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THEATER

2020 year in review: Looking back on a fractured year in San Diego theater



The San Diego Union-Tribune

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Timothy L. Cabal and Nancy Ross star in "Red Bike" at Moxie Theatre. (Courtesy of Daren Scott)

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By PAM KRAGEN

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When San Diego theaters abruptly shut down March 12 due to the pandemic, nobody expected they would stay dark for the rest of the year. And yet, out of the darkness, local artists began producing hundreds of online productions, play readings, cabarets and concerts, audio-casts, podcasts, interviews and education programs to stay connected to their art and their audiences.

For this year's look back at the 2020 year in theater, I found it impossible to choose a top 10, since there's no way to compare the work produced onstage before a live audience with shows presented on Zoom and Facebook Live, or filmed plays. So I offer my picks for standout work in a multitude of formats and themes.

Best pre-pandemic onstage show

"Red Bike" at Moxie Theatre was about an 11-year-old's careening downhill bicycle ride that reflected the decline of the American small town. Director Lisa Berger's exuberant and brilliantly conceived production of Caridad Svich's open-text play split the child's role into two personalities played by male and female actors, and she staged it on a childlike set lined with bike ramps and chalkboards the actors constantly marked up with drawings, words and ideas.

Runners-up: "August Wilson's Jitney," The Old Globe; "House of Joy" at San Diego Repertory Theatre; "The Great Leap" at Cygnet Theatre; "Murder for Two," New Village Arts.

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Crystal Lucas-Perry as a young John Quincy Adams and Rosina Reynolds as President George Washington in San Diego Repertory Theatre's streaming production of Aaron Posner's "JQA." (Courtesy photo)

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Best filmed show

San Diego Rep's regional premiere of Aaron Posner's "JQA" notably arrived just before the Nov. 3 election. Sharply directed by Sam Woodhouse, it was a smart, pointed, multilayered and diversely cast look at John Quincy Adams, an honest and ethical American president who put the country's welfare before his own, but lacked the blind populist

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Runners-up: [“The Niceties,”](#) Moxie Theatre; [“Roosevelt: Charge the Bear,”](#) Roustabouts Backyard Renaissance Theatre.

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zle,”

On Dec. 20, Hershey Felder live-streamed his play about Russian composer Piotr Tchaikovsky from Florence, Italy. (Courtesy photo)

Best livestreamed show

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Canadian-born playwright/pianist/actor has been presenting semi-monthly works from inspired plays from his home studio, from Florence's 365-year-old Teatro Della Pergola a Tchaikovsky's former apartment in Florence. The film-quality, two-hour productions feature nearly an hour of live piano-playing and half-hour post-show talkbacks where he answers questions sent in from viewers via text. Because it's live, things sometimes go wrong, like a badly squeaking floor and a piano that went out of tune mid-performance. But seeing artists improvise on the fly is what live theater is all about.

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Blindspot Collective, the scrappy theater co-founded by Blake McCarty and Catherine Ha three new projects in 2020 in response to the pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement. “Walks of Life” was a series of original audio dramas that imagined conversations inside the homes of quarantined San Diegans. “Refractions: A Collection of Human Anthems” paired local songwriters with families who lost loved ones to COVID-19 to create songs in their memory. And “Good Trouble” was a BLM-inspired verbatim audio play based on interviews with local activists. Masked audience members were encouraged to meet at a designated location, listen together to the play and then join in a communal protest.

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Best performances in a filmed show**SUBSCRIBE**

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Monique Gaffney, "Speaking Truth to Power," Common Ground Theatre; Richard Baird in "An Iliad" at North Coast Repertory Theatre; Susan Clausen in "Donna Orbits the Moon," Scripps Ranch Theatre/Oceanside Theatre Company; Phil Johnson in "Roosevelt: Charge the Bear," The Roustabout Theatre Co.; Rosina Reynolds and Jesse Perez in "JQA," San Diego Rep; Sean Murray in "A Christmas Carol."

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Phil Johnson stars as Teddy Roosevelt in The Roustabouts Theatre Co. production of "Roosevelt: Charge the Bear." (Courtesy photo)

Best performances in a livestreamed show

Allison Spratt Pearce and Steven Lone had just one day to prepare for Roustabouts' reading of "Switching Tracks," a play about a long-broken-up couple who meet unexpectedly 10 years later, but their chemistry and interactions felt charged, raw and honest, even though they were interacting on Zoom from separate homes. **Runner-up:** Hershey

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Best new play**SUBSCRIBE**

“[Speaking Truth to Power](#)” by Robert Alexander. Common Ground Theatre commissioned this new play about three roommates, two Black and one White, debating the power of protest, police brutality, White privilege and Black-on-Black prejudice in the wake of the George Floyd murder. The dialogue is sharp and real and the characters are well drawn and complex for a one-act play.

