



## **Flying Under the Radar: The Best of L.A. Theater in the '00s**

**By Steven Leigh Morris**

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For local theater, the millennium's first decade has shaped up to be an era of retrenchment, determined largely by tectonic shifts in the style of new-play development at major institutions, and in the manner in which the scene is being reported in the press. These two shifts are interconnected and have lasting ramifications for the purpose and vigor of the work being created. There remains a bustle of activity here, as well as the creation of excellent theater, much of which transfers to other areas of the country, including Broadway and off-Broadway. But the decade's administrative and economic shifts have resulted in a net diminishment of the region's promise for national distinction, meaning that without the administrative and press support that existed in 2001, too much of the great work being produced here flies under the radar, underrecognized and/or forgotten. This has nothing to do with the quality of the work but with the quality of the support systems that could place it on national and international radar.

Let's start with what we've lost, then move on to what we've gained.

In fall 2003, we lost A.S.K. Theatre Projects, which was shaping up to be one of the nation's premier new play-development forums, and which was beginning to fulfill the region's long-awaited promise of being the best national laboratory for the the kind of works that move the art form forward. Not only did A.S.K. Theatre Projects have bonds with literary departments in major theaters in New York and around the country, as well as with the Royal Court Theatre in London, but it also fostered relationships with individual playwrights, as well as local theater companies. Every year, on the UCLA campus, A.S.K. Theatre Projects — which was never a producing organization — would host a festival of new works, replacing the traditional model of a theater commissioning individual playwrights with the model of a curator commissioning local theater or dance companies, who in turn put forward their best writer/choreographers. The festival presented works-in-progress, which were attended by literary managers from theaters around the country. It put Los Angeles forward, institutionally, as a breeding ground for new work — a purpose it has traditionally served because of the presence of so many actors from other theater meccas (New York, Seattle, Chicago, Minneapolis) drawn here by the TV and film industries, and eager to work in some innovative theater when they can. Until A.S.K. Theatre Projects, we lacked an institution that could give our scene credibility. That was A.S.K.'s loftiest accomplishment.

We also had a series of play-development laboratories inside Gordon Davidson's Mark Taper Forum, but these were devoted to process more than product. They seldom received the attention lavished by A.S.K., and they were all removed when Michael Ritchie replaced Davidson.

What we've lost at Center Theatre Group with the ascent of Ritchie is a clear sense of what exactly the Taper, the Ahmanson and the Kirk Douglas Theatres are meant for. Even with the

abundance of star-studded shows booked in from London and New York under Davidson's helm — perhaps the only Davidson tradition Ritchie has sustained — Davidson had a clear commitment to use his theaters as windows into our social and political life. This was a driving philosophy that gave some definition to the Mark Taper Forum, from *The Trial of the Cantonsville Nine* and *Zoot Suit* to *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *Stand-Up Tragedy* to numerous premieres of plays by August Wilson.

There are glimmers of this under Ritchie (*Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* at the Douglas, transferring to the Taper this coming season), (*Water & Power* and *Palestine, New Mexico* at the Taper). But tellingly, the “New” (remodeled) Mark Taper Forum opened inexplicably and metaphorically with John Guare's 1970s farce, *The House of Blue Leaves*, about a New York zookeeper and his insane wife, during the pope's 1965 visit; it couldn't have been less relevant to the first decade of the 21st century, and dropped a disheartening hint about the theater's future. The tone of the new Center Theatre Group is set by Broadway-bound diversions, such as *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Minsky's* and *9 to 5*. This is forgivable and perhaps necessary in a barn like the Ahmanson, where those musicals were performed, but the programming at the Taper and Douglas has felt scattershot and bereft of a unifying mission. In Ritchie's defense, this is part of a national trend in nonprofit theaters, which have lost sight of how their purpose is supposed to be any different from that of commercial theaters.

