

# BIRDS of MAMMOTH

## Recession Be Damned: Best Theater of 2009 A thriving year for stage in L.A.

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Patrick McGowan's Film at Theatre of NOTE

Maybe because the cost of doing theater here under the Actors' Equity Association's Small Professional Theatre contracts is so inexpensive compared to other metropolitan

theater centers in the country, the recession has put hardly a dent in the quantity of productions opening in L.A.'s smaller venues. Also for

reasons having largely to do with economics, this year the bulk of the most artistically challenging and exciting work continued to come from our smaller theaters, frequently operating on shoestring budgets and without the crushing financial stakes of our midsize and larger theaters. This reality was mingled with the continued absence of arts funding in the U.S., the kind of funding in Britain and Europe that allows the larger theaters to push the art form forward. That responsibility is largely met in New York by private, commercial investors, and here by scrappy theater companies, compensating with inventiveness for what they lack in resources. Not the best scenario, but it works well enough to provide a list of riveting shows from 2009.

1. ***Monsters and Prodigies: The History of the Castrati*** REDCAT is getting more savvy at programming international theater, shipping in Mexico City's Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes, and its history of how preadolescent boys in 17th-century Europe were castrated in order to preserve the beauty of their high voices. The circuslike spectacle was as disturbing as it was beautiful. A snorting, stomping Centaur (Miguel Angel Lopez) opened the piece, his huge, bare chest heaving from behind stable doors, establishing the Greek myth origins of how lines between men and beasts became crossed — along with those between men and gods. Fast-forward to the 20th century, and the stage was occupied by ghoulish characters out of a Molière farce: Siamese twins in whiteface (Raúl Román and Gastón Yanes) attached at the waist by their Baroque vest; a fuming harpsichordist (Edwin Calderon) and one "Castrati" (Javier Medina). Dualities abounded on the stage: the brutality of castration (especially when it went awry) versus the beatific rapture of those high, holy voices. The stage was eventually opened to reveal a huge sandpit behind those stable doors. The twins were separated, the French Revolution intervened, and the performance devolved into a madcap farce, which included Punch-and-Judy show antics, food fights and the parade of a magnificent horse, restrained to the point of frothing at the mouth.

2. ***Violators Will Be Violated*** Casey Smith's wordless one-man show, presented by Circle X Theatre Company, late night at Son of Semele Theatre (performances resume in January), was a lunatic act of physical theater in which Smith — vaguely resembling Steve Martin but with a triple dose of mania — performed brief sketches circling back on the theme of self-destruction: from a female stripper and her ludicrous gyrations, to a decathlon athlete gored by his own javelin, to a ballet featuring a romantic hero who accidentally severed his own head with a carving knife.



3. **Film** Patrick McGowan's new biographical play at Theatre of NOTE about the late theater director Alan Schneider (Bill Robens) was set in 1965 New York, and showed Schneider trying to make a film from a screenplay by Samuel Beckett (Phil Ward), who had come to New York to work with Schneider. Joining them to star in the slogging, portentous film, also named *Film* (now regarded by some historians as a masterpiece) was Beckett's favorite comedian, Buster Keaton (Carl J. Johnson), long past his prime, spiritually at ease with his station in life, and willing to play along with the clueless intellectuals and a film crew whose patience was sorely tested.

4. **Oedipus the King, Mama!** Riffing on literary classics by tethering it to some pop crooner has become a cottage industry for Matt Walker's Troubadour Theater Company of clowns and improvisers. The idea of reimagining Sophocles' tragedy with songs by Elvis would seem about as lame a confection as one could dream up. Yet with Walker's sardonic, limping King and Beth Kennedy's gravel-voiced Jocasta, Ameenah Kaplan's choreography, plus the quick-witted antics of Rick Batalla and the sharp-shooting company, the silly event had moments of surprising tenderness — particularly in one improvised moment playing off a feather that had escaped from some piece of costuming, and which inspired a spontaneous, improvised scene about following the feather's flight, and the capricious turns of destiny.

5. **Light up the Sky** Open Fist Theatre Company took a 180-degree turn from its 2008 hit, Frank Zappa's rock opera *Joe's Garage*, with a stylish and beguiling revival of Moss Hart's 1946 valentine to showbiz, directed by Bjorn Johnson.

6. **Treefall** Rogue Machine at Theatre/Theater premiered Henry Murray's postapocalyptic drama about a group, which after surviving an ecological collapse, uses theater to cobble together the illusion of a family. Aside from the fine performances, the evening was distinguished by the play's driving, despondent ache of truth, under John Perrin Flynn's tender staging.

7. **Shining City** Conor McPherson's pristine drama played at the Fountain Theatre (it resumes after the holidays) about a sexually confused Dublin therapist (William Dennis Hurley, revealing layers of subterranean angst beneath a kindly veneer) and his forlorn patient (Morlan Higgins, gruff and burly, yet with heart dangling from his sleeve). The therapist listened and listened and listened to the widower agonizing over the death of his wife in a traffic accident. Making matters worse, the patient and his wife were estranged at the time of her death. The play overflowed with pathos, loneliness, humanity and wry humor, under Stephen Sachs' gentle direction.

8. **Hamlet Shut Up!** Jonas Oppenheim's 90-minute rendition of Shakespeare's brooding classic at Sacred Fools Theatre Company with 'nary a word spoken was presented in the style of a silent film. This was a monument to theatrical imagination, and a lark as well, like the Reduced Shakespeare Company but without even the shorthand language.

9. **Blackbird** Jade Dornfeld and Johnny Clark portrayed a co-dependent couple in a New York walk-up — Danny Cistone's brick-lined set played perfectly off the venue's brick walls. Adam Rapp's grungy love story had a striking authenticity, as staged by Ron Klier in a VS. Theatre Company production at the Elephant Theatre Lab.

10. **Impro Theatre** In their improvised, full-length re-creations of works by Jane Austen, Tennessee Williams and other literary luminaries, Dan O'Connor's troupe finds just the right blend of parody and homage in their witty, erudite entertainments.

Also noteworthy: **Druid Ireland** (Ireland), **TR Warzawa** (Poland) and **Theatre Zar** (Poland), all at UCLA Live; **Arias With a Twist** at REDCAT; Kit Steinkellner's **Adeline's Play** at the Powerhouse; Culture Clash's Aristophanes riff, **Peace**, at the Getty Villa; South African drag artist Pieter-Dirk Uys' **Elections and Erections**, at both UCLA and REDCAT; the Wooster Group's eccentric take on Francesco Cavalli's 17th-century opera **La Didone**, also at REDCAT; and Tom Salamon's site-specific kidnapping mystery, **Accomplice: Hollywood**.