



THEATER

Best of 2023: Despite financial panic, gorgeous theater abounds in the Bay Area



Lily Janiak | December 20, 2023 Updated: December 20, 2023, 11:55 pm



Chanel Tilghman, left, as Dorothy and Ada Westfall as Professor Marvel in American Conservatory Theater's "The Wizard of Oz."

Photo: Kevin Berne/American Conservatory Theater

The theater world might still be recovering from the pandemic, lagging behind other industries that got to reopen sooner. But you wouldn't know it from looking at the sheer abundance of gorgeous, thought-provoking, star-making work from companies big and small this year.



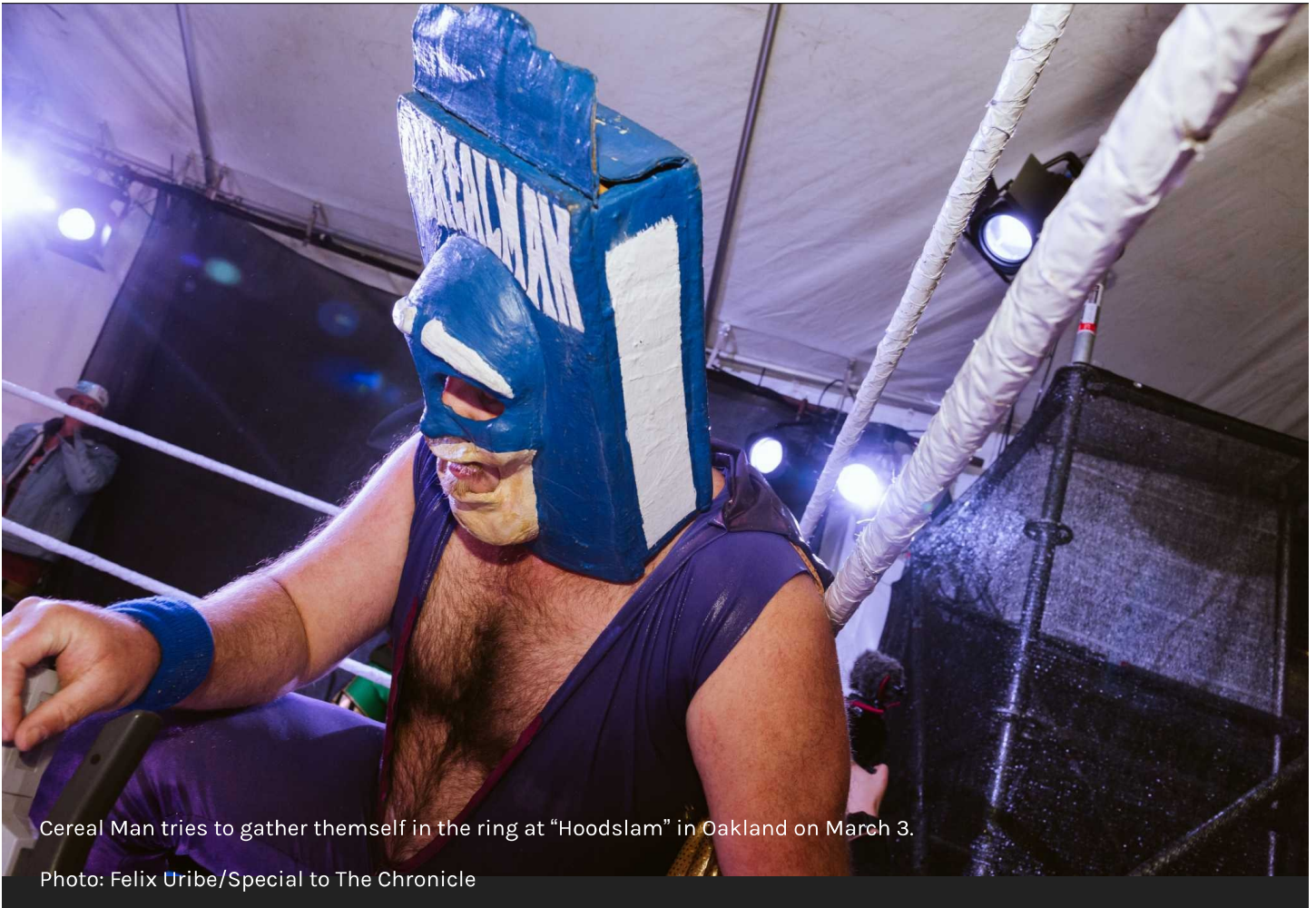
Aidaa Peerzada as Georgia in San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Company's "Private."

