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Isthmus critics rate the year in local culture Isthmus Staff on Friday 12/28/2007

2007 had its share of bad news for the Madison arts scene. The Overture Center's endowment fund dipped perilously low. The Madison Center for Creative and Cultural Arts shut down. The Madison Theatre Guild almost died. Former Overture Center chief Robert D'Angelo was indicted on 39 criminal counts.

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But let's look at the bright side, shall we? Robert Redford chose Madison as the site of his first Sundance Cinemas, tremendously boosting the local film scene. The troubled Club Majestic gave way to the promising Majestic Theatre. Madison Ballet raised its game by hiring a dozen professional dancers. Madison Opera sold out its fall production of La Bohème. The Madison Repertory Theatre mounted an original production about Vince Lombardi.

And there's more. Isthmus' arts critics look back on 2007, taking the bad with the good.

- Dean Robbins

Susan Kepecs

It's been a rough 12 months — economy's down, war's still on, W's still in the White House and winter hit before Thanksgiving. And despite all the precip, arts offerings were drier this year than last. In '05-06 I picked tickets for 24 shows from the pot of performances served up under the auspices of Wisconsin Union Theater or the Overture Center, and I scrambled to cram 15 of them into my year-end highlights list. From this year's haul of 20 events, only eight appear here.

That doesn't mean there weren't bright lights in the little city. The divine Dianne Reeves graced the Wisconsin Union Theater with a perfect performance. Always the consummate show woman, Reeves sang her intros and scattered her way offstage. In between, she unleashed that trademark sumptuous voice on a splendid set of tunes like the early Betty Carter classic "Social Call" and the temptin' Temptations "Just My Imagination." Wow.

Tied with Reeves at the top of my list are Cuba-born reed boss Paquito D'Rivera at the

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Wisconsin Union Theater and his fellow island expat **Omar Sosa** at UW Music Hall. D'Rivera's super-tight quintet stretched out on a set of Cubop-to-postbop tangos and guaguancós, mostly off their sizzlin' new Funk Tango CD.

D'Rivera and Sosa are quintessentially Cuban — commanding and flirtatious. But D'Rivera's definitive Big Apple Latin jazz and Sosa's global santería are worlds apart. Sosa, dressed in orisha whites, teased new-age modal love-in themes from the keys, weaving his spirit-soaked sound through the impeccable Afreecanos quartet's layered polyrhythms and haunting Wolof songs.

I adored Baraka the Dragon, the astonishing **Dragon Knights** puppet wandering the Terrace at the Wisconsin Union Theater's fourth annual **World Music Festival**, which I'm counting as a single event. Other standouts on that bodacious three-day bill: **New York Gypsy All-Stars**, the **Huong Thanh & Nguyen Le Quintet**, the **Roberto Rodriguez and Maurice El Medioni Trio**, **Estrella Acosta** and **Puerto Plata**. But the fest topped out with African ax man **Louis Mhlanga**, whose harmonious Afropop groove appealed my '60s hippie heart.

Moving on to dance, the **Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company's** lovingly restored Alwin Nikolais retrospective at the Wisconsin Union Theater was intriguing. The spooky "Noumenon" (1953) and the exuberantly visual, sci-fi-esque "Tent" (1968) were treats, but the magic of those earlier works evaporated in "Mechanical Organ" (1981).

The Best of Momix at Overture Hall was mostly TV-commercial slick, but I liked the delicate sensibility of "Spawning," a salmon dance. And the encore — no costumes, no props, no special effects, just dance — was extraordinary.

UW dance prof **Li Chiao-Ping's** "HOME WORKS" concert at Overture's Promenade Hall offered earthy, intelligent dances. Noteworthy were a stripped-down "this is me dancing" solo, "Mendelssohn Piece," made for Li by California-based choreographer June Watanabe, and "FoRAY," a solo Li created for herself with live jazz and Beat Generation motifs.

Finally, kudos and a big rose bouquet to **Madison Ballet** artistic director **W. Earle Smith** and his fledgling professional company for the luscious neoclassical "Snow" scene in this year's Nutcracker.

