

THINGS TO DO

## Year's best theater in Marin



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It's been an unusually tempestuous year in Marin's professional theater, primarily because of the controversy and protests over Marin Theatre Company's world premiere of "Thomas and Sally," Thomas Bradshaw's play about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. That discussion will (or at least certainly should) continue to provide food for thought for theaters all around the Bay Area for some time to come. In the meantime, it's also instructive to remember some of the things that very much went right this year.

Meanwhile, Marin's local theater scene weathered the storm nicely in spite of and — in at least one case — because of it.

Here's a brief look back on some of 2017's best theatrical productions in Marin.

### **"Native Son," Marin Theatre Company**

In a tense staging by Seret Scott, playwright Nambi E. Kelley delivered a devastating gut punch of a play with her bold new adaptation of Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel about a righteously indignant young African-American man who accidentally kills a young white woman, and the sensationalized manhunt that follows.

— Sam Hurwitt



### **“Mother Lear,” We Players**

Created by performers Ava Roy and Courtney Walsh, this heartbreaking two-person play depicts a harried daughter trying to take care of her dementia-plagued mother, who now only speaks in reshuffled lines from “King Lear.” The only way she can reach her mom, even for a moment, is to play along.

Performed in various parks, homes and community centers, the piece was followed by intense discussions about the difficult feelings, memories and fears it evoked in the audience.

– Sam Hurwitt

### **“Bondage,” AlterTheater**

Originally staged in an office park in Corte Madera, this new play by Star Finch is a potent coming-of-age story of two teenage girls, cousins by birth but divided into master and slave by the color of their skin, that just gets more dreamlike and disturbing as it goes on. AlterTheater is reviving the production this February at ACT’s Costume Shop Theater in San Francisco, so it’s not too late to catch this one.

– Sam Hurwitt

### **“Guards at the Taj,” Marin Theatre Company**

Rajiv Joseph’s play about two guards outside the soon-to-be-unveiled Taj Mahal has some playful nods to “Waiting for Godot” in the comical and philosophical dialogue between two sentinels who aren’t supposed to be talking at all. The play soon turns grim and gory, but what resonates most is the sense of wonder and curiosity that can’t be contained within the tightly prescribed roles of the characters.

– Sam Hurwitt

### **“Peerless,” Marin Theatre Company**



Jiehae Park's dark comedy is explicitly influenced by "Macbeth," but there's also a fair amount of "Heathers" in the perversely funny tale of twin sisters scheming to take out their high school competition to get into the college of their choice. It's a devilishly clever piece that's as bloody-minded as it is hilarious.

— Sam Hurwitt

### **"Cabaret," Ross Valley Players**

This large-scale production helmed by James Dunn was both vastly entertaining and horrifically frightening in its depiction of what happens when people fail to pay attention to the rising tide of political dictatorship. "Cabaret" paid homage to the 1960s original while proving to be presciently contemporary, as was Dunn's intention. An onstage band led by Debra Chambliss provided solid support for an exemplary 13-member cast, among whom there were no weak links. Erick Batz gave a standout performance as the manic Emcee with excellent performances from Emily Radosevich as songbird Sally Bowles, Maxine Sattizahn as Fraulein Schneider, Ian Swift as Herr Schulz and Izaak Heath as itinerant American novelist Cliff Bradshaw.

— Barry Willis

### **"The Government Inspector," College of Marin**

Director Lisa Morse knocked one completely out of the park with this studio theater production of Nikolai Gogol's Czarist-era farce. The funniest of several superb comedies put on this year, this show provoked laughter so intense that it was just about impossible for the audience to catch its breath. Veteran actor Steve Price was brilliant as the scheming mayor of an obscure Russian village, as was Andy LeBuhn as Khlestakov, the wastrel who plies on the locals' gullibility, taking bribes from the entire town with implied promises of official recognition from the capital. Sophia Harris was the epitome of understated comic genius as Khlestakov's servant Osip, while Benjamin Vasquez and Raysheina DeLeon were wonderful as commedia dell'arte twins Dobchinsky and Bobchinsky. Simply a breathtaking five-star performance.

— Barry Willis

### **"Chicago," Novato Theater Company**



A reprise of a production done early in the year in the East Bay, the 1970s Bob Fosse classic “Chicago” was the pinnacle of NTC’s season. Directed by Marilyn Izdebski, the musical explores big city legal corruption, media manipulation and public fascination with celebrity. Among superb performers were David Shirk as the quick-thinking/fast-talking charlatan lawyer Billy Flynn, Gillian Eichenberger and Alison Peltz as murderesses Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly, respectively, and an excellent Patrick Barr as Roxie’s doofus husband Amos. Daniella Innocenti-Beem rocked the house as bribe-driven “Mama” Morton, matron of the women’s wing of the Cook County jail, performing “When You’re Good to Mama,” backed by Debra Chambliss’ seven-piece band – the high point of a tremendous show.

– Barry Willis

### **“August: Osage County,” Novato Theater Company**

Directed by Terry McGovern and Nan Ayers, this production of Tracy Letts’ depiction of the ultimate dysfunctional family actually bettered one done at Marin Theatre Company. Emotional manipulation is the currency of the Weston clan, gathered at their home in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, after the suicide of patriarch Beverly, an alcoholic poet. Shirley Hall combined steely resolve and unsteady balance as his opioid-addicted widow Violet, while Molly McCarthy, Heather Shepardson and Miriam Ani were supremely well-cast as sisters Ivy, Barbara and Karen. Jesse Lumb was excellent as cousin Little Charles, as were Montgomery Paulson as Karen’s lecherous mate, Steve, and Ken Bacon as Barbara’s philandering professor husband, Bill. Sandi Weldon was amazing as flamboyant Aunt Mattie Fae, while Richard Kerrigan was the cast’s solid anchor as her logical, even-tempered husband, Charlie.

– Barry Willis

### **“Bus Stop,” Ross Valley Players**



Director Christian Haines illuminated the relative innocence of 1950s middle America with William Inge's classic comedy, depicting three love affairs in a single night at a roadside diner. Set designer Bruce Lackovic created an entrancing Gace's Diner and Mary Ann Rodgers brought its proprietor fully to life. Her fascinating guests during a snowy stopover included bus driver Carl (Jeffrey Taylor), an old professor Dr. Lyman (Ron Dritz), lounge singer Cherie (Laura Peterson), a randy young cowboy Bo (Andrew Morris) and his sidekick Virgil (Aeron Macintyre). Steve Price solidly anchored the production as local sheriff Will, lending him a beguiling blend of toughness, wisdom and forgiveness, while Macintyre stole the show when he pulled out his guitar and delivered a mournful country song in a gruff Western baritone. A retired anesthesiologist, Dritz was a delightful surprise as the lecherous Dr. Lyman. "Bus Stop" was a funny, adult and extremely well-polished production.

— Barry Willis

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