



Miami Theater in 2013: Despite Companies Closing, a Few Masterpieces Remained

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Ethan Henry in *Metamorphoses* (left)

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Karen Stephens and Shane Tanner in *Fear Up Harsh*

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When looking back at the past year in theater, there's no escaping the void. Companies that had become staples at awards shows and in best-of tallies were nowhere to be found, having vanished like the bee population.

We got the proverbial goose egg from the Naked Stage. Its sole contribution to theater was its cherished annual fundraiser, the 24 Hour Theatre Project, mounted way up in the hinterlands of West Palm Beach. After more than 40 years of producing enlightening African-American plays, the M Ensemble unveiled just one work in 2013 and has nothing on the horizon; its website hasn't been updated since March.

Likewise, the Alliance Theatre Lab produced only one new show in 2013, the exceptional *Savage in Limbo*. After wowing everybody with its experimental debut of *Three Sisters* a year ago this month, Miami Theater Center offered no new adult work on its main stage. Going into 2014, its direction seems focused solely on smart children's work, which certainly has its place — but it ain't Chekhov.

Those seeking impressive theater on the margins did see a few fringe benefits: Ground Up and Rising emerged from a long hibernation to produce a four-play season in intimate, unorthodox venues such as O Cinema and Miami Beach Botanical Garden. Storycrafter Studios has brought a small but dedicated audience to its new Miami Beach playhouse and is angling for Carbonell consideration in 2014. And Miami Theater Center offered its black-box space for up-and-coming playwrights and performance artists as part of its grant-supported Sandbox Series.

Still, theatergoers' options haven't felt this limited in years. (Palm Beach County, by contrast, has the opposite problem, with its quantity outpacing quality.) The decline of small and midsize companies in Miami — there being only so many public dollars to go around — felt especially pronounced when the time came to rank the ten best regional productions of the

year. (See my picks online at cultistmiami.com.) Seventy percent of them came from the powerhouses with the biggest largesse and community support: Actors' Playhouse, GableStage, and the Adrienne Arsht Center, the holy trinity. For our theater scene to maintain the vibrancy of recent years, the absent companies mentioned above need to be resuscitated so they can keep pace with — and challenge — the heavy hitters.

But before we get to the year's standouts, it's worth recalling a few of the clunkers. ***The Fox on the Fairway*** was the nadir for Actors' Playhouse this summer (the company produced memorable work only in the winter and spring). The humor in this exhausted golf farce was as old as the average country-clubber; even a cast as talented as Actors' couldn't make it work. Mad Cat's shapelessly scattershot ***Cat Lady*** showed us the perils of failing to rein in a meandering, self-indulgent playwright/performance artist. And the Arsht Center's expensive experiment ***Metamorphoses***, based on Ovid's classic myths and coproduced with the University of Miami's theater students, failed to connect or properly employ its inventive poolside concept.

Some performances, though, transcended otherwise imperfect milieus. None of the following productions made my Top 10, but all were worth seeing, thanks in large part to the outstanding performances. GableStage's ***4000 Miles*** provided a master class from Harriet Oser as a hearing-impaired former radical. Zoetic Stage's ***The Savannah Disputation*** showcased the charm, range, and comic timing of Lindsey Forgey, as a cheery purveyor of doom-laden dogma. Actors' Playhouse's ***Ruthless!*** offered two heretofore unseen sides of Amy Miller Brennan, as both a mechanical Stepford mom and an irrepressible stage diva. The African American Performing Arts Community Theatre's ***Fences*** was anchored by Carolyn Johnson's subtly scene-stealing work as the powerful wife to her family's volcanic breadwinner. ***Metamorphoses*** came to vivid life only when Ethan Henry plunged into the depths of Ovid's despair. And in Mad Cat's ***Blow Me***, Erin Joy Schmidt disappeared effortlessly into the skin, clothes, and hats of tortured fashion muse Isabella Blow.

But we've saved our biggest praise for the complete packages, the productions that make Miami the increasing envy of regional theaters across the country. New Theatre, which struggled with some of its world premieres this year, found itself compellingly at home with its only classic: a spartan production of ***Agnes of God*** that felt raw, haunting, and still of-the-moment. Slow Burn, a Boca-based company, brought its profound production of ***Next to Normal*** to the Aventura Arts & Cultural Center for a limited run, providing Miami audiences with an indispensable introduction to this offbeat musical-theater brand, which is finally hitting its stride.

As for the big three? Yeah, they're here quite a bit. GableStage's virtually set-less ***Cock*** was a marvelous exploration of sexual tension, withering humor, and emotional unease, all delivered through the magic of word, gesture, and timing. It was the year's most successful experimental work. Its production of David Lindsay-Abaire's ***Good People***, likewise, was sheer perfection, a black comedy fit for this or any recession, with Laura Turnbull turning in one of the best performances of her career.

Actors' Playhouse's ***Other Desert Cities*** began 2013 with an unforgettable emotional scorcher and followed it with a rousing ***In the Heights*** — a Broadway-ready production on every level. Zoetic Stage took stage humor to new heights of sophistication and modernity with ***All New People***, a quirky comedy that was probably funnier on the Arsht Center's elegant set than it was on the page.

As for Zoetic's closing production of 2013, the world premiere of Christopher Demos-Brown's ***Fear Up Harsh*** — this community should feel privileged to be the first audience to absorb this stunning meditation on honor, war, ethics, friendship, and child-rearing in an age of government-sanctioned torture. Most world premieres need at least some polish as they find themselves through the trial and error of early productions. This one felt like it was lifted straight from Broadway's Tony shortlist.

Miami audiences might be yearning for theaters that didn't show up for work much in 2013, but ***Fear Up Harsh*** distilled enough brilliance in an hour and a half to raise the whole community up a notch. Local playwrights, let's see you keep it raised in 2014.