Photo: Alexa "LexMex" Treviño/San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Company

'Private'

You know a dystopia is truly frightening when it doesn't seem that implausible. In the world of [San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Company's](#) West Coast premiere, electronic devices record "logs" of everything their owners do, and they have to buy "privacy insurance" to keep that data from leaking. When Corbin (Sedrick Cabrera) gets a fancy new job that trades top-flight insurance for access to his entire home life, he and his partner Georgia (Aidaa Peerzada) have to articulate what's really so important about privacy anyway, and what if anything in their lives can't be for sale.

Mona Pirnot's exquisite dialogue got an especially fine rendering from Peerzada, who was a last-minute understudy; she made the words as vulnerable and pure as if they were something you're never supposed to show anybody.



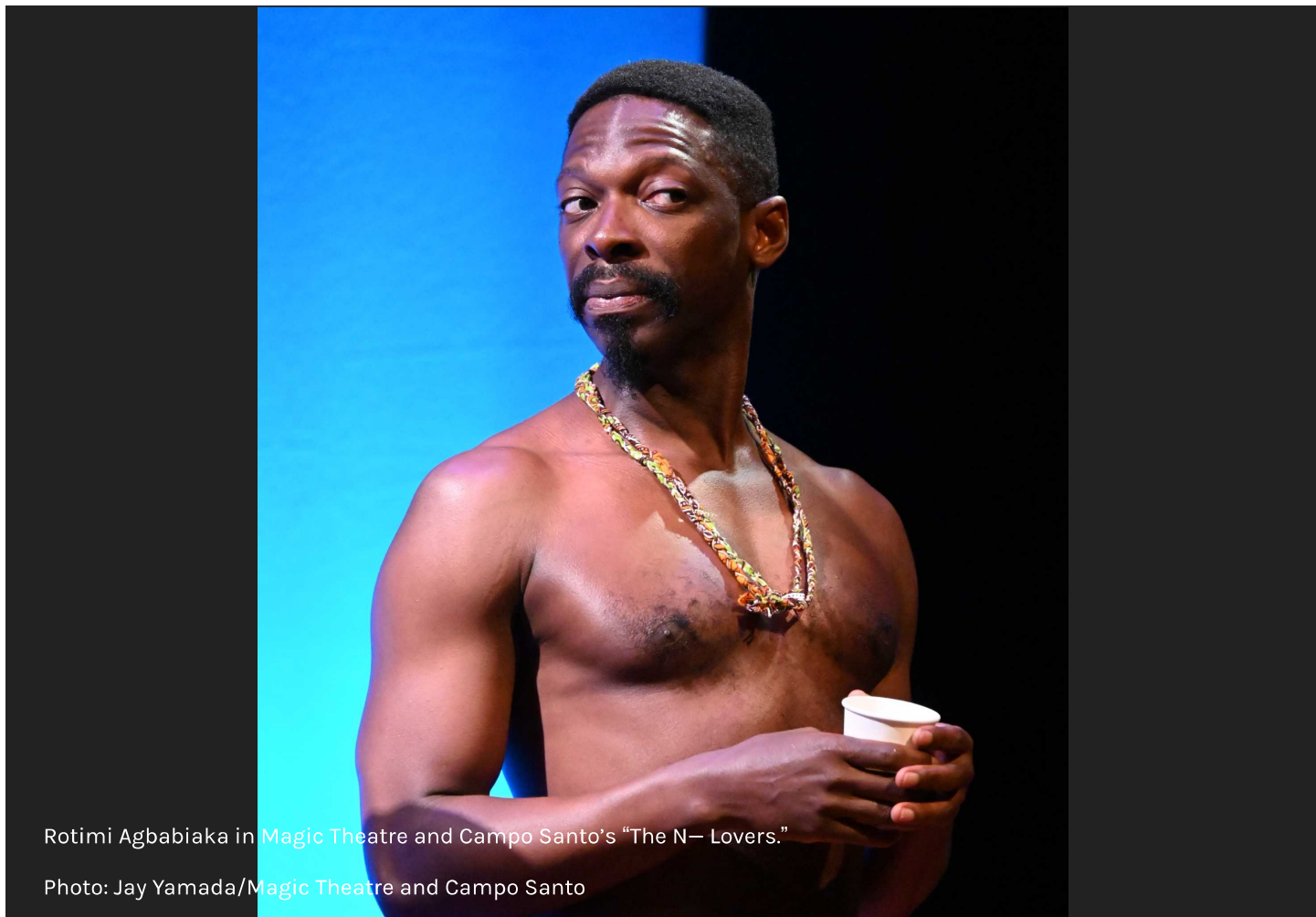
Cereal Man tries to gather themselves in the ring at "Hoodslam" in Oakland on March 3.

