

Collins: The year in theater

By Mark Collins Camera Theater Critic
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Jessica Cerullo charmed Boulder International Fringe Festival audiences in 2007 with her one-woman show "Miracle Tomato."

Calling it "The Year of Comedy" may be a little much, but looking back on theater in 2007 in the Boulder/Denver area, it's the humor that stands out. From dark to clever, satirical to silly, there were many different kinds of laughs coming from various stages.

Whether it was politically charged, like Vox Feminista's "The Last Supper, To Go"; big Broadway tours, like "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" or "Spamalot"; original work, like Theatre13's "once upon a time: The End"; or several funny shows at the Boulder International Fringe Festival, remounts like Buntport's "Titus Andronicus! The Musical!," classics re-envisioned -- like "The Servant of Two Masters" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival -- or humor set to music, such as in PHAMALy's "Urinetown" and Boulder's Dinner Theatre's "Mid-Life! The Crisis Musical!," it was "tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight" during many a theatergoing weekend this past year.

Of course, the past year wasn't all laughs. The Country Dinner Playhouse, the popular and long-standing dinner theater in south Denver, shuttered its doors due to financial troubles. And a Denver District judge upheld new legislation that banned on-stage smoking in Colorado theaters -- a ruling that drew fire from many of the state's theater artists.

In between all the on-stage laughs, and off-stage drama, there were many more excellent evenings of theater, too. After seeing 75 shows, here's one critic's Top 10 Theater Moments of 2007.

Best Moment To Laugh Like A Teenager Again

It was a pleasure to relive the teen years when "Spamalot," the musical based on Monty Python's "Holy Grail" movie, came to the Buell. What first sent me over the top in two hours of over-the-top fun was the soft-shoe routine during the song "I Am Not Dead Yet."

Best Toilet Humor Moment

Bethany Urban and Kjersti Webb teamed up in "once upon a time: The End" at Theatre13 and flushed laughter out of the audience in several scenes, including a particularly hilarious one in which Urban portrayed an airport toilet, and Webb a weary traveler.

Best Save The Play Moment

The CSF audience ate it up on opening night of "The Servant of Two Masters" when Stephen Weitz and John Plumpis improvised their way through a bit created when gusty winds unexpectedly blew open a stage door and sent papers flying. On the spot, they employed some front-row patrons to help them get through the scene, as the rest of us cheered them on.

Best Existential Moment

I'd studied it in college and seen it previously in production, but Richard Bell's delivery of Didi's final "born with one foot astride the grave" speech in The Upstart Crow's version of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting For Godot" turned it from an intellectual understanding to a visceral experience. Bell's performance captured the frailty and rage, the fear and awe of the passage. It was existential horror in the flesh.

Best Showstopper Moment

Midway through the first act of Boulder's Dinner Theatre's "Ragtime," Reynelda Snell opened up and poured her heart all over the stage in the mournful ballad "Your Daddy's Son." Soulful and devastating, Snell's stirring rendition highlighted what was an excellent production, one that joined BDT's talents with ensemble members from Denver's Shadow Theatre.

Best Use of a Vegetable (Or was it a Fruit?) Moment

Who knew the tomato could ripen into wonderful fodder for a play? Jessica Cerullo discovered people's passion for the plump, red delight when she began putting together her one-woman show about the history of the thin-skinned edible. Her performance of "Miracle Tomato," which featured her as one of three Italian-American triplets, was one of the highlights of the Boulder International Fringe Festival. By the time she held a tender orb in her hand, then crushed it with her grip, I was past ready for pasta and sauce.

Best Food On Stage Moment, Part II

Vox Feminista's "The Last Supper, To Go" was a smorgasbord of politically charged vignettes focused on something we all have in common: food. Sounding an alarm about GMOs, bloated agri-business, slaughterhouses and eating produce shipped thousands of miles never tasted so good. The reason? The talented Fems spiced the show with ladles full of great humor.

Best Casting and Choreography Moment

Director Steve Wilson's decision to cast seven blind or visually impaired actors to play a corporate tycoon and his lackeys in PHAMALy's "Urinetown" was inspired. The musical with a dark take on the future was hugely entertaining, and no more so than when choreographers Cindy Bray and Debbie Stark ended the energetic song "Look To The Sky" with a crash of actors. Pun intended -- the dance number involving the seven blind performers was a sight to behold, as well.

Best Things To Look At for Moments

Trefoni Rizzi's evocative scenic design was full of magic and surprise in the Colorado Shakespeare Festival's "A Child's Christmas in Wales." Clare Henkel playfully dressed the actors in CSF's "The Servant of Two Masters" with anachronistic flair. Victor En Yu Tan painted the Mary Rippon Outdoor Theatre in enchanting romantic hues, and his playful laser beams portraying the fairy characters in CSF's charming "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were delightful.

Best Theatrical Mashup Moment

Bravo to the Denver Center Theatre Company for taking on Jason Grote's epic "1001" (a play some thought was unstagable), and kudos to the play's creative team for bringing the sprawling re-telling of "The Arabian Nights" tales to life. From Sinbad to Scheherazade, Alan Dershowitz to a Palestinian interpreter, 28 characters rubbed shoulders in this dizzying, challenging yet accessible piece of multi-media theater, which included plenty of visuals and a live DJ. It was the most thrilling show this critic saw all year.

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