

The best Los Angeles theater of 2015

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While a backstage battle raged, these 10 disparate productions showed LA's theater scene at its full potential



By Bob Verini | Posted: [Wednesday December 16 2015](#)

2015's signature Los Angeles drama took place offstage, in the struggle between Actors' Equity Association and its members over the future of the venerable 99-seat theater plan. For almost 30 years this scheme has, depending on your point of view, either rudely exploited actors and stage managers, or allowed producers to keep costs down so as to deliver large-scale quality productions. In this battle,

the populist desire for fair compensation clashes with the populist desire to [volunteer](#) one's time freely, leading to a controversial referendum, a threatened lawsuit and full-throated arguments about the very nature and purpose of arts unionism.

Whatever distraction this megillah posed, a lot of first-class work managed to find its way to [LA's stages](#). Omitted are the Broadway tours that keep the doors open and the overseas imports that tone things up, to highlight the kind of ambitious, sometimes funky, risk-taking entertainment that regularly graces our vibrant, yet perennially underappreciated, [theater scene](#).

The best plays of 2015

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Photograph: Brian Blevins

I ♥ 99, The Musical!—Akbar and Dragonfly niteries

Hostility between AEA and 99-seat proponents peaked early in the year. Remembers actor-producer Adam Silver, “My theater root impulse was, I guess I should put on a show.” SRO crowds and star performers mingled for two sassy March evenings of songs and sketches, raising funds for The Cause while ratcheting down tensions. These cabarets, smacking of *Waiting for Lefty* set to music, showcased the LA community at its most resourceful, talented and passionate.

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Photograph: Jessica Sherman

Astro Boy and the God of Comics—Sacred Fools

We Baby Boomers have never been able to get that theme song out of our heads (“There you go, Astro Boy / On your flight into space”). Playwright Natsu Onoda Power vividly depicts the career of Astro’s creator Osamu Tezuka, a profound humanist with a touching vision of world peace. Under Jaime Robledo’s direction, the scrappy Sacred Fools company executed startling manga and anime effects with admirable economy of means.



Photograph: Emilie Svensson

A Good Family—Lounge Theater

In 2015's best world-premiere play, doting parents discover on Christmas Eve that their college student son will that night enter the slammer on a charge of raping a co-ed. During 60 real-time minutes, writer-director Marja-Lewis Ryan wound up the suspense like a steel spring, sending the characters through a full spectrum of emotions from denial to outrage, while we were left to question assumptions about everyday decency and the stability of the American home.



Photograph: courtesy La Mirada Theatre

Carrie: The Killer Musical Experience—La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts

Nobody gets redeemed in Stephen King's classic about high school bullies' deadly rendezvous with telekinesis. (Few are left to tell the tale.) But Brady Schwind's immersive, enjoyable staging redeemed the rep of an adaptation once synonymous with Broadway flopdom. And after a La Mirada engagement, the smashing young troupe moved its flying effects and blood buckets Downtown, successfully bringing the historic Los Angeles Theater back from the dead.



Photograph: Craig Schwartz

Bent—Mark Taper Forum

Martin Sherman's 1979 drama holds a special place among Holocaust dramatizations in its searing examination of homosexuals' treatment under the Third Reich. For its first major U.S. revival in 35 years, director Moisés Kaufman commissioned from designer Beowulf Boritt a giant "machine for actors" of platforms and ramps, its very versatility suggesting the mechanisms which were destined to cart millions to their doom. An inevitably political evening became a memorably emotional one as well.

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Photograph: Michael Lamont

These Paper Bullets!—Geffen Playhouse

Rolin Jones' *Much Ado About Nothing* tweak set in mod, mop-topped '60s London was the year's foremost smile producer, a riotous farce in the *Hard Day's Night*

tradition and a poignant romance true to the Benedick and Beatrice we all know. Helmed with unflagging invention by Jackson Gay, the production originated at Yale Rep and went on to New York's Atlantic Theater Company, emblematic of the cooperation America's regionals may need to start relying upon.

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Photograph: Ken Sawyer

Hit the Wall—Los Angeles LGBT Center

Playwright Ike Holter calls his impressionistic recreation of the 1969 Stonewall Inn riots a “remix” of scholarship and legend. However factual or fanciful the text, Ken Sawyer's environmental staging brought to life a prevailing atmosphere of humiliating oppression, broken when a handful of colorful Village characters unleash a cascade of defiance and personal freedom. Agit-prop at its boldest and funniest, punctuated by hard-driving tunes from That Dog's Anna Waronker and the Go-Gos' Charlotte Caffey.

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Photograph: Geoffrey Wade

Picnic—Antaeus Theatre Company

One of the city's two companies focused on classics, the Antaeus collective routinely double-casts its productions to both accommodate in-demand actors' schedules and enrich the development process. Cameron Watson directed his twin ensembles to solid gold, brushing the dust off William Inge's warhorse romance to bring out a bitter, profound critique of what it means to pursue the American Dream. (Another powerhouse classical company, A Noise Within in Pasadena, pulled off a thrillingly blood-red *Julius Caesar* this year.)

Photograph: Sam Atkin

Lady Into Fox—Hollywood Fringe Festival

A highlight of the uncurated, anything-goes Fest, in its sixth year, was this gem from the improbably-named The Interrobang Departure. In Sam Hunter's adaptation of a David Garnett fable, a vixen of a wife literally transforms into a vixen, teaching both spouses about love's limits. Audiences sat on cushions around a dimly lit playing area, as a trio of sublimely shape-shifting actors reminded us of the endlessly seductive power of story.

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Photograph: Craig Schwartz

Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles—Getty Villa

For its annual ancient classic in a massive outdoor amphitheatre, the Getty hit pay dirt with Luis Alfaro's stunning Euripides adaptation in which the heroine, a Mexican seamstress with mystical powers, is shunted aside by an ambitious Americanized spouse once they've crossed the border. Their son's cultural assimilation lends psychological justification to the inevitable shocking denouement. Local phenom director Jessica Kubzansky evoked all the pity and terror spectators of antiquity must have felt.

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