Photo: Felix Uribe/Special to The Chronicle

'Hoodslam'

Theater doesn't have to be polite and tidy. At "Hoodslam," the monthly Oakland wrestling show, it's smelly, bloodthirsty and a little dangerous, especially if you dare to stand ringside. Created 13 years ago by Dark Sheik, whose real name is Sam Khandaghabadi, it's a showcase for wildly imaginative characters and scenarios: Cereal Man, whose weapon includes his eponymous breakfast food, which crunches under wrestlers' bodies as they crash onto the floor; Pong, who might haul a bundle of vintage video game controllers into the ring, which magically can be used to dictate the movements of one's opponents; and then there's longtime emcee "Broseph" Joe Brody, who enters in board

shorts amid an eye-stinging cloud of Axe body spray.



Rotimi Agbabiaka in Magic Theatre and Campo Santo's "The N— Lovers."

Photo: Jay Yamada/Magic Theatre and Campo Santo

‘The N— Lovers’

One of theatergoing’s great joys is discovering an inimitable new voice. In this [Magic Theatre and Campo Santo’s world-premiere satire](#), playwright Marc Anthony Thompson proved himself a maestro of the undercut, a connoisseur of bathos and someone who can make a difficult intellectual point with a giant wiggling dildo.

In this show, which fuses lounge act, comic sketches, Brechtian distancing techniques and vaudeville, Thompson’s ostensible topic is the real-life Ellen and William Craft, who escaped slavery by disguising the light-skinned Ellen as William’s master. But in heightening that scenario into cartoon, Thompson exposed the way we love to simplify our historical figures into heroes and villains, making bedtime stories out of centuries of wrong. By getting weird, “The N— Lovers” lowers your defenses, forcing you to see horrors

anew.



The Red Queen (Drew Watkins) brings Anna Poupon onstage April 28 during "Adventures of Alice" by We Players in Golden Gate Park.

Photo: Adam Pardee/Special to The Chronicle

‘Adventures With Alice’

We Players shows always have unbeatable sets: the Bay Area’s local, state and national parks in which the keen eye of Ava Roy, founder of the 23-year-old company, sees stages for Shakespeare, Greek epics and other classics. With this adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s stories set in Golden Gate Park, the art was every bit as thrilling as the environment.

Chris Steele and María Ascención Leigh as Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum were ferocious in their impishness – delivering their lines as if they quenched thirst. Drew Watkins reenvisioned the Red Queen as a preening fashionista in drag. And Libby Oberlin as the White Queen proved a comic truism: baaing like a sheep never stops working as a punchline. Golden Gate Park is always a wonderland, but the We Players made the eucalyptus and fog seem fantastical.



Lisa Ramirez, left, as Martha and Wera von Wulfen as Honey in Oakland Theater Project's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"
Photo: Ben Krantz Studio/Oakland Theater Project

‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’

The classics are thriving in the hands of Oakland Theater Project, the 11-year-old company that stages most of its shows in a garage behind Oakland’s Flax Art & Design store. Michael Socrates Moran’s direction of Edward Albee’s jugular-stab of a play revealed the 1962 classic as a fresh canvas, one where the actors could write on the set or rip part of it off.

As boozy, vituperative couple George and Martha, Adrian Roberts and Lisa Ramirez were as tuned into each other as professional boxers fighting their championship match. Each sneak attack occasioned an equally clever defense; if you could fully keep up with the whirl, you must be an athlete, a polymath or both.

Ezra Reaves, left, El Beh, Travis Santell Rowland and Beth Wilmurt as munchkins in American Conservatory Theater’s “The Wizard of Oz.”