Jennifer A. Smith

In the visual arts, 2007's most significant show was probably the **Wisconsin Triennial** at the **Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA)**. Installing a show the size and scope of the Triennial — MMoCA's signature survey of current Wisconsin art — in the museum's expanded space made the experience a richer one for both viewers and artists. Among my favorites were pieces by photographers **Carl Corey** and **Stephen Milanowski**, painter **Daniel O'Neal**, and **Stephanie Liner** and **William J. Andersen**, who mixed social and political commentary into their art while still delivering a satisfying visual jolt.

Another Triennial highlight, the bug installation by **Jennifer Angus** called "The Grammar of Ornament," delved into the artist's fascination not only with entomology but also with Victorian patterning. Viewers got a chance to experience a more all-encompassing installation by Angus — complete with a sound design by **Alistair MacDonald** — at the **Chazen Museum of Art** with the delightful "Silver Wings and Golden Scales."

Other memorable shows this year included solo exhibitions by **Jessica Jacobs** and **Doug Fath** at the **Wisconsin Academy's James Watrous Gallery**, as well as the Academy's thematic shows "**Wisconsin's People on the Land**" and "**Spectrum**," the exhibition showcasing winners of 2006 Wisconsin Arts Board fellowships.

"**Jess: To and From the Printed Page**" at MMoCA and "**Competition & Collaboration: Japanese Prints and the Utagawa School**" at the Chazen offered viewers in-depth explorations of fascinating subjects.

On local stages, **University Theatre's** Urinetown was a professional-level production at a bargain price. The quirky, self-mocking musical with a social message was staged by a winning ensemble cast, with especially noteworthy performances by **Clare Arena Haden** (also very strong in UT's drama A Nervous Smile) and **Steve Wojtas**.

American Players Theatre's staging of George Bernard Shaw's Misalliance was a spirited treat. As the gutsy Eastern European acrobat Lina, **Tracy Michelle Arnold** proved why she's a local favorite — as she did in Much Ado About Nothing, although I much prefer Shaw to Shakespeare. Another APT regular, **Colleen Madden**, grounded Tennessee Williams' Night of the Iguana and also appeared with husband **James Ridge** in Talley's Folly at the **Madison Repertory Theatre**.

As for new, original theater work, **Broom Street Theater's** Debs in Prison, written by artistic director **Callen Hartly**, showed that BST is not just a home for outré theater — though it is that, too. Debs took on the timely subject of political speech and how each of us might seek to make change in the world.



Come to think of it, that's not a bad note to end on. As an election year, 2008 is gonna need all the help it can get.

Bruce G. Bradley

The Greeks knew a thing or two about acting. They invented the words theater, proscenium and thespian. And, of course, they gave us the famous mask depicting tragedy and comedy as the inextricably linked elements of drama and life. What a prescient move that turned out to be!

Madison theater troupes also know a thing or two about acting. And while we may not have an auditorium to rival that of ancient Ephesus, which reportedly held 50,000 spectators, there was no shortage of fine establishments in which to enjoy the theatrical offerings of 2007.

At least two companies in the past year have, like the fire-devastated Bankside playhouses of Shakespeare's time, striven to rise from the ashes of misfortune. **Madison Theatre Guild**, one of the area's venerable community theaters, struggled through personnel and financial difficulties. But new board membership seems determined to put the company back on a sure footing and will start the New Year with David Mamet's comedy *The Duck Variations*.

Likewise, longtime favorite **Children's Theatre of Madison** seemed to have reached its nadir and was sinking in a sea of red ink. But with the enormous success of last season's *A Christmas Carol*, directed by **Roseann Sheridan**, a flicker of hope has been fanned into a fire of inspiration. Sheridan has now been appointed producing artistic director and takes over a burgeoning organization that has shed its debt and slated an exciting season of plays in 2008.

Not every company made it into the headlines in 2007, of course. Most just kept working away at what they do best, producing plays for enthusiastic audience response and critical acclaim. Stalwarts like **Broom Street Theater**, **StageQ** and **Mercury Players Theatre** continued to support aspiring playwrights and to explore nontraditional themes, while **Strollers Theatre** forged on with works as disparate as *Hair* and *Uncle Vanya*.

A revitalized **Madison Repertory Theatre**, the city's professional troupe, presented an eclectic mix of music (*Carousel*), myth (*Lombardi/The Only Thing*) and mastery (*Death of a Salesman*). The artistic gambles that the company took a couple of years ago are starting to pay off.

