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NOT QUITE THE HALFTIME REPORT

Our critics look at the 2009-2010 theatre season so far

By Keith A. Joseph and Christine Howey



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New facilities for Great Lakes Theater Festival and Dobama, one of our most adventurous theaters closed its doors and local companies giving full productions of more than a dozen plays by local playwrights has meant plenty of intrigue this season. As the year is about to turn, we asked critics Keith Joseph and Christine Howey to share their thoughts on the 2009-2010 theatre season so far.

Describe the season so far in 100 words or less.

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Mandalorian Boba Fett Might Have Gotta Interesting

Keith A. Joseph In its timidity and shortage of options, the season shows the effects of the recession. For example, with the cancellation of its studio season, Beck Center has denied the city its imperative annual dose of Dorothy and Reuben Silver. The range of theatrical options has been diminished by offering chestnuts like *Inherit the Wind* and a rerun of *Peter Pan*. And Great Lakes Theater Festival, our official classical theater, will be stooping to a low common denominator with that giddy but economical trifle, *Bat Boy*.

Christine Howey It feels a bit threadbare to this point. This is partly because a couple more theater companies have bitten the dust — Bang and Clatter, sadly, being one (or, actually, two) of them — while other companies have only barely started their seasons. For instance, most of the Cleveland Play House and PlayhouseSquare productions this season will happen in 2010.

Which production has been the most noteworthy?

KJ When Great Lakes announced it was doing *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the general reaction was "So vut." But thanks to Victoria Bussert's bawdy direction, Martin Cespedes' delightfully decadent choreography, and a cast of merry high-steppers and farceurs, the local production managed to outshine the Shaw Festival and touring versions. It represented a renaissance for long-dormant Great Lakes craftsmanship.

CH The most challenging and interesting play to date has been *Ouroboros* at convergence-continuum. Played in reverse order on two successive nights, this time-twister by Tom Jacobson tracked two couples doing the tourist thing in five Italian cities. But although each couple started at opposite ends of this cathedral tour, the time they spent in each city happened simultaneously. Director Clyde Simon and his cast handled it all with smooth confidence — forward and backward.

Which one was best?

KJ Great Lakes' luck continued in its other production of the season, *Twelfth Night*, blissfully free of de rigueur anachronisms and over-the-top cutesiness. In their place was everything-goes Bardification to convert the Philistines who equate seeing Shakespeare to paying taxes. It was a wonderful opportunity to see our gloriously renovated Hanna Theatre used in all its thrust-stage splendor. Particularly of note was David Anthony Smith's psychologically astute Malvolio to warm our evening with soaring comic arias.

CH Chockablock with geeks and coistrels (that's idiots and scoundrels to you), *Twelfth Night* at the Great Lakes Theater Festival had everything you could wish for in a production. By realizing both the humorous and romantic aspects of Shakespeare's script, enhanced with Persian-Moroccan music and set design, director Charles Fee and his skilled company fashioned a delightful evening. Andrew May was a splendidly blotto souse as Sir Toby Belch, and Ian Gould quivered like a protoplasm as the spineless Sir [Malvolio](#). Bruner was dashing as Viola crossdressed as Cesario. [Malvolio](#) virtually stole the show as the hilariously priggish Mal

And worst?

KJ When one-man biographical shows go wrong, they go wrong in a big way. In *Beethoven, As I Knew Him* at the Cleveland Play House, pianist-playwright Hershey Felder gave us a pal of Beethoven's with a Ludwig von Drake accent and a faux Otto Preminger sneer. We suspect the motive for this acting exercise was to give Felder the chance to tickle the ivories in a lofty manner that no concert hall would dare tolerate. This is the kind of stupefying, after-school theater that could convince young people never to leave the sports field or computer.

