

The Star-Ledger

The 10 best New Jersey theater productions of 2016



Bob Ari, Lena Kaminsky and Miles G. Jackson starred in "My Name Is Asher Lev" at the George Street Playhouse earlier this year. (T. Charles Erickson)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media

Intimacy seems to have been New Jersey theater's secret of success in 2016.

With a few notable exceptions, small theaters and small casts produced the year's best work. In confined spaces, actors and directors found the means to amplify the emotion and struggle of their characters. Indeed, most of the productions on this list were fascinated by lives in crisis. Whether those crises were personal, familial, or political, New Jersey theater was at its best this year when it proved most interested in the angst attendant upon lives at a crossroads.

When that tension brews among a small cast in cramped confines, pressure builds with the constant threat of explosion, and the result is excellent, powerful theater.

New Jersey's best show in 2016 took the stage in New Brunswick, where Miles G. Jackson, Bob Ari, and Lena Kaminsky gave excellent performances in George Street Playhouse's production of "My Name is Asher Lev." Jim Jack's spot-on direction underscored the powerful strife eating away at Jackson's stunning portrait of an artist haunted by faith.

Two River Theater continued its run of masterful August Wilson productions, as Ruben Santiago Hudson returned to Red Bank to direct "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Brandon Dirden was an explosive Levee amidst a band room full of actors whose expertise in Wilson's work carried this production to great heights.

In West Orange, Luna Stage Company gave us an intimate, moving and wonderful production of Tarell Alvin McCraney's "The Brothers Size." Brandon Carter, Shamsuddin Abdul-Hamid and Clinton Lowe poured themselves into McCraney's emotionally fraught characters. Christopher Burris's direction treated Luna's black box as a claustrophobic cauldron of family drama.

Director Brian B. Crowe took a risk staging a large-scale production of a Shakespearean rarity at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, but his gamble paid off with a fiery "Coriolanus." Greg Derelian dominated the stage with virile rage, but this show could not be contained: Shakespeare's protestors in the aisle and the balcony seemed always ready to tear the theater down in riot.

Two men in the tiny playing space of a small Weehawken theater company made Keith Huff's "A Steady Rain" a powerful highlight of the spring. Under the direction of Frank Licato, stellar performances by Charles Wagner IV and Greg Erbach made Hudson Theatre Works' production of this play at once gripping and deeply human.

At the New Jersey Repertory Company, Susan Maris and Christopher Daftsios captured wonderfully the anguish of worried parents in Tony Glazer's "The Substance of Bliss." Jessica Parks' small set showcasing a meticulously appointed backyard belied the torn psyches of two parents trying their hardest not to obsess over the whereabouts of their drug-addicted son.



Paper Mill Playhouse artistic director Mark Hoebee directed its 2016 production of "West Side Story." Paper Mill Playhouse

"West Side Story" was a pretty safe bet for the Paper Mill Playhouse's season, but under the direction of Mark S. Hoebee, the theater mounted an excellent version of the beloved classic. Leonard Bernstein's familiar score bounced and soared, and all that we love about "West Side Story" came to life in a vigorous production.

There is nothing wrong with having a whole lot of fun at the theater, and "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) (Revised)" on the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's outdoor stage allowed us to do just that. Patrick Toon, Connor Carew and Jon Barker bounded joyously around Benjamin Kramer's lovely set, as Jeffrey M. Bender's directorial debut evinced the same comic mastery so familiar from his acting.

In Trenton, Leslie Ayvazian showed herself deft enough to write a fine play and wise enough to take on the best role herself. "Out of the City" at the Passage Playhouse was a fun look at a middle-aged getaway weekend, but also a sympathetic examination of existential questions that gain new urgency with age.

"Water by the Spoonful" won a Pulitzer and then received a ballyhooed production in Manhattan, but it was done better this year in Union at Premiere Stages. Director Kel Haney embraced the intimacy of the show's small space in order to accentuate the troubling conflicts afflicting the play's damaged characters.

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