And for those interested in seeing the stars of the future, an evening at **UW-Madison's University Theatre** should give rise to a feeling of optimism for the acting profession. With their season of adventurous and diverse subjects, UT gave us a memorable year.

The indomitable spirit of Madison theater would no doubt please the Greeks, who admired the virtue of perseverance as much as they embraced artistic expression. Melpomene and Thalia, twinned for all eternity on that ubiquitous mask, would be proud.

John W. Barker

Madison's classical-music scene has been a lively one in 2007. In the concert sphere, the heavy lifters — the **Madison Symphony Orchestra** and the **Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra** — generally maintained and even enhanced their outstanding ensemble quality. The MSO's **John DeMain** rounded out his Mahler cycle with the Ninth Symphony, and also tackled Stravinsky's thorny "Rite of Spring," topping otherwise more conventional but quite solid repertoire.

The WCO's **Andrew Sewell** continued to emphasize substance and variety, particularly favoring Mozart — witness even a full program devoted to that master. He deftly balanced Tchaikovsky's rich "Serenade for Strings" against Arensky's endearing "Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky." And, of course, his *Concerts on the Square* rolled out more of his annual summer diversity.

One thing that struck me was the better consistency of soloists that each orchestra brought in through the year. I could have done without a saxophonist with the WCO, but the orchestra gave us two very fine pianists — **Adam Neiman** and **Janina Fialkowska** — while the gracious violinist **Rachel Barton Pine** was a refreshing contrast to the overhyped **Joshua Bell**, featured in a special MSO concert. The MSO itself fielded two splendid cellists (**Lynn Harrell**, **Steven Isserlis**); two gifted pianists (the fiery **Per Tengstrand**, our own **Christopher Taylor**); a welcomed-back organist (**Thomas Trotter**); and a beguiling soprano (**Dawn Upshaw**).

Of MSO's guest conductors, **Pinchas Zukerman** seemed at sea alike in Vivaldi and Tchaikovsky, but **Edo de Waart** climaxed some rousing 19th-century repertoire with Elgar's sturdy "Enigma Variations," and **Emil de Cou** averted calamity as a last-minute substitute for **Wolfgang Gönnenwein** in Orff's bilious "Carmina Burana" with the MSO Chorus. Another podium guest, **Kent Nagano**, brought his own chorus and orchestra (Chicago Symphony) for a less-than-ideal Brahms "German Requiem."

That other anchor of our local music-making, the **Madison Opera**, achieved distinction in

two superb productions: not only the warhorse *La Bohème*, but an unjustly neglected novelty, Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*, both gorgeously staged as well as beautifully sung. Its now-institutionalized "Opera in the Park" delighted a gigantic summer audience.

Madison Savoyards scored with a double-bill of the Gilbert and Sullivan Sorcerer plus an earlier Sullivan farce, *Cox and Box*. The **Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society** again offered five different programs of adventuresome diversity in the course of three June weekends.

More such variety was available at **John Harbison's** intimate **Token Creek Chamber Music Festival**. The **Madison Early Music Festival** added to summer richness in its eighth annual gathering, focused this time on the glorious "Age of the Netherlanders" in the Renaissance.

Always chugging along on artistic steroids, it seems, is the **UW School of Music's** vast multitude of faculty and student concerts. If there was a highlight, it had to be the **University Opera's** remarkable delivery, by a talented student cast, of Debussy's elusive *Pelléas and Mélisande*. Nor should we forget the weekly Sunday concerts at the **Chazen Museum of Art**, which offer a range of performers, both local and visiting, in enterprising programs. My favorite was the recital by a local-boy-made-good, the remarkable harpsichordist **Michael Fuerst**.

Mounting a discreet challenge to the UW's **Pro Arte Quartet** in the last few years is the plucky **Ancora String Quartet**, performing in residence at the First Unitarian Society. Well-established now are two local beacons of period-music presentation: the **Wisconsin Baroque Ensemble**, in refreshing performances of vocal and instrumental chamber works; and **Trevor Stephenson's Madison Bach Musicians**, presenting the sacred and secular music of their namesake composer in ever more bold, exciting and stylish ways.

I write all this in the aftermath of Thanksgiving, which prompts me really to give thanks for so much wonderful musical activity available to us here in Madison.

