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## Great Shakes(peare)

After years of mediocrity, Philly theater makes a comeback.

by J. Cooper Robb

Philadelphia area theater companies rediscovered their creative impulses during the first half of the 2007-'08 theater season.

Signs of an artistic resurgence were first apparent in early September with Pig Iron Theatre Company's innovative production *Isabella*. Presented at the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival, director Dan Rothenberg's audacious adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (in which actors portraying corpses recited the Bard's prose with awkward tenderness) boosted Pig Iron's reputation as one of Philly's most exciting companies.



Soldiering on: Temple's staging of 'In Conflict' has been the biggest surprise of the season.

The Philadelphia Live Arts Festival also gave local theatergoers the opportunity to sample the talents of several nationally renowned companies including the Wooster Group, which presented their startlingly vivid adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. But perhaps the most memorable moment of the 2007 festival was provided by the Riot Group, which staged the world premiere of playwright Adriano Shaplin's magnificent study of online pedophilia *Hearts of Man*.

The area's largest theaters likewise contributed to the season's strong opening with a host of engaging productions.

Topping the list was Wilma Theater's epic staging of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. Taking a surreal approach to Shaffer's wonderfully messy tragedy about ambition and genius, director Jiri Zizka's superbly crafted production managed to be simultaneously thoughtful, disturbing and engaging.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, Arden Theatre Company provided perhaps the season's most jarring moment to date in director Terrence J. Nolen's uneven but compelling production of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins*. Although slow to develop, the production's conclusion (featuring John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas School Book Depository) drew a chilling parallel between America's obsession with guns and Philadelphia's appalling murder rate.

People's Light & Theatre Company likewise offered a stunning finale in the company's forceful production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Nimble navigating the thin line between fantasy and reality, director Ken Marini's supremely theatrical production proved a penetrating investigation into the nature of identity.

Walnut Street Theatre opened its 199th season on a high note with a poignant staging of the musical *Man of La Mancha*, featuring Paul Schoeffler's rousing performance as the idealistic knight Don Quixote. Other acting highlights from the season's first half included Jennifer Childs' superlative performance in 1812 Productions' *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* and Lantern Theater Company's delightful production of Molière's *The School for Wives*, which featured a trio of witty portrayals from Lee Ann Etzold, Joanna Liao and Greg Wood.

And while the area's other companies were busy mounting mindless if mildly entertaining holiday productions, 11th Hour Theatre Company offered an ensemble-driven production of *The World Goes 'Round* that transformed the conventional Kander & Ebb musical revue into an engaging exploration of contemporary American culture.

But the biggest surprise so far of the season was Temple Theater's world premiere *In Conflict*. Superbly directed and adapted by Douglas Wager from Yvonne Latty's same-titled book, the production featured a host of remarkable performances from a student cast portraying servicemen and women stationed in Iraq. A dramatic and disquieting work, *In Conflict* prompted a renewed respect for the young Americans who sacrifice their limbs, lives and sanity daily in an increasingly regrettable conflict.

While surprisingly fresh and vibrant productions dominated the theater landscape, there were a few disappointments. Although expertly directed by Joe Canuso, Theatre Exile's imaginative production of the dark comedy *Mr. Marmalade* couldn't conceal the fact that Noah Haidle's play is ultimately all style and little substance. Other eagerly anticipated shows not meeting expectations included Mum Puppettheatre's bewildering *Rhinoceros*, Wilma Theater's sporadically engaging but empty *Age of Arousal*, Prince Music Theater's muddled world premiere *A Night in the Old Marketplace* and InterAct Theatre Company's disappointingly routine production of Steven Dietz's *Last of the Boys*.

A healthy number of promising productions are on the horizon, but it's too early to predict whether the 2007-'08 campaign will be a rousing success. Nevertheless the strong opening half demonstrates that after several years of predictable and lifeless fare, Philly's theaters are showing signs of artistic renewal.