extra-close to the Bard.

"The Glass Menagerie" (Booth Theatre): John Tiffany directs a production that beautifully draws out the poetry in Tennessee Williams' classic. Celia Keenan-Bolger inhabits Laura in a deeply sympathetic performance, Cherry Jones commands the stage as Amanda and Zachary Quinto captures Tom's restlessness to poignant effect. Steven Hogget's movements make ballet out of a mere table setting and Bob Crowley's set, which maroons the stage in dark liquid, further enhances the surreal yet familiar "memory play" atmosphere.

"Parsifal" (Metropolitan Opera): A new production by François Giraud featured striking imagery, including a stagewide depiction of Amfortas' wound that complemented a majestic musical performance led by conductor Daniele Gatti. Jonas Kaufmann proved a fine Wagnerian in the title role, Rene Pape showed characteristic might as Gurnemanz, Katarina Dalayman made a captivating Kundry and Peter Mattei contributed an affecting, well-sung Amfortas.

"Two Trains Running" (Two River Theater): August Wilson's play about life in a poor, African-American community in 1969 Pittsburgh received a vibrant interpretation at the hands of veteran collaborator and director Ruben Santiago-Hudson. The ensemble cast, including Chuck Cooper, Harvy Blanks, Owiso Odera, Anthony Chisholm and Roslyn Ruff created richly drawn characters with a firm rapport.

"Good People" (George Street Playhouse): David Saint directed a fully satisfying and thought-provoking production of David Lindsay-Abaire's portrait of a struggling woman and her friends and neighbors in South Boston. Ellen McLaughlin gave a nuanced portrayal of Margie, with toughness and a quick mouth overlaying the truth of a woman near her breaking point.

"The Electric Baby" (Two River Theater): Stefanie Zdravec's new play deftly wove together stories of relationships and family in a way that defied laws of coincidence, but made for an entrancing story. The play explored grief and empathy, including welcome doses of humor and folklore, with a unique, heartfelt voice. May Adrales directed a moving production with a strong cast.

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" (Walter Kerr Theatre): Steven Lutvak and Robert L. Freeman's new musical about a man who knocks off the heirs ahead of him to become rich delivers ample laughs, engaging performances and dazzling feats. Jefferson Mays amazes as he takes on a series of quick-change roles, Bryce Pinkham finds a charming (and physically and vocally agile) murderer as Monty Navarro, Lisa O'Hare excels as the vixenish Sibella and Lauren Worsham is a wonderfully quirky ingénue as Phoebe, Navarro's cousin/fiancée.

"Tovarich" (The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey): Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey artistic director Bonnie J. Monte unearthed a gem in "Tovarich," a forgotten 1933 work by Jacques Deval. Following the trials and successes of resourceful Russian aristocrats forced out of their positions, the work contained fascinating layers and tonal shifts, which were deftly handled by Monte and the cast, notably Jon Barker and Carly Street.

"Le Nozze di Figaro" (Mostly Mozart Festival): Iván Fischer led the Budapest Festival Orchestra in a performance of the Mozart classic that showcased his characteristic conducting panache — and proved that his fascinating direction of "Don Giovanni" two years ago wasn't a one-time thing. Using costumes as set pieces — coming down from the flies, changing from one cast member to another — he brought out the issues of identity and authority in a fresh interpretation of the work.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" (Metropolitan Opera): Benjamin Britten's centennial brought out an invigorating performance of his spot-on adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy. James Conlon led an

animated account of the score that highlighted its colorful characterizations, and the cast — from charismatic countertenor Iestyn Davies as Oberon and the comical Matthew Rose as Bottom to the smaller roles of the men in the theater troupe — embraced its quirky but abundant appeal.

Loved: Enough stood out this year that 10 feels like an incomplete list. I'd also like to include the affecting, admirably well executed small-scale "A Moon for the Misbegotten" at Luna Stage, and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, "Pippin" on Broadway, which made a stunning spectacle of a widespread show. Broadway's "Matilda," the Paper Mill Playhouse's "Thoroughly Modern Millie," and the McCarter Theatre's "Proof" stood out as well.

Loathed: The number of performances I attended this year, including concerts, ended up somewhere around 120. But I still missed shows I would really like to have seen, especially off-Broadway. Someone please stage "Belleville" again?

Most unwelcome trend: "Every movie the musical." Just because it's popular, or even vaguely watchable when it comes on cable, doesn't mean it needs songs.

Best surprise: Celebrity casting can have unpredictable results, but this year brought out great ones. Cicely Tyson in "The Trip to Bountiful," Tom Hanks in "Lucky Guy," Cyndi Lauper's score for "Kinky Boots" and Trey Anastasio's for "Hands on a Hardbody" were among the highlights.

Looking forward to: Will Eno's "The Realistic Joneses" on Broadway with Tracy Letts, Toni Collette, Michael C. Hall and Marisa Tomei.