

SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

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10 BEST THINGS ON AREA'S STAGES

FROM DICKENS TO BOLLYWOOD TO ABBA'S BUBBLEGUM POP

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Theater, like life, is by nature ephemeral. A play comes alive on stage and then poof! It's gone, and no recording of that performance can capture how it felt to be part of that audience on that night. Still, some shows leave an imprint on the theatergoer that never fades away. Here's my list of the 10 most memorable people and things (from silly to sublime) during this year in theater:

- **Cutest Pooch:** Best in show award goes to **Gus**, the tenacious terrier in the American Musical Theatre of San Jose's ``The Wizard of Oz" in September. Stepping into the pivotal role of Toto at the last minute, Gus stole every scene he was in (and some he wasn't).
- **Hippest Performer:** Hey yo, **Sarah Jones**. The hip-hop theater diva held court at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in February with ``Bridge & Tunnel," workshopping her slammin' portrait of immigrant life in post-Sept. 11 America. Next year she takes the show to Broadway (where it will be directed by the Rep's Tony

Taccone).

- **Best Solo Turn:** All hail **Jefferson Mays**. Few actors shed their skin on stage like this über chameleon, who won a Tony for his incomparable performance in ``I Am My Own Wife." He brought it to San Francisco's Curran Theatre in May.
- **Most Electric Production:** ``**Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla**" lit up the San Jose Stage Company in June with its white-hot fusion of science and stage pictures.
- **Best Period Epic:** ``**The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby**" (part one), a heart-pounding whirl through Charles Dickens' lavish classic, swept the audience away at the California Shakespeare Theater in Orinda in July.
- **Biggest Laughs: Yuk it up, Bollywood-style.** ``**Baby Taj**," Tanya Shaffer's riotous comedy of dating and mating, was presented at TheatreWorks in Mountain View in October, marking the first time a major theater in Silicon Valley had focused on Indian themes.
- **Best Ingenue:** Nepotism be damned. Directed by her daddy, the legendary Sir Peter Hall, in the Theatre Royal Bath's ``As You Like It" at the Curran in April, **Rebecca Hall** was the most charming Rosalind I've ever seen.
- **Brainiest Romance:** San Jose Repertory Theatre's ``**Hannah & Martin**," in May, took the prize for the sexiest play of ideas in a local theater this year. Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger having an affair meant philosophy as foreplay.
- **Most Disturbing Moment:** OK, having read Edward Albee's ``The Goat," a play about a man in love with livestock, I can't say I was shocked in July at San Francisco's American Conservatory

Theater by the risque aspects of the plot. But **the father-son kiss** in this post-modern Greek tragedy still made me squirm. Close second: Mike Daisey's rough sex escapades in ``The Ugly American'' at Berkeley Rep in August. Let's just say it wasn't a first-date kind of play.

- **Biggest Surprise:** After sitting through the ABBA-salute ``Mamma Mia!'' with my critical nose in the air several times before, I had low expectations for last month's presentation at American Musical Theatre of San Jose. I went only because, well, it's my job. But, lo and behold, the cheesy musical finally grew on me (kind of like spandex). Guess Shaw was right: You never can tell.