

ARTS COMMENTARY

The good, the bad and the unusual: looking at last season

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Here's a look back at the past season: part serious, part whimsical, part tongue in cheek.

■ **The Show You Probably Missed, Though You Shouldn't Have**
"Irving Berlin's White Christmas" at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall

I almost missed seeing this show too; I feared it was just another cheap, cheesy attempt to cash in on the holiday season. Plus, it ran post-Christmas, in the very beginning of January. But it was top-quality, simply magical. I saw it twice, and urged all my friends to attend. The staging was innovative; the singing, acting and dancing top-drawer, and the costumes and sets wonderfully evoked the era. "White Christmas" was hands-down one of the best shows of the season. (Yes, another version will play locally next season, but not with the same budget, and not with Broadway actors.)

(runner-up): **"Almost, Maine" at the Florida Repertory Theatre**

This whimsical play by John Cariani looked at various scenes of love in a small, inland Maine town in the dead of winter. Sad, funny, nostalgic, thought-provoking.

■ **The Show I Wished I'd Walked Out Of, Even Though I Never Walk Out of Shows**
"The Wedding Singer" at the B.B. Mann

Based on the Adam Sandler movie, this musical catered to the lowest common denominator with stock characters and corny jokes. It even had a Mr. T impersonator and a rapping grandma. One of the worse musicals I've ever seen in my career.

■ **Show That Received a Standing Ovation It Didn't Deserve**

"The Wedding Singer" at the B.B. Mann

See above. True, many shows could be listed in this category. There's no accounting for taste sometimes.

■ **Best Scene of Sexual Ecstasy**
Diane Buirski and Brendan Powers in "Breaking Legs" at the Florida Rep

While Brendon Powers rubs her feet, Diane Buirski writhes her way across the length of a restaurant booth, then tosses Italian breadsticks with wild abandon at the height of ecstasy. (To make the scene kinkier, a Mob hit can be seen tak-

ing place through the window behind them.) (runner-up) **Megan McCombs in "Cabaret" at the Sugden Community Theatre**
 Megan McCombs, as Fraulein Schneider, waxes ecstatic about a pineapple—a gift from a suitor—in "It Couldn't Please Me More (The Pineapple Song)."

■ **Edgiest Show of the Season**
"Cabaret" at the Sugden Community Theatre

The Naples Players got it exactly right with this production: it was smart, edgy, dark, moving, and hit on all cylinders, thanks to director Dallas Dunnagan, a provocative Mark Vanagas (the show's emcee) and a fabulous cast. Totally seedy and decadent.

■ **Show That Got the Most People Talking**
"Doubt" at the Florida Rep

Superbly directed by Maureen Heffernan, this Pulitzer Prize-winning play by John Patrick Shanley had audiences talking in the lobby, on the sidewalk, and in their cars on the ride home, discussing the nature of faith and doubt.

■ **Most Complex Performance**
Lisa Morgan in "Doubt" at Florida Rep

Lisa Morgan portrayed a principal at a Catholic school who suspects a priest of molesting a boy. She has no proof, only her certainties. This is a role that could be overplayed but Morgan brought a rich complexity to her character, displaying glimpses of tenderness and humor.

■ **Performances So Exhilarating I Could've Flown Home**
 (tie) **Natalie Cole at the Mann Hall and Liza Minnelli at the Mann Hall**

Natalie Cole started her concert with jazz standards and hits, then turned up the heat and positively sizzled with rock and R&B. When Liza Minnelli walked out on stage, my theater companion said, "Oh, she's just a little thing!" But when the concert was over, he said in amazement, "When

Diane Buirski and Brendan Powers in "Breaking Legs" at the Florida Rep



she sings, she's seven feet tall!" Especially outstanding was a choreographed tribute to her godmother, Kay Thompson. Both performers know how to connect with their audience, and give their all.

■ **Best Big Little Cast**
Bill Taylor and Chris Clavelli in "Stones in His Pockets" at the Florida Rep

The two portrayed a cast of 17, including elderly Irish men and egomaniacal Hollywood starlets, switching from one character to another in a second, sans costume changes.

■ **Tiniest Costume**
Jesse St. Louis in "The Bible: the Complete Word of God (Abridged)" at Theatre Conspiracy

As the son of Adam and Eve, Jesse St. Louis's character wore a one-inch fig leaf on the front of his nude underwear, which barely covered what God blessed him with.

(runner-up) **Diane Buirski in "Breaking Legs" at the Florida Rep**

Men everywhere discovered a love for the theater when attending "Breaking Legs," watching Diane Buirski in her tiny purple Spandex dress that covered the essentials but didn't leave much to the imagination. (Not that they may have noticed, but Buirski gave a great performance.)



■ **Funniest Love Letter to Musical Theatre**
"The Drowsy Chaperone" at the Philharmonic Center for the Arts

The touring Broadway show of "The Drowsy Chaperone" was simultaneously a send-up of musical theater and a love letter to it. This musical made me laugh out loud with just the sheer delight of it all.

■ **Best Snow Storm**
 (tie): **"Irving Berlin's White Christmas" at the B.B. Mann Hall and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago at the Phil**

It never snows in Southwest Florida, but this year, it snowed twice—indoors. In "White Christmas," at the Mann Hall, it snowed on the audience during the finale as actors in 1940's winter outfits skated on-stage. And for a half-hour before Hubbard Street Dance Chicago took the stage at the Phil, it snowed white feathers on a jet-black, perfectly lit stage. There was something so

beautiful, so sacred about these white feathers drifting slowly down to the stage that I would've paid to sit in a dark, empty theater and watch them fall.

■ **Funniest Foreplay**
Michelle Damato and John Patrick Driscoll in "Almost, Maine" at Florida Rep

Michelle Damato and John Patrick Driscoll's characters realize they love each other and want to go to bed. But first, they have to rid themselves of their clothes—and, in the dead of winter in this northern state, that's a lot of clothes. For maybe five minutes straight, the two tear off layer upon layer upon layer of clothing in a wild frenzy of anticipation: parkas, hats, gloves, sweaters, flannel shirts, boots, socks, ski pants, jeans. I loved the sight of these two flopping about on the floor, ripping their clothes off in a hilarious ballet of clumsiness and eagerness. Of course, there seemed to always be at least another layer or two to remove.

■ **Funniest Prayer**
Tricia Laycock in "Humble Boy" at the Sugden

Tricia Laycock delivers a prayer that is part admonishment to those around her, part litany of how put-upon she feels, part complaint—and only a fraction of gratefulness for what they're about to receive—all the while ignorant that she's mixed the ashes of the deceased into the soup, (having mistaken them for flavoring.) The prayer brought the house down every night.

■ **Bravest Performance**
Matt Flynn in "Humble Boy" at the Sugden

After years of working backstage, set designer Matt Flynn decided he wanted to see what it was like on the other side of the scenery, and auditioned. He won the title role of "Humble Boy" and did himself proud.

■ **Best Acting Within Constraints**
Rachel Burttram in "Doubt" at Florida Rep

Rachel Burttram nailed the role of a naïve, enthusiastic, trusting nun in "Doubt." Her body constrained by a nun's habit, she had only her face and voice to work with, yet masterfully conveyed her character's optimism and inner emotional struggles.

■ **Best hysteria**
Jason Parrish in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" at Florida Rep

As the fluttery, wound-much-too-tightly Hysterium, Jason Parrish was a nervous breakdown on legs in the classic, and extremely funny, "Forum." ■

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