Photo: Kevin Berne/American Conservatory Theater



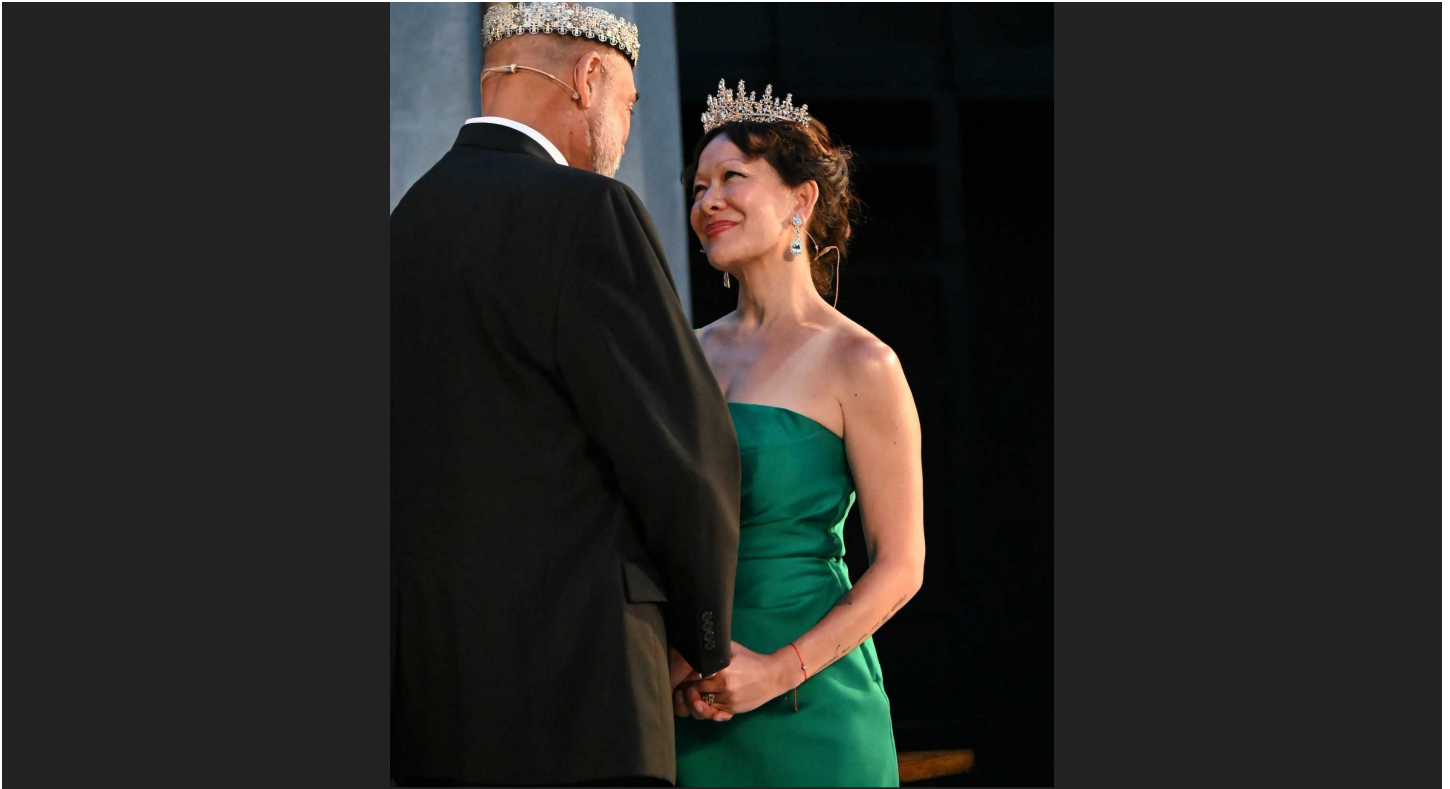
‘The Wizard of Oz’

Here’s what it looks like to reimagine a story specifically for the Bay: You invite the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay Freedom Band and Sister Roma of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to make cameos on opening night. The tornado is played by an actor (Travis Santell Rowland), and the munchkins are inanimate objects turned into puppets via giant googly eyes.

Director Sam Pinkleton’s reenvisioning of the classic at American Conservatory Theater was an explosion of ruffles and rainbows that celebrated a range of races and gender expressions, embracing the story’s longtime resonances for the LGBTQ community. This “Wizard” was explicitly about finding a chosen family after being misunderstood and about turning outsider traits into strengths.

Michael Torres, left, and Bridgette Loriaux in Marin Shakespeare Company’s “Hamlet.”