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Best pandemic-related project

[Theatre is the Cure](#), an ambitious online project by Logan Squared Productions, has produced since March more than 200 online plays, readings, monologues and a 13-minute film called "Say Their Names" on the murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans. The project brought together actors, directors and playwrights from all over the world in a shared space to collaborate, keep their chops up and comment on their experiences about the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Runner-up: [Sofa Shakespeare](#), created by pandemic-idled actor/teaching artist Julia Giolzetti, is a collection of 11 William Shakespeare plays assembled from thousands of filmed scenes emailed in from more than 500 quarantined performers in 22 countries worldwide.

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Walter DuMelle films a scene for Bodhi Tree Concerts' "8 Songs for a Mad King." (Courtesy photo)

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Best revival

Just before the Nov. 3 election, Bodhi Tree Concerts' revisited Peter Maxwell Davies' song cycle "8 Songs for a Mad King," which won "Best of the Fest" at the 2017 San Diego International Fringe Festival. Three years ago onstage, the King George III-inspired central figure in "8 Songs" seemed vaguely Trump-like with his tweets and tantrums. There was nothing vague in the new filmed version, where Bodhi Tree co-founder Walter DuMelle sang, howled and giggled in a blonde wig and orange face-tanner while hiding in a bunker, chomping fried chicken and tweeting from the toilet.

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The Old Globe Artistic Director Barry Edelstein. (Courtesy of Doug Gates)

Best theater education project

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“[Thinking Shakespeare Live: Sonnets!](#)” at The Old Globe. From March 31 through Oct. 20, Old Globe Artistic Director Barry Edelstein presented a series of 10 free online lectures where he dissected 30 of the Bard’s 14-line poems to decipher their meaning and the context and times in which they were written. The series, which drew viewers worldwide, concluded with an all-star cast of classically trained actors reading those sonnets from locations around the country.

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Best audio-cast project

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Diversionsary Theatre's production of Josh Irving Gershick's documentary-style play "[Dear ONE: Love & Longing in Mid-Century Queer America](#)" featured 40 actors, including George Takei and trans actor Nicky Endres, reading letters from 40 people who wrote to "ONE," the pioneering LGBTQ magazine published in Los Angeles from 1952 to 1967. Read in chronological order, the letters track the readers' as they gradually move from a place of fear and shame to self-acceptance and openness.

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David Israel Reynoso with the patent-pending “portal” viewer audience members used to watch his cellphone video “Portaleza.” (Jarrod Valliere / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Most creative use of streaming

“[Portaleza](#)” for La Jolla Playhouse’s all-digital Without Walls Festival. To create a theater experience that felt more audience-interactive, San Diego playwright/producer David Israel Reynoso created a patent-pending kinoscope-style “portal” viewer that was mailed to ticket-buyers who had to assemble the viewer, write a note, take a picture of

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A screenshot of Simon Will taken five minutes into Gob Squad's "Show Me a Good Time," a livestreamed 12-hour theatrical event presented as part of La Jolla Playhouse's all-digital Without Walls Festival. (Courtesy photo)

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Biggest disappointments

It's hard to criticize theaters that are struggling to navigate in new media as they fight to survive. But two ambitious projects this year showed just how big the challenges are to create art in a pandemic. The Old Globe's only theatrical production since March was "In-Zoom" a 10-minute comic play starring Bill Irwin and Christopher Fitzgerald. Presented live over Zoom, it was meant to poke fun at the infamous technical problems associated with the online meeting software. But a few minutes in, Fitzgerald's video feed actually did freeze and Irwin abruptly ended the performance for a later reboot. Another letdown was Gob Squad's "Show Me a Good Time" for La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival. The 12-hour livestreamed theater event featured nine performers in Germany in England sharing their unscripted experiences in lockdown. Unfortunately, it was as dull and tedious as it is for everyone trying to fill long stretches of empty hours.

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The original Broadway cast starred in a filmed version of "Hamilton," which is now streaming on Disney+. (Courtesy photo)

Best non-local streamed theater

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The only filmed theater I saw this year that I felt improved on the real thing is “Hamilton,” now streaming on Disney+ network. The original Broadway cast were filmed from multiple camera angles and in dazzling close-ups that offered so many fresh insights on the production impossible to see from the nosebleed seats. The subtitles also allowed me to catch all of the blazing-fast rap lyrics for the first time. And best of all, it’s always available, so I have watched it more than 20 times since it premiered in July.

Runner-up: National Theatre Live’s “Jane Eyre,” reimaged with a jungle gym set and fire effects by director Sally Cookson, was thrilling and visceral.

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