Lue Allen

Was it my imagination or were audiences really larger at the smaller theaters in Madison this year? Calls last week to some company managers proved it was no illusion: Their audience numbers were up. Some by just a tick, but several by a big bump.

"We had an incredibly successful season," reports **Four Seasons Theatre** managing director **Sarah Marty**. "Three full houses for *West Side Story* in August." Might have been the lure of a full orchestra and a Union Theater stage full of hometown talent. Marty adds that there was a huge spike in sales just before opening night for both *Story* and their staged concert version of *Miss Saigon* in March.

Children's Theatre of Madison hit their target numbers last year. "We sold 88% of the tickets for *To Kill a Mockingbird*," says producing director **Roseann Sheridan**. *Mockingbird* introduced two promising young actors: 11-year-old **Emma Geer** as Scout and **Kenny Lyons** as Jem. The play put CTM on the comeback track after their recent financial collapse.

Bartell Theatre managing director **Lee Ann Cooper** thinks ticket sales for all six Bartell groups enjoyed a boost. "More and more people have become familiar with the quality of our work. Or maybe," she jokes, "it's the wine bar."

Whichever — **Strollers Theatre's** *Uncle Vanya* completely sold out for over half its run. The Chekhov classic starred **Sam White**, **Carl Cawthorne** and **Colin Woolston** — a tossup as to who stole the show. **Mercury Players Theatre** bucked the mainstream with *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, a disquieting drama with puppets and an extraordinary real-life performance by **Ray Ready**; also *Bug*, a psycho creepy crawler that showcased **Cara Peterson's** grisly makeup work. **Madison Theatre Guild** battered the Bard with a fast-forward ribald production of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (abridged).

"Despite the snowfall and the construction that surrounds Vilas Hall, audience numbers have continued to grow," says **Michele Traband**, general manager at **University Theatre**. The marvelous **Olivia Dawson** was featured in two of their productions: *Yellowman* and *Three Sisters*; **Jeff Godsey** was particularly fine as Kulygin in *Sisters*. You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown gave **Kathryn Premo** a chance to demonstrate her high-wattage comic talent, and **Steve Wojtas'** dance number was a dazzler.

Number one on everybody's wish list: a downtown meltdown that will get audiences back in line at the box-office.

Katie Reiser

This past year of theatergoing consisted of minor discomforts and bountiful rewards. **Broom Street Theater's** awful bleachers were made bearable because the snappy and silly *Vogue*, about a failed record company, was such fun. The itty-bitsy black bugs at **American Player Theatre's** *Timon of Athens* were annoying, but the elegant and modern take on this lesser-

known work of Shakespeare was a pleasant surprise. Perilous driving through slush was soon forgotten after **Jazzworks Dance Company's** lively and polished evening of dance at the Overture Center. Parking and babysitting woes seemed petty after viewing choreographer **Peggy Choy's** stirring Gateless Gate, the final installment in her Women of the Scarred Earth series.

I was moved by individual performances this year. **Paul Milisch** was a standout in two Strollers Theatre productions. Dynamic and feral as Berger in Hair, he then did a quiet and thoughtful turn as Serge in Art. Dancer **Arienne Kluesner** shone in every Jazzworks piece she was in with her impressive technique and lovely stage presence. **Roderick Peeples** was moving and heartbreaking as Willy Loman in **Madison Repertory Theatre's** spare and powerful Death of a Salesman. Peeples' chemistry with **DJ Howard** as Charley made their scenes together really resonate. Comedian **Lewis Black** at the **Overture Center** made me laugh at myself, our government and Wisconsin's quest for the ideal brandy old-fashioned. Opening for Black was comedian **John Bowman**, who more than held his own.

I cringe whenever any actors approach me in my seat, even if they are as charming and talented as **Caitlyn O'Mara** in Tom Foolery from the troubled Madison Theatre Guild. The audience participation in the bizarre but well-sung Girls Night: The Musical, an Overture Center touring show, felt contrived even though the television commercials made it seem that dancing in the aisles would be the natural response. **WhoopDeDoo Production's** raucous Sweet-Cannoli Nuptials (complete with dinner at the West Side Club) almost did me in, but there I was doing the chicken dance.

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