Photo: Jay Yamada/Marin Shakespeare Company



‘Hamlet’

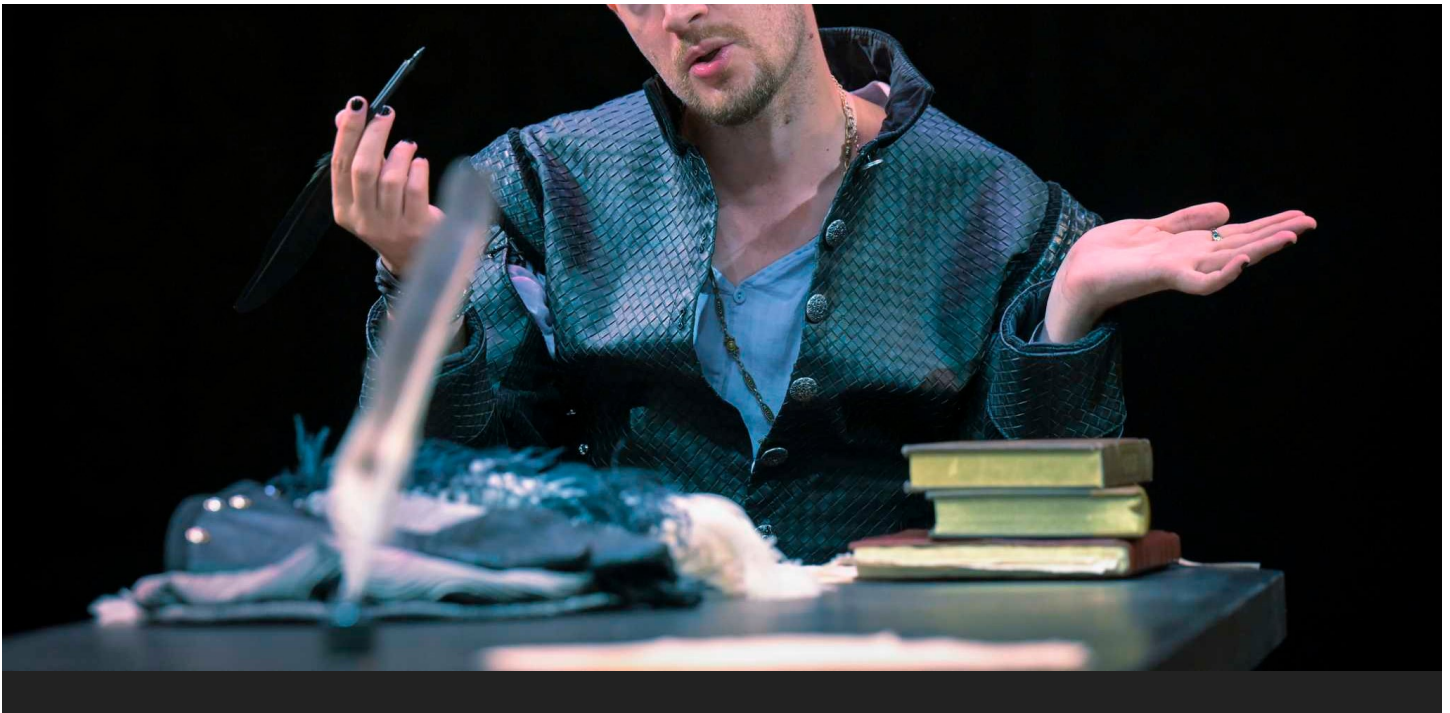
If you’ve seen your share of mediocre takes on Shakespeare’s lugubrious Danish prince, you might have a certain picture in your head of how things look at Elsinore. Jon Tracy exploded all that at Marin Shakespeare Company, where he recently became artistic director.

“To be or not to be” was no soliloquy but dialogue – and flirtation at that. Gertrude and Ophelia, which elsewhere have been throwaway roles defined by their helplessness, exuded agency and force in Bridgette Loriaux and Désirée Freda’s renderings, and their moments of connection with each other electrified; you felt as never before the tragedy of how these two perceptive women, isolated in a male-dominated world, never got to be family with one another.

Dean Linnard as Kit in Aurora Theatre Company’s “Born With Teeth.”

