

Vaclav Havel, and 1989's Minor Lights

By Tom Stringer

VACLAV HAVEL. He, and his ascent to the presidency of Czechoslovakia, has to be the most significant world theater event of 1989. And, of course, the playwright's role has come about largely through a relentless and courageous insistence on speaking the truth. When a career-long record of fearless artistic



integrity and political dissidence translates directly into national political power, artists and politicians throughout the world are bound to take note.

Meanwhile, closer to home, having replaced our own dismal version of an artist-leader with an

equally dangerous pretender (one pretended to be an artist, the other tries desperately to promote a leadership image), we at least have some good theater news to talk about.

IN LOS ANGELES, 1989 WAS A YEAR in which performance art outshone the conventional theater, especially in confronting the more challenging crises of our time: homelessness, the AIDS epidemic, and ethno-racial conflict. Much of the credit goes to *Highways*, the new Santa Monica performance space which opened in May under the direction of Tim Miller and Linda Frye Burnham. Their multicultural and sociopolitical mission is already serving as a model for other artist-run spaces around the country.

In the conventional theater, equity-house productions were most interesting. At the Ahmanson and the Dorothy Chandler, visiting productions of *Into the Woods* and *Cypsy* were highlights, as was the Edward Albee-directed *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Doolittle. Tackling real-

ism's constraints, director David Schweizer placed his postmodern stamp on two Theater Center plays: Thomas Babe's *Demon Wine* and Marlane Meyer's *The Geography of Luck*. Disappointingly, the Taper's lineup was, at best, a hit-and-miss affair, though Richard Jordan's production of Vaclav Havel's *Temptation*, featuring a wickedly funny performance by Michael Constantine, was thoroughly enjoyable.

1989's highlights:

1. *Jupiter 35*, The Los Angeles Poverty Department (*Highways*). The year's most significant production was also the most ignored. Every other newspaper in town failed to review this play, which, ironically, depicted street life's isolation and the importance of community to the survival of street people. The LAPD, a rag-tag band of Skid Row theater artists, proved itself capable of strong narrative momentum while retaining their raw, improvisatory power.

2. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, August Wilson (Los Angeles Theater Center). If the eighties produced only one playwright whose works will last more than a hundred years, you can safely place your bet on August Wilson. Chronicling the Afro-American experience decade by decade, Wilson set this deeply moving story in a 1911 Pittsburgh boarding house. Roscoe Lee Browne and James Craven delivered strong performances as the old conjurer and the haunted stranger, respectively.

3. *Blessed Are All the Little Fishes*, John Fleck (L.A.C.E./Tiffany Theater). Coincidental with U.S. Senator Jesse Helms's manufactured brouhaha, Los Angeles's funniest and most outrageous performance artist, John Fleck, spent his NEA grant exploring, among other themes, the dramatic, political, and religious potential inherent in taking a pee. Besides displaying impeccable timing, Fleck delivered one of the year's most revealing monologues, examining sexual confu-

sion in the age of AIDS and the wonder of artistic transcendence.

4. *Cypsy*, Jule Styne-Stephen Sondheim-Arthur Laurents (Dorothy Chandler Pavilion). Tyne Daly was magnificent as Mama Rose in Arthur Laurents's thirtieth-anniversary revival of this classic show-biz musical. Daly's gutsy singing and emotional commitment reached every nook and cranny of the Chandler Pavilion.

5. *Visions*, Scott Kelman's Pipeline (Various locations, Skid Row). From the ashes of Another Planet, Pipeline has revived the vision of producing cultural events by and for the homeless. Their first outing in San Julian Park, "Voices from the Sidewalks," was a collection of poetry readings and performances noteworthy for their hard-edged and honest approach as well as for their enlivening affect on the park's groggy, isolated inhabitants.

6. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Edward Albee (James A. Doolittle Theater). A profoundly funny and disturbing revival of Albee's dark night of marital humiliation, as directed by the author. Glenda Jackson, born to play Martha, gave a performance that made Elizabeth Taylor's film version look like Goldilocks. Well, not really. But Jackson was terrific, as was John Lithgow, who provided a dryly funny George.

7. *The Theory of Total Blame*, Karen Finley (L.A.C.E.). If this cheesy, wacked-out melodrama were a movie, it would be a seasonal cult classic. Giving new meaning to the term "dysfunctional family," Finley's absurdist comedy, straight from the guts of an uninhibited writer-performer, provided a timely look at holiday get-togethers.

8. *Our Man in Nirvana*, Jackson Hughes (Theater/Theatre). Hughes's trance-channeling monologue had an irresistible vitality, drawing belly-laughs with his fresh, satirical viewpoint. I looked forward to meeting Hughes some day, such was the appeal of his on-stage persona. But only eight days after his closing-night performance, Hughes died of AIDS.

9. *Intimacies*, Michael Kearns (*Highways*). In his tour-de-force portrayals of six AIDS-afflicted outcasts, Kearns provided a model of empathy for paying more attention to the many unseen sick and disenfranchised AIDS patients around us.

10. *Into the Woods*, Stephen Sondheim-James Lapine (Ahmanson). Despite the tacky touring company sets, this fairy-tale musical lifted off by virtue of its excellent cast, which performed exquisite songs in grand style.

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