

Best of 2013: Theater

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by Mary Cusack, Ute Von Der Hayden and Paul Wozniak

We don't want to tip our hand just yet to what shows might be recognized at next year's Pulsar Awards, but three of our resident theater critics — Mary Cusack, Ute Von Der Hayden and Paul Wozniak — took a look back at 2013 to dole out some praise.

Best Plays

By MARY CUSACK

"The Graduate," Lansing Community College Department of Theatre

The set was imaginative, the props were the envy of local hipsters and the cast was solid. But, really, all that anyone who saw the play could talk about was Deb Keller's performance as Mrs. Robinson. Keller's abundant energy couldn't be contained in a character of such refined restraint; she crackled and popped with every step.

"August: Osage County," Riverwalk Theatre

Yes, the film version starring Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts opened this week, and it will probably be very successful. But it won't match the intensity and intimacy of Riverwalk's version, which featured Connie Curran-Oesterle as the matriarch of a dysfunctional family who transforms from drug-addled to domineering with frightening speed and purpose.

"Other Desert Cities," Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.

The family members in this play are adept at masking their dysfunction, until daughter Brooke (Shannon Rafferty Bowen) decides to publish the memoir of her brother's suicide. Resentments start to seep out until the dam breaks, releasing a flood of secrets that compel actresses Lela Ivey and Janine Novenske Smith to raise the tempo — and the volume until they were literally screaming at each other. Wow.

"A Doll's Life," Renegade Theatre Festival

Not for those with delicate ears and sensibilities, this was one of the most daring New Original Works ever featured at the Renegade Theatre Festival. Scott Sorrell's salty script is a frank depiction of a "perfect" romance going dreadfully wrong. Turns out sex dolls have feelings, too.

"The Woman in Black," Williamston Theatre

In this British period piece, a solicitor (John Seibert) hires a theater director (Aral Gribble) to help him stage an autobiographical story of the paranormal. The script is average "Outer Limits" fare, but the play-within-a-play structure gave Gribble and Seibert a fantastic opportunity to show off their acting chops as they deftly juggle characters, accents and tone.

Best Musicals

By UTE VON DER HEYDEN

"White Christmas," Riverwalk Theatre

They'll be talking about this one for a long time, both at the theater (the soldout houses for all 12 performances, the cast and crew of more than 40, the ninepiece orchestra) and out in the community. That was "White Christmas," directed by Jane Fallion, the No. 1 musical of 2013.

Outstanding performances by both lead and supporting actors and singers, breathtaking dancing, glorious costumes, effective production values and an undeniable overlay of hard work by everyone are the tangible elements that made this show a success. But in the end what really sold it was a feeling — a feeling of cohesion, camaraderie and love — yes love — among the cast that could not help but radiate out to audiences and pull them into an unforgettable experience.

"Funny Girl," Michigan State University Department of Theatre

"Funny Girl" was an ambitious, largecast extravaganza featuring a talented group of young artists enthusiastically led by Zachera Wollenberg, Will Slinger-Grant, Zev Steinberg and Jacqueline Wheeler. They brought us into the show biz world of the legendary Fanny Brice and made this production of "Funny Girl" one more example of how excellent and competitive the MSU Department of Theatre has become.

"Mamma Mia!" Wharton Center

One of the problems with Broadway touring companies is that they are often second rate — and the effort they put into performing in venues like Wharton Center is second best also. Not so with the totally committed, disarming company of “Mamma Mia!” This was first class stuff: Heavenly voices, athletically stunning dancing, plus heartfelt performances. And the whole thing was done with über-energy, heart and soul.

“Xanadu,” Michigan State University Department of Theatre

It took courage, or maybe just bravado, to put on this wild roller disco musical. “Xanadu” featured a crazy mix of really good roller-skating (thanks to the Lansing Derby Vixens), singing, dancing, humor and audience participation antics. The result was unadulterated fun.

But it also was one more effort by Director Rob Roznowski to introduce his students to new experiences and collaborations. It also provided a first look at the new Studio 60 Theatre, part of the MSU Auditorium’s multi-million dollar renovation.

Best Performances

By PAUL WOZNIAK

Some of the most memorable stage performances in 2013 came not from the leading actors and actresses but from the smaller supporting and featured roles. All performances, notably, came from Peppermint Creek Theatre Co. shows, a testament to the troupe’s dedication to complex characterizations.

AnnaMaria Horn and **Diego Ramirez-Love** both won Pulsar Awards in August for their featured roles in the musical, “In the Heights.” Both parts were more spice than substance to the interweaving plot, but Horn and Ramirez- Love’s dynamic performances made the roles unforgettable.

In “Bonnie & Clyde — A New Musical,” **Scott Laban** set up the crucial third corner of the love triangle as Officer Ted Hinton. Hinton is the nice guy Bonnie should be with instead of Clyde and Laban’s sincere warmth and intelligence make that argument crystal clear for the audience.

Finally, as kooky aunt Silda in “Other Desert Cities,” **Lela Ivey** once again demonstrated how to make entrances, exits and entire scenes sparkle. Arguably her character had the monopoly on laugh lines, but Ivey made the audience cling to every word.

Even when she was screaming.

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