Photo: Kevin Berne/Aurora Theatre Company





‘Born With Teeth’

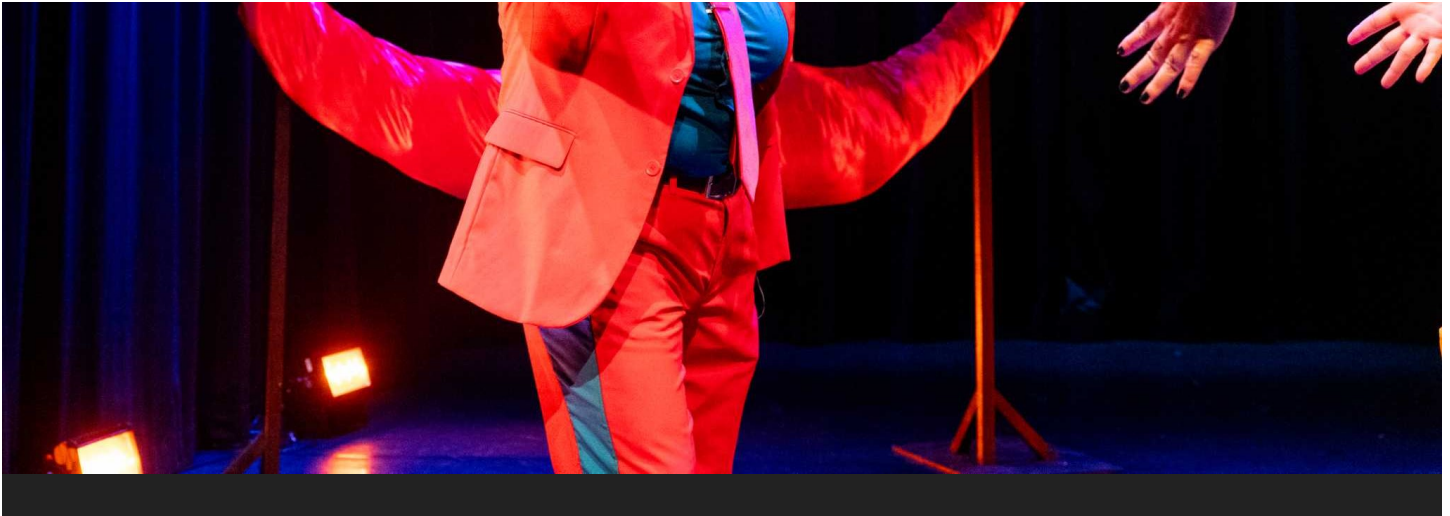
We Bay Area theater mavens have long noted the exceptional promise shown by actor and Berkeley native Dean Linnard – in “Groundhog Day” at San Francisco Playhouse, in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at California Shakespeare Theater.

But Aurora Theatre Company’s West Coast premiere of Liz Duffy Adams’ two-hander, imagining the collaboration by William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe on the “Henry VI” trilogy, established him as a star. He sharpened every line of already taut dialogue, showing how each beat was an attack, a faux retreat, a come-on, a baring, a garrisoning. A play became a dance.



Annie Danger leads a game show with audience members during “The Hands That Feed You” at CounterPulse on Oct. 6 in San Francisco.

Photo: Noah Berger/Special to The Chronicle



‘The Hands That Feed You’

Lots of artists talk about using art to spur social change. [Annie Danger’s brilliant piece](#) at CounterPulse, which starts as a game show in which audience members compete for real cash prizes and steal winnings from each other, modeled what that could actually look like.

Continually busting out of its narrative frame, it eventually gave the audience total control of the show, Danger having long stripped herself of her role as game show host. We got different assignments to imagine what a more generous, compassionate world might look like, and by the time we collectively decided to exit the venue, it felt possible.



Monique Crawford as agoraphobic video editor Annie in Crowded Fire Theater’s searing and inventive “Edit Annie”

Photo: Cheshire Isaacs/Crowded Fire Theater



‘Edit Annie’

It’s incredibly rare when a whole script sails by without a clunky sit-down, “Here’s how all the characters got to be here” moment. It’s rarer still to hear dialogue that feels so fresh and true you think you could overhear it right outside the theater’s walls or mistakenly believe you’ve met the characters before. Rarest of all is to encounter a storytelling surprise so chilling you have to redraw your expectations of what humanity is capable of and how low we can sink.

[Mary Glen Fredrick’s play](#) about a social media influencer and her video editor, mounted by Crowded Fire Theater in a West Coast premiere, accomplished all this and more, including a coup de theater that ripped the set’s walls in half – the perfect device for a world-shattering show.

***Correction:** A previous version of this story misnamed a character in "Hamlet." Her name is Ophelia.*

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Lily Janiak

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Lily Janiak joined the San Francisco Chronicle as theater critic in May 2016. Previously, her writing appeared in Theatre Bay Area, American Theatre, SF Weekly, the Village Voice and HowlRound. She holds a BA in theater studies from Yale and an MA in drama from San Francisco State.

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