

Our critic's annual recap of the year in theater, plus his 10 favorite productions.



Hap Erstein

For 21 years, the Hapster Awards have recognized achievements in South Florida theater, dubious and otherwise. Here is how the year looked from my aisle seat:



BEST PERFORMANCE PLAYING JAN McART

Former Broadway and concert hall star, former producer and performer at Boca Raton's Royal Palm Dinner Theatre, current professor and producer at Lynn University and eager recipient of Hapsters, Jan McArt, played herself in "Glamour Girl, The Jan McArt Story," by Tony Finstrom, in a staged reading at Lynn University in early January. The Hapsters committee was in attendance and reports that she was typecast and very convincing.

Jan McArt, "first lady of Florida musical theater" and head of the theater department of Lynn University. RICHARD GRAULICH/THE PALM BEACH POST

EXIT, STAGE SOUTH

Last year, The Women's Theater Project moved up from Fort Lauderdale to Boca Raton and The Wick came north from Pompano Beach to Boca. This year, we're losing theater companies to the lure of Broward County. Outre Theatre Co. has hoofed it to the Broward Center beginning this month with its take on "Othello," and Slow Burn Theatre Co. has announced plans to leave West Boca at the end of this season for the Broward Center's Amature Theatre. Here's hoping they did their homework and studied Florida Stage's fatal move to the Kravis Center.

IT'S TIME AGAIN FOR THE HAPSTERS!



STAGE NOTES

Current theater shows reviewed by our staff

"MAME": Through Sunday. The Wick Theatre, Boca Raton. Tickets: \$58-62. Call: 561-995-2333. A buoyant, tuneful musical version of "Auntie Mame," chronicling the ups and downs of an unconventional, life-embracing bon vivant, played by Leslie Uggams, who sings much better than she moves. — Hap Erstein (B)

"MY OLD LADY": Through Jan 4. Palm Beach Dramaworks, West Palm Beach. Tickets: \$62. Call: 561-514-4042. Playwright Israel Horowitz's culture clash tale of a down-on-his-luck American who flies to Paris to sell an apartment he has inherited from his estranged father, and finds a more complicated situation than he expected. The place is inhabited by a wily old woman (the estimable Estelle Parsons) and her hostile daughter, with whom the American has an involved history. — Hap Erstein (B-)

"WHEN YOU'RE IN LOVE, THE WHOLE WORD IS JEWISH": Through Jan. 11. Mizner Park Cultural Arts Center, Boca Raton. Tickets: \$40. Info: 561-910-7727. A string of ethnic jokes, acted out by a tireless sextet of comics in a Borscht Belt vein. Most of the gags are old, but at least they are well told. — Hap Erstein (B)



The Plaza Theatre's landmark sign has helped lure moviegoers since 1939. Home of Alan Jacobson's theater company, it closed its doors in mid-October. CONTRIBUTED BY CHRISTOPHER ESCOBAR

PLAZA THEATRE, R.I.P. (2012 – 2014)

Starting into its third season of existence in Manalapan, Alan Jacobson's theater company abruptly declared bankruptcy and closed its doors in mid-October. The first casualty was a potentially popular booking of New Vaudevillian performance artist Avner Eisenberg in "Exceptions to Gravity." The main thing working against the engagement's success was that virtually no one had bought tickets. In hindsight, perhaps Jacobson should have kept extending his schlock musical revues, "Waist Watchers" and "Cougar."

The only saving grace: Soon after the Plaza disappeared, Jacobson appointed himself president of "Waist Watchers, the Musical," which will continue touring the nation, and he touted his new position on the internet.

WHEN YOU'RE IN FLA., ALL PLAYS ARE JEWISH

Probably there are some comedians who are not Jewish, but you would never know it from the theater fare here lately. Now playing are "Old Jews Telling Jokes" and "When You're in Love, The Whole World is Jewish." Both blur the line between theater and comedy clubs, and if you haven't already heard most of these jokes, you haven't been paying attention.

IN MEMORIUM, JAY H. HARRIS

South Florida's theater community lost its most enthusiastic and financially supportive booster when Boca Raton resident Jay H. Harris died June 20. A Broadway and London producer of such plays as "Say Goodnight, Gracie" and a 2008 revival of "American Buffalo," Harris's prime achievement was keeping this region's theaters afloat with donations estimated to total over \$1 million. Boy, will he be missed.

