

## THEATER

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## Waking Up the Rock Musical, and Other Triumphs

LOOKING in the rearview mirror at my year in theater, I was happily impressed with the sheer variety of the contenders for cream-of-the-crop consideration. Pleasure was to be found on Broadway and off, with or without music, in big packages or little. In an ideal world my best-of list would probably include more new plays, but four is actually a better percentage than most years offer up. And any year that includes a giant step forward for the often backward-glancing Broadway musical (see "Spring Awakening") deserves special commemoration. So here, in alphabetical order, the highlights of my 2006 in theater:

**'AWAKE AND SING'** Bartlett Sher and one of the year's richest ensembles celebrated Clifford Odets's 100th birthday with an emotionally rewarding revival that restored the luster to a play assumed by many to be antique agitprop. Zoë Wanamaker scored another Broadway triumph as the loving and destroying matriarch of a Brooklyn clan scrabbling to stay afloat during

the Depression, while Lauren Ambrose and Mark Ruffalo gave the production a steady flame of heat as a pair of disillusioned young romantics snatching a last chance at salvation in each other's arms.

**'BRIDGE & TUNNEL'** I could probably fill a 10-worst list with solo shows, but Sarah Jones's ebullient panorama of the immigrant experience in New York City made me forget all those endless 90-minute nights of angst-ridden self-indulgence. The ease with which Ms. Jones slipped into a dozen different souls was matched by a rare gift for defining a character with a precise, indelible sound or image: the crook of a wagging finger or the musical lilt of an accent.

**'THE CLEAN HOUSE' AND 'EURYDICE'** The late arrival of Sarah Ruhl's "Clean House" in New York, after numerous regional-theater productions was greeted with odd churlishness in some critical quarters. (Winning a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, as Ms. Ruhl did in September, doesn't necessarily win you friends.) But it's hard to see how anyone with an open

heart and an open mind could fail to be charmed by Ms. Ruhl's fantastical comedy about the curlicued interrelationships among a workaholic doctor, her daffily melancholy sister and a maid who has an allergy to cleaning. Meanwhile, Les Waters's lyrical production of Ms. Ruhl's equally venturesome meditation on grief and loss, "Eurydice," found a grateful home at Yale Repertory Theater (where "The Clean House" had its premiere two years ago). Happily, that production comes to the Second Stage Theater this spring.

**'DRUIDSYNGE'** Garry Hynes and her Druid Theater Company, based in Galway, Ireland, staged the whole canon of J. M. Synge in a daylong marathon, imported by the Lincoln Center Festival. The funny-sad music of Synge's words has probably never been played with such grit, joy and majesty. This was a highlight not just of my theatergoing year, but of my theatergoing life.

**'HEARTBREAK HOUSE'** The Roundabout Theater Company, the city's most steadfast champion of talky old George Bernard Shaw, brought his darling masterwork about the English gentry drifting into oblivion to timely life. Swoosie Kurtz and Philip Bosco, the names above the title, provided much of the stylish comedy in peak-form performances, but the whole ensemble shone under the incisive direction of Robin Lefevre.

**'THE HISTORY BOYS'** Proving that not all good things come to an end, Alan Bennett's wry comedy about English schoolboys tasting the bitter-sweet fruits of real knowledge, as opposed to education, is now preserved on film. All to the good for those who missed it onstage. But a two-dimensional medium couldn't possibly recreate the glorious pop of Nicholas Hytner's stage production, which glistened on Broadway as it hadn't when I saw it in its native habitat at London's National Theater.

**'KINGLEAR'** Robert Falls celebrated his 20th anniversary as artistic director of Chicago's Goodman Theater this fall in bloody good style, mounting an audacious production of Shakespeare's towering masterpiece that grabbed the audience by the throat in the opening moments and didn't let up for three hours. Set in Yugoslavia in the early days of the Balkan conflict, this modern-dress production was a scabrous



but also searching commentary on a 20th century rife with bloodshed, staged as we sorrowfully endure what promises to be a painfully sanguinary 21st.

**'SHINING CITY'** The Irish playwright Conor McPherson may have the most delicate touch of anyone writing for the stage today. In this deeply affecting play about two men struggling through emotional crises, he explored the slow ache of loneliness in tête-à-têtes both tender and trenchant. Leading a flawless cast in the role of a doubt-ridden priest turned therapist, Brian F. O'Byrne added another to his virtually unmatched album of New York stage portraits in recent seasons.

**'SPRING AWAKENING'** The alluring rock score, by Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater, is flat-out the best of the year and probably many another besides. And in transferring from Off Broadway's Atlantic Theater Company to Broadway, this gutsy new musical bloomed in unexpected ways. Adapted from Frank Wedekind's 19th-century play about adolescents discovering the joys and perils of sex, "Spring Awakening" has a shivery sensual allure unmatched by anything in the theater right now. All you who profess allergies to Broadway musicals, in particular the watery pop-rock that passes for fresh sounds on the stage, should take notice: this is something distinct and distinctly new.

**'[TITLE OF SHOW]'** A delightful deconstruction of the classic let's-put-on-a-show show, this tiny new musical by Hunter Bell and Jeff Bowen — two guys, two girls, a few chairs and a guy at the keyboard — brimmed with uncloying charm and good humor. Its healthy run at the Vineyard Theater helped keep alive the flickering hope that there is an audience for new musicals off Broadway.



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Above, Sarah Jones in "Bridge & Tunnel," her one-woman show about the immigrant experience in New York; left, a scene from "Spring Awakening," a rock musical based on Frank Wedekind's 1891 play.

## ONLINE: FAVORITE THINGS

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