

THE arts

If You Build It ...

Ah, you know the rest

BY ROBERT FAIRES

Do you *really* need a reminder from me as to what Austin's big arts story for 2008 was? After 16 years of planning, designing and redesigning, raising millions of dollars, and persevering through every obstacle imaginable, the Long Center for the Performing Arts opened. If you somehow missed hearing the blast of media fanfare around its debut, you were bound to catch the howls of outrage sparked by the massive traffic jam that occurred when two Long Center performances collided with the International Gem & Jewelry Show at Palmer Events Center and the Austin Reggae Festival at Auditorium Shores on the same Sunday afternoon. It was a painful misstep for the center, but it confirmed that the city knew the Long Center was there.

How well the Long Center truly fits into Austin's cultural landscape and whether it will fully realize its potential won't be known for some time. But one thing we *do* know eight months into this facility's life: Austin arts groups are realizing *their* potential when it comes to programming there. Companies across the cultural spectrum have been producing ambitious work there

with impressive results. The lists in this issue tell the tale: companies from the Rude Mechs to Ballet Austin to ProArts Collective being hailed for work produced at the Long Center. And audiences agree; they have been packing the house for many of these homegrown shows. That's as encouraging a sign as the center's completion.

The Long Center wasn't the only arts story this year. The Butlers gave the UT School of Music a stunning \$55 million. Some long-planned spaces moved forward (Arthouse's renovation, Zach Theatre's third space, Austin Museum of Art's new building), some venues debuted (KidsActing's Center Stage Theatre, TexArts' Morris Theater), and some departed (so long and thanks, Gallery Lombardi and Arts on Real). And we lost some dear friends (Raúl Salinas, Glynda Cox, Alan Pappé, Francis Hodge, Frank Delvy). Still, 2008 was about crossing a line, moving forward, growing up. The Long Center gave us a new measure of what we can be culturally, and even with the economic collapse now leaving the future uncertain for Austin's artists, there's no turning back from that. ■

TOP 10 THEATRICAL TREASURES AND PLEASURES OF 2008

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- 1) **Porgy and Bess (Zach Theatre)** George Gershwin's 1930s folk opera rescored for the 21st century. Arranger Greg Bolin distilled the original's grand orchestra to an intimate combo, over which director Dave Steakley laid richly personal rhythms of jazz and gospel, as well as some deeply evocative visuals, to bring this American classic home with freshness and immediacy.
- 2) **The Casket of Passing Fancy (Rubber Repertory)** As audacious a theatrical work as this city has seen, I think, one that crafted 500 individual experiences for its audience and made each member choose just one. You couldn't help but confront your own desires, but ultimately the show was wondrously communal, as audience members lingered to share their experiences.
- 3) **Elaine Stritch: At Liberty! (Austin Cabaret Theatre)** What becomes a legend most? An autobiographical solo show that is as meticulously crafted, as personally illuminating, and as 11-o'clock-number all-stops-out gloriously entertaining as this one. There's life in the old girl yet. *Toujours gai*, Stritchy, *toujours gai!*
- 4) **Five in the Morning (Rotozaza at Fuse Box Festival)** Bare stage. Three swimmers. One disembodied voice issuing curious commands. Less was assuredly more in this London troupe's astonishing performance piece that navigated through issues of authority and identity and community in surprising and surprisingly nuanced ways.
- 5) **The Red Balloon (Tongue and Groove Theatre)** Our most whimsical stage company doing what it does best: infusing a work of theatre with a sense of wonder. This children's classic was delivered with a disarming innocence, theatrical ingenuity, gorgeous animation by Leah Sharpe, and a captivating score by Justin Sherburn.
- 6) **Doubt (Zach Theatre)** In terms of craft, an airtight script, but it gives the audience plenty of room to breathe – and form its own doubts – as it ponders a priest's guilt or innocence over accusations of molestation. Taut direc-

tion by Steven Dietz and an ensemble on fire proved traditional drama can still enthrall.