The other big loss is the decimation of the *L.A. Times*, which has cut back its local theater coverage and now appears to have committed its shadow presence to competing with the *New York Times*. After leaving its chief drama theater desk empty for four years, the brass deigned to hire *Village Voice* theater editor Charles McNulty, an erudite and sensitive voice now dedicated almost entirely to covering the work in our midsize and larger theaters, and to plays in New York, up and down the West Coast and London. This leaves our smaller theaters, which constitute 90 percent of the work being staged here, without an essayist at the paper of record. The *Times'* theater-reviewer/arts journalist Don Shirley was let go and picked up a column at the alt-weekly *City Beat*, which subsequently folded. Meanwhile, *The Daily Breeze* and *Daily News* have dropped their theater critics, Jim Farber and Evan Henerson, respectively. (Note: the *L.A. Weekly* eliminated its theater editor position in January 2009, which I held, but has sustained its theater coverage, and is continuing its annual L.A. Weekly Theater Awards, via freelance agreements.)

**In addition to the losses**, we've also made gains on all fronts, even if those gains don't add up to a net advance. Shirley's column has been restored on the L.A. Stage Blog. That blog's parent organization, L.A. Stage Alliance, is actively seeking a model to restore and centralize the arts criticism that has been lost, possibly with a nonprofit model, while addressing the new information technologies that have sprung up since 2001. Numerous independent theater-review and aggregation blogs have also sprung up, with varying standards and asking provocative questions about the nature and purpose of theater criticism.

We've gained UCLA Live and REDCAT, curators for some of the best international programming around (see accompanying article, “Recession Be Damned”). If UCLA can work harder on making both its parking and its programming more affordable for the artists here who create theater, those gains will be even richer.

Under Sheldon Epps' artistic direction, the midsize Pasadena Playhouse has emerged from its fog of antiquity and artistic confusion — it still has financial struggles — but it also has a much clearer sense of what it's about: new musicals and a focus on the African-American experience.

The midsize Geffen Playhouse remains star-driven but has shown a promising interest in serious, new plays. This could be significant if the theater stops trying to please all the people all the time, and can figure out with greater specificity what it actually believes in.

The Los Angeles Theatre Center now knows exactly what it believes in but doesn't seem to be doing much about it.

A big plus for the decade came from the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, whose funding of various companies at [Inside] the Ford, including Circle X Theatre Company and Ghost Road Theatre Company, has given us some of the richest programming of the seasons.

Here's a short list of our best companies for the decade: **Sacred Fools** in Hollywood: a lucid, goofy, populist aesthetic, its work has, in flashes, been transcendent; **City Garage** in Santa Monica: Expressionism and farce under the same roof — hit or miss, Frederique Michel and Charles Duncombe know exactly what they're doing, and why; **The Fountain Theatre** in Hollywood: continued excellence in the conservative but meticulous staging of modern classics; **A Noise Within** in Glendale: classical repertory theater with standards that will never disappoint, sometimes stodgy and actorly, but when they cut loose, as with *Ubu the King*, with beautifully deranged performances by Alan Blumenfeld and Deborah Strang, the sky's the limit; they also did a nice *Noises Off* this year; **Open Fist Theatre Company** in Hollywood: dicey acting, but they'll surprise you with a charm offensive; **Furious Theatre Company** in Pasadena: taut and well-acted productions from the dark side; **Road Theatre Company** in North Hollywood: atmospherically rich theater, also very well-acted, on occasion does very interesting new plays; **Zombie Joe's Underground** in North Hollywood: Gothic horror shows in 90-minutes or less; **Pacific Resident Theatre** in Venice: a sustained excellence of acting, specializes in lesser-known modern classics; if they were braver, the hair color of their audiences would be something other than silver; **Rogue Machine**, in residence at Theatre/Theater near Pico and La Brea: relative newcomers committed to poetical and difficult new plays. Also noteworthy: NeedTheater and **VS. Theater Company**, both in Hollywood; **NoHo Arts Center**; **Alive Theatre** in Long Beach; **Theatricum Botanicum** in Topanga Canyon, and countless others I apologize in advance for failing to mention.