

## 'Nickleby,' 'Caroline' tops in 2005 theater

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HEY, here's a surprise: The Bay Area was brimming with good-to-great theater in 2005. A continuing sign of a healthy theater scene is a robust number of new plays making their premieres here. Happy to report that last year about 165 shows sprang to life on Bay Area stages.

Berkeley Repertory Theatre survived a devastating fire in its scene shop, and though there are fiscal challenges afoot for some, no major theater went under. In this dodgy arts economy, that has to be counted as a big success.

As for the shows themselves, filling the Top 10 was easy — so easy, in fact, that I had to create a lengthy "honorable mention" overflow list.

I've divided my best-of lists into two categories: the best locally produced shows and the best shows that played here but originated someplace else. There's also a little list at the end to remind us that for every triumph there's also tragedy.

### **Top 10 — Locally produced**

1. "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby," California Shakespeare Theater — Hands down, this massive, two-part epic was the theater event of the year. Co-directors Jonathan Moscone and Sean Daniels and a cast filled with some of the Bay Area's best turned David Edgar's adaptation of Dickens into an incredibly moving experience and six of the best hours ever spent in a theater.
2. "The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?" American Conservatory Theatre — The destruction of a beautiful set has rarely been so entertaining as in Edward Albee's provocative drama about, among other things, bestiality. Pamela Reed turned in a bravura performance as Stevie, a woman whose husband is having an affair with a goat. By shocking us, Albee wants us to take a fresh look at how we decide what matters in our lives and relationships. Under Richard E.T. White's direction, we did.
3. "The People's Temple," Berkeley Repertory Theatre — With music, joy and an unflinching honesty, director Leigh Fondakowski and her team of writers tackled one of the darkest chapters in Bay Area history in this highly theatrical exploration of the Rev. Jim Jones and events leading to the massacre in Jonestown. Exposing the humanity behind the headlines, Fondakowski and a sterling cast cracked open the past in surprising and powerful ways.
4. "Crowns," TheatreWorks — For sheer exuberant joy you couldn't do better than this musical about African-American women and the hats they wear to church. When the women in the cast sang, the sky opened up and light poured in. Well, not actually, but it sure felt like that during some of the gospel numbers. No wonder the show moved to San Francisco's Marines Memorial Theatre for a successful city run.
5. "Honour," Berkeley Repertory Theatre — Along with ACT's "The Goat," this Joanna

Murray-Smith work demonstrated family drama at its very best. Tony Taccone drew stunning performances from Kathleen Chalfant and John Doman as a longtime married couple whose comfortable life is shattered by infidelity. Watching Chalfant's character try to cope with late-in-life change was wrenching, fascinating and, because Chalfant is so good, thrilling.

6. "Hannah and Martin," San Jose Repertory Theatre — Who knew that the bumpy love affair between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger could be so compelling? Stacy Ross and Robert Krakovski were terrific as the titular lovers in David Schweizer's harsh, unflinching production, which featured a stark but effective set by Alexander V. Nichols.

7. "Baby Taj," TheatreWorks — After the huge success of her one-woman show, Berkeley writer Tanya Shaffer proved she has more than the right stuff to create a full-blown play with this vibrant tale of a 30-something woman wrestling with her desire to have a baby and her need to escape responsibility. A gorgeous, fanciful production (from director Matt August and designers Joe Ragey, Fumiko Bielefeldt and Pamela Gray) couldn't overwhelm heartfelt performances.

8. "The Ballad of Pancho and Lucy," Campo Santo/Intersection for the Arts — For so many years, Octavio Solis has been so very serious, but when this formidable playwright decided to lighten up, he created an original musical about a crime spree through Mission District bars. Hilarious and tuneful (music by Beth Custer), this lighter side of Solis should come to the surface more often.

9. "The Price," Aurora Theatre Company — In the wake of Arthur Miller's death came this strong, finely detailed production of one of his last great plays. Director Joy Carlin and a cast of veterans created a world that felt lived in, deeply pained and ultimately hopeful.

10. "Happy End," Woman's Will; "Cabaret," Shotgun Players; "One Big Lie," Crowded Fire Theatre Company — OK, so this is cheating, but these three scrappy musicals all deserve a place in the Top 10 because they were performed with impressive gusto and good cheer. Musicals aren't easy, and these small companies more than rose to the challenge.

In no particular order, here are some other great nights spent in the theater: "Fetes de la Nuit," Berkeley Repertory Theatre; "The Typographer's Dream," Encore Theatre Company; "Dublin Carol," Aurora Theatre Company; Hot House '05 featuring "The Rules of Charity," "The Black Eyed" and "3F, 4F," Magic Theatre; "Finn in the Underworld," Berkeley Repertory Theatre; "Crumble," Impact Theatre Company.