

The Year in Arts: Dance & Theater

In a year of change, 20th-century works started to seem like classics

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2008 was definitely one for the history books. Even while we were beavering away to become the change—and make the change—we want to see in the world, we had an extraordinary chance to look back at some of the history that brought us to this strange first decade of the 21st century.

The tide of time ran beneath the surf of new plays and dances, and brought in a powerful rip current of older ones—often ones that had been change-provoking in their days. And many new works took on history, future history, and politics past and present. Humanity doesn't alter that much over millennia, but our mores and behaviors vary considerably over mere decades. On war and tyranny we are holding even with the worst and best recorded by art, but when it comes to sexual politics and certain aspects of race relations, some of the works we saw in 2008 made it clear that yes, we have come a long way, baby.



A scene from Pericles, produced by PlayMakers Rep last fall
Photo by Jon Gardiner

I started thinking about this in June, when the American Dance Festival presented a double bill with the Martha Graham Company and the Lar Lubovitch Company. For its 75th anniversary season, the ADF paired and tripled companies to show us important works from modern dance history and many instances of how dance influences dance through the years. Graham was one of the most important early modern dancers and choreographers, and one could see both the weaknesses and continuing power of her work. Her "Steps in the Street," a section of the 1936 *Chronicle*, with its excoriation of power's fascistic tendency is no less relevant today. Lubovitch had been one of Graham's students before forming his own company and, as it were, turning toward the light. His company danced a resplendent work from 1986 that had originally been provocative and political in its presentation of male love—at the time the horror of AIDS was dawning on the world. The dancers all wear white and move with delicate purity to late Mozart. Twenty-two years later, the message of *Concerto Six Twenty Two* has not become unnecessary but it has been overtaken by the sheer glowing beauty of the work.

Also at ADF, Bill T. Jones presented a newly reworked version of *Another Evening: Serenade/ The Proposition*, in which he mixed personal history with references to certain aspects of 19th-century American history. The piece was not very successful, including as it did a mystifying litany of place names repeated during the performance. Yet now that itinerary of train stops between Springfield, Ill. and Washington, D.C., has taken on a new historical resonance. Jones was tracing Abraham Lincoln's journey to his presidential inauguration, and in a few days, President-elect Barack Obama will make a similar journey, completing it on the same rails his hero traveled, through the same cities,

whose names will then echo not on an auditorium stage but on the world stage. It is enough to restore one's belief in the artist as a shaman, one who draws on the past to tell the future.

In the theater, we saw several intriguing looks at various histories. There was Little Green Pig Theatrical Concern's sprawling accomplishment *Europe Central*, which looked at art and killing in mid-20th-century middle-Europe in fresh ways that reminded us that certain historical dangers are still present. The most powerful production of the year, Little Green Pig's staging of Athol Fugard's *The Island*, from 1974, was acted by men too young for personal memories of apartheid-time. That, more than any other fact, made it clear to me that the world has taken at least one step away from that particular historical nightmare. It also demonstrated the lasting artistic value of the play itself—as did new stagings of several other plays from the 1960s through the 1990s. Works that had been among the brashest of the new are now canonical. Details, as some in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (given a powerhouse staging by Party Girl! Productions and director Tom Marriott) may be outdated, but the core truths are even clearer than in their first days. We saw that the same transition from challenge to canon has occurred with David Mamet's *Duck Variations* and his *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, both beautifully mounted by Ghost & Spice Productions.

The long-canonical Shakespeare was brought up to the moment in smart stagings of *Twelfth Night* (Burning Coal Theatre) and *Pericles* (Playmakers Repertory Company). Both companies used contemporary design and music to bring the old stories into the now. Burning Coal mined classic Miles Davis jazz, but PRC went further. Traditional musician and composer Jack Herrick played the ancient instruments, but also a stack of synthesizers, as he hauled up the aural net of history and cast it sparkling through the present to support some later artist's future explorations of the eternal themes. As changeful 2008 settles into history, like Shakespeare's Miranda we should exclaim, "Oh brave new world, that hath such people in it."