

## LOCAL ACTORS SET THE STAGE FOR A YEAR TO REMEMBER

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Great acting goes a long way toward seducing you into the world of a play or musical.

Stronger and deeper than ever, South Florida's acting pool did some masterful wooing in 2004, and that seductive artistry is what we celebrate most at the end of this year in theater.

David Kwiat, who won the Carbonell Award for his tour de force portrayal of quirky physicist Richard Feynman in QED at GableStage in June, was also chillingly memorable in March in Blind Date, Mario Diament's delicious puzzle of a play at New Theatre.

Graced with terrific performances by everyone in the cast - Lisa Morgan as a shrink with an increasingly crazy husband, Ursula Freundlich as a carelessly free-spirited young woman, Barbara Sloan as a woman fixated on a love that might have been, Steve Gladstone as a blind author modeled on Jorge Luis Borges - Blind Date was the world premiere of the year here.

Morgan gave another wondrous performance, both warm and intense, as the mother of a murdered child in GableStage's October production of Bryony Lavery's devastating Frozen. And as the killer, Gordon McConnell was fiercely, powerfully, memorably disturbing.

Three younger actors also did some of the year's best work.

Back from a lengthy stint in New York, Todd Allen Durkin reclaimed his status as one South Florida's most intense, incendiary actors in both the world premiere of Paul Tei's Artful Dodgers at Mad Cat in October-November and GableStage's current production of Bug, Tracy Letts' meditation on paranoia and violence.

In three very different roles - as a gay artist and sometime drug user in Ten Unknowns at GableStage in February, as an awkwardly charming math geek in Proof at Mosaic Theatre in May and as a miracle man in Wait and See at New Theatre in September - Nicholas Richberg was impressive every time. And the luminous Beatriz Montañez made a dazzling New Theatre debut in the world premiere of Elaine Romero's Barrio Hollywood in October.

At the Coconut Grove Playhouse in September, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz proved his artistry as both author and director in staging Anna in the Tropics, bringing out the best in a terrific cast and guiding velvet-voiced Adriana Sevan to an exquisite performance as a betrayed wife who takes a lover of her own.

In November at the Grove, B.J. Crosby let loose with some of the strongest pipes on Broadway in the service of the Hoagy Carmichael catalog, contrasting beautifully with the low-key charm of Hoagy coauthor and star Billy Philadelphia.

The year's most versatile artist, Michael McKeever, made his mark in three ways at New Theatre - as a playwright (Wait and See was his), a set designer (he painted the imposing, beautiful religious figures in Barrio Hollywood and did the sleek set for the theater's current Affluenza!) and actor (he's easy, amusing and artful as the greedy spoiled son in the written-in-verse Affluenza!).

And we won't soon forget: scene-stealing Elizabeth Dimon as the talkative Irish housekeeper in Florida Stage's current world premiere of Joan Ackermann's Ice Glen; Actors' Playhouse artistic director David Arisco's impressive return to the stage as Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof in March; the explosive, provocative confrontations of John Archie and David Mann in Thomas Gibbons' Permanent Collection at Florida Stage in March; Meshawn Labrone Arnold's swaggering charm in August Wilson's Two Trains Running at M Ensemble in November; and Lewis J. Stadlen's mad Max (Bialystock) in The Producers at the Broward Center in May.

Theater's Top 10

1. Women who shone on South Florida stages include B.J. Crosby in Hoagy, Beatriz Montañez in Barrio Hollywood, Lisa Morgan in Frozen, Adriana Sevan in Anna in the Tropics, Elizabeth Dimon in Ice Glen.
2. The guys who glowed: David Kwiat in QED and Blind Date, Gordon McConnell in Frozen, Michael McKeever in Affluenza!, Todd Allen Durkin in Bug, Meshaun Labrone Arnold in Two Trains Running, David Arisco in Fiddler on the Roof, John Archie and David Mann in Permanent Collection, Nicholas Richberg in Wait and See, Proof and Ten Unknowns.
3. After his Pulitzer-winning Anna in the Tropics ran too briefly on Broadway, former Miamian Nilo Cruz directed an exquisite production of it at the Coconut Grove Playhouse.
4. At the Carbonells, small companies (especially Palm Beach Dramaworks for its Jacques Brel) won big.
5. The best South Florida world premiere in 2004 was Mario Diament's glorious Blind Date at New Theatre.
6. Mel Brooks' smashing The Producers lived up to its hype at the Broward Center in May (it comes to the Jackie Gleason Theater in March).
7. Quirky Avenue Q, not Wicked, scampered off with the best musical Tony Award in June; Aussie heartthrob Hugh Jackman was anointed the season's best musical actor for The Boy from Oz.
8. Though it just scrapes by, Miami's spiky Mad Cat is rich in talent, style and originality; it's South Florida's best ensemble theater.
9. Both the Hollywood Playhouse (which just reopened) and the Shores Performing Arts Theater struggled in 2004, but the Coconut Grove Playhouse gained control of its developmental destiny when the state relinquished ownership.
10. Among theater greats lost in 2004 were Marlon Brando, who first bellowed ``Stella!" in the Broadway production of A Streetcar Named Desire; great actor and teacher Uta Hagen, National Actors Theatre founder Tony Randall, Cabaret lyricist Fred Ebb and monologist Spalding Gray.

**Caption:** photo: Beatriz Montañez (a)

CHUCK FADELY/HERALD FILE `BARRIO HOLLYWOOD': Beatriz Montañez made her debut in October in the New Theater production.

**Memo:** YEAR IN REVIEW

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