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THE 10 BEST OF 2014 IN AREA THEATER

The Hapsters also recognize the 10 best theater productions of the year in Palm Beach County, based on a scientific poll, i.e., my opinion. The 2014 winners are:



■ **"The King and I" (Maltz Jupiter)** – Director Marcia Milgrom Dodge again and again tackling a classic musical with choreography by Jerome Robbins, but not in a conventional way. The production was well on its way to success with the casting of Wayne Hu and Michele Raguza in the title roles of this clash of cultures tale, but what made the evening memorable was the Thai shadow puppets that conveyed the "Small House of Uncle Thomas" sequence, credited to The Puppet Kitchen. CONTRIBUTED BY ALICIA DONELAN



■ **"August: Osage County" (Florida Atlantic University)** – Dysfunctional families have long been a theater staple, exemplified by Tracy Letts' Pulitzer Prize winner about an Oklahoma clan's unscheduled reunion. The marathon play has numerous juicy roles, handled well here by such talent as guest artist Kim Ostrenko as cancer-riddled, foul-mouthed matriarch Vi and recent FAU graduate Elizabeth Price as her combative daughter Barbara. CONTRIBUTED



■ **"Ain't Misbehavin'" (Wick Theatre)** – The cure for the ho-hum musical revue is this superbly crafted celebration of the vintage songs associated with jazz singer-songwriter "Fats" Waller. But it needs the right quintet of performers, so director-choreographer Ron Hutchins pulled in five veterans of the show to assure that the joint would be jumpin', and it was. CONTRIBUTED



■ **"War Horse" (Kravis Center)** – Quick, name the previous time that a non-musical was on the Kravis's Broadway series. This epic stage adaptation of a children's book by the National Theatre of Great Britain became Tony Award-winning adult theater, transformed by life-size puppets of horses put through the ordeal of World War I. Yes, Steven Spielberg made a movie of this boy-and-his-horse saga, but he drained it of its magic by using real horses. CONTRIBUTED BY KRAVIS CENTER



■ **"Other Desert Cities" (Maltz Jupiter)** – The main offerings of this Jupiter-based company are musicals, but they also do plays exceedingly well, as seen in this heady drama by the uber-smart Jon Robin Baitz about a conservative Republican – and, yes, dysfunctional – family facing public exposure when daughter Brooke returns home one Christmas with the manuscript of a tell-all memoir. The crisp, crackling production featured local talent and a few ringers, such as the impressive Richard Kline. CONTRIBUTED BY TIM PEREIRA

■ **"Fiddler on the Roof" (Maltz Jupiter)** – Rather than yet another carbon copy of Jerome Robbins' (admittedly brilliant) staging of this sublime musical in celebration of tradition, director-choreographer Marcia Milgrom Dodge gained special permission to think outside the box and outside Robbins' work. The resulting show was true to the material of Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick and Joseph Stein, but it took on a freshness and vitality, aided by a younger than usual company led by Robert Petkoff as an understated, less schtickey Tevye.

■ **"Parade" (Slow Burn Theatre Co.)** – Acclaimed but commercially unsuccessful when it premiered on Broadway in 1998, this dark-toned, dramatic musical about anti-Semitism in early 20th century Atlanta was right up Slow Burn's alley. Perennial director-choreographer Patrick Fitzwater crafted vivid stage pictures and Tom Anello was compelling as Leo Frank, a Jewish factory foreman wrongfully accused of molesting and murdering a young female employee.

■ **"The Book of Mormon" (Kravis Center)** – Sold out for the entire week before the show even arrived in the area, the hype proved accurate, if you happen to have a taste for profanity and irreverence. After all, the show was conceived and created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone of "South Park," as well as "Avenue Q's" Robert Lopez. They kid the Mormon church and its naïve missionaries mercilessly, but in the end are all for belief systems and musical comedies.

■ **"Thrill Me" (Outre Theatre Co.)** – Another company exploring the bounds of musical theater produced a minimalist evening with maximal impact, a musical exploration of the so-called "crime of the century," a cold-blooded random murder by two privileged, preppy students, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. Composer-lyricist-playwright Stephen Dolginoff's score was stark and chilling, well matched to director Skye Whitcomb's assured sense of unease.

■ **"Our Town" (Palm Beach Dramaworks)** – This West Palm Beach company has always been partial to Pulitzer Prize-winning plays, but it waited for the start of its 15th anniversary season to produce this nostalgic gem from Thornton Wilder about small town living and the cycle of life. Director J. Barry Lewis also turned it into a celebration of Dramaworks' history by casting actors who have trod the boards of the company's various stages over the past decade and a half.