7) **The Method Gun/ I've Never Been So Happy (Rude Mechanicals)** The acting guru may have been fake, but the Rudes' tribute to everyone who acts – onstage and in life – was real and as touching as it was funny. And the first workshop for their new musical, a Western tall tale with cowgirl romance and racing dachshunds, was a giddy whirl across the saloon floor that left me grinning.

8) **Ophelia (Tutto Theatre Company)** Hamlet refracted through the eyes wherein lie all his sins remembered. Shakespearean investigator Dustin Wills proved again how much can be accomplished with imagination and a fiercely committed ensemble.

9) **Still Life With Iris (UT Department of Theatre & Dance)** Steven Dietz's fanciful fable about the uses of memory was realized with lush imagination in its designs and an affecting tenderness in performance.

10) **The Clean House (Zach Theatre)** Love is messy, life messier, and death messier still, we learned here, but crisp direction and keen leading performances (my wife's among them, I confess) washed the pain away with comedic bliss.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Bomb Shelter: or the Modern Pinocchio (Tongue and Groove Theatre)

The Nina Variations (Gobotrick Theatre Company)

The Brats of Clarence (The Bedlam Faction)

Art (Penfold Theatre Company)

Robert Johnson: Trick the Devil (ProArts Collective/Austin Community College Drama Department)

Porgy and Bess



Cult of Color: Call to Color

TOP 10 DANCE AND CLASSICAL MUSIC WONDERS OF 2008

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- 1) **Cult of Color: Call to Color (Ballet Austin)** The dense, deeply personal mythology of visual artist Trenton Doyle Hancock, developed largely in two dimensions, exploded into a third via this vibrant, color-drenched collaboration with Graham Reynolds, who crafted a thrillingly animated score, and Stephen Mills, who stretched his choreographic muscles in new, compelling ways.
- 2) **Verdi: Messa da Requiem (Conspirare, Victoria Bach Festival Orchestra and Chorus, and Texas State University Chorus)** Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare christened the Long Center with the company of voices in stunning fashion: leading a massed vocal ensemble that delivered the sound of Judgment Day. Breathtaking.
- 3) **The Bat (Austin Lyric Opera)** Viennese Champagne swapped for a tangy margarita. ALO's reinvention of Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* toasted Austin (and occasionally roasted it) with wit, affection, enthusiasm, and style.
- 4) **Music of John Adams (UT New Music Ensemble)** A vigorous tribute to the composer that affirmed not only his music's hypnotic power but its playfulness, its emotional depth, and its enduring greatness.
- 5) **Long Center Gala Opening Concert (Long Center for the Performing Arts)** A night for the ages, lit by Austin stars (Graham Reynolds, Anton Nel) and a majestic finale – 200 voices joined on Bernstein's "Make Our Garden Grow" – that still echoes within me.
- 6) **Blue Rhapsody (Austin Chamber Music Center)** On Gershwin's original setting for *Rhapsody in Blue*, a mid-sized ensemble and blazing Michelle Schumann on piano brought this work from the skyscraper spires back to street level: a jazzy, thrilling urban odyssey.
- 7) **Woman's Work: Reconstructions of Self (Andee Scott at Fuse Box Festival)** With solo commissions by five choreographers in distant places, the nimble, gifted Scott held the world in her body and held us riveted.
- 8) **Nobody Likes a Show-Off. Well, Maybe Just This Once (Austin Chamber Music Center)** Pure, dizzying virtuosity from violinist Sonja Braaten and cellist Martha Baldwin of Cleveland and our own Schumann again tackling Tchaikovsky, Ravel, and Beethoven.
- 9) **Home/Christmas at the Carillon (Conspirare)** Our world-class choir proving twice more it can create the most sumptuous sounds with any kind of music, the latter with exquisitely poignant aid from Eliza Gilkyson.
- 10) **"Soudain L'Hiver Dernier" (Winter's Tryst, American Repertory Ensemble)** In a typically stellar ARE program, this gem shone most radiantly: a haunting dance duet with ARE Artistic Director David Justin and Ramon Thielen movingly supporting each other.