CH Sadly, the worst production "honor" is shared by two shows written by local playwrights and involving issues emanating from our fair burg. In *Ten More Minutes From Cleveland*, Dobama's Theatre's inaugural play in their new digs, author Eric Coble dipped once again into the fetid well where he finds short vignettes that supposedly capture the essence of Cleveland and its inhabitants. Unfortunately, these were nothing more than overacted, stereotyped skits exhibiting less wit than the banter on the set of NewsChannel 5. Playwright Eric Schmiedl took the same basic approach in *Browns Rules* at Cleveland Public Theatre. The goal was to tell the story of our town's beloved and currently befuddled pro football team in vaudeville style. But due to the clumsily written and indifferently performed songs and skits, Schmiedl and composer, co-lyricist and director Bill Hoffman only tarnished the memories of both the Browns and skilled burlesque artists.

What about individual performances?

KJ Laura Perrotta has spent decades decorating Cleveland stages and offering performances ranging from ill-advised to enchanting. As Princess Puffer in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, it was as if she were suddenly transformed from black-and-white to radiant color. Never before have we so realized her capacity for comedy, pathos and selling a song. If Perrotta is an old favorite, Christopher Richards, fresh out of Kent State, is akin to a youthful one-man band. As half of the cast of *Gutenberg! The Musical!*, he displayed comic genius and verbal dexterity and brought to mind a dozen stars, from Jerry Lewis to Tom Hanks.

CH Kristi Little and Kyle Primous set fire to the Karamu stage in *Yellowman*, a play by Dael Orlandersmith that explored the intra-racial bigotry that mostly revolves around the skin tones of African Americans. Under the sensitive direction of Fred Sternfeld, Primous (playing a light-skinned man) and Little (playing a darker, slightly hefty woman) dealt with their own personal and family demons while trying to forge a relationship. Their passion and humanity were honest, visceral and unforgettable.

Which plays are you looking forward to in the new year?

KJ Neil Simon's reputation is straddling a dangerous line between neglect and mounting royalties. We hope the Cleveland Play House's *Lost in Yonkers* in January will place Simon firmly in the ranks of Kaufman and Hart and other purveyors of merriment for generations to come. Harvey Fierstein is replacing Topol in the touring production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. We know he can do gay and Jewish, but can he do one without the other as the father of five daughters? Either way, we are grateful for a Teyve who doesn't come across as their (great?) grandfather.

CH I'm eagerly awaiting *August: Osage County* at Playhouse Square. It's a Pulitzer Prize and Tony award-winning tragicomedy by Tracy Letts (I crossed) octogenarian Estelle Parsons. Also, I anticipate

amazing shows that just pop up out of nowhere. Will it
Dobama? *Things of Dry Hours* at CPT? *The Great White Hope* co-produced by
Karamu and Ensemble Theatre? *Emma* at the Cleveland Play House? Or others? I
stand ready to be amazed.

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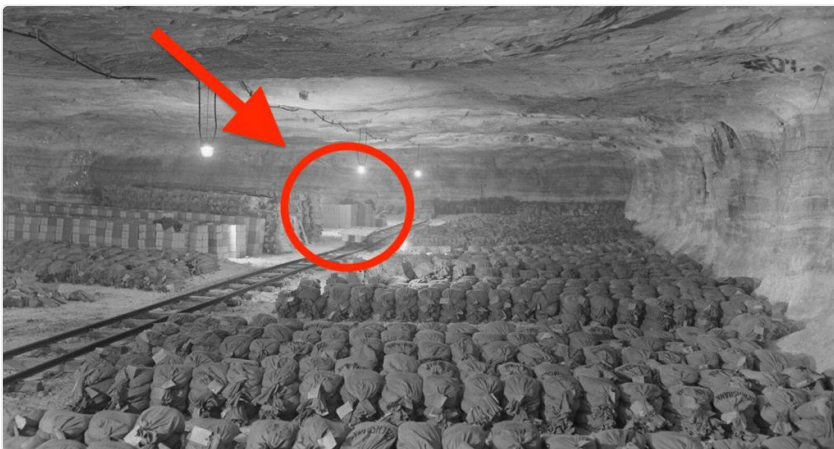
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