

2011: The year in theater

by Brent Hallenbeck

The five most memorable theatrical productions in the Burlington area this year featured a same-sex spin on a classic love story; a seedy tale of the criminal underworld brightened with lively singing and dancing; a quasi-autobiographical story of a local musician/playwright that offered a ray of hope within the bleakness; a musical that alternately questioned and celebrated its own existence; and a giant and very scary anthropomorphic pillow.

This quintet of productions made 2011 a great year on the local stage. They're listed in chronological order in the month in which they opened:

April -- What drew attention to the St. Michael's College production of "Romeo & Juliet" was the uniqueness of the cast: The title lovers were played by two women. Theatergoers left, however, with a renewed sense of how love transcends boundaries not just of familial standing but of gender. They also left with a new local acting star to watch -- Kit Rivers was a dynamo as Romeo, and her inclusion as a first-year student in the cast of the St. Michael's Playhouse presentation of "The Drowsy Chaperone" in June (see below) shows that the professional summer-stock company based on the college's Colchester campus knows she's someone with a roomful of promise.

April -- The story line is a familiar one, but the Lyric Theatre production at the Flynn Center in Burlington of the popular musical "Chicago" felt fresh and vibrant. Hannah Brown and Serena Magnan O'Connell created dark sparks as the murderous gals at the center of the tale, but the sharp choreography and humorous undertones of numbers such as "A Tap Dance" (in which Brown's character literally and figuratively danced circles around one of her hapless victims) and "We Both Reached for the Gun" (a hilarious scene mocking the artificial choreography of a press conference) gave "Chicago" many compelling shades between light and dark.

June -- Burlington playwright/trumpeter Stephen Goldberg creates hard-edged, language-rich scripts that local actors dream of inhabiting. For the production of his play "Burning Bridges" at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts he turned to the one actor who could best handle the lead role of a jazz musician wondering if he still has the chops: himself. Goldberg's performance smoked with restrained artistry, guided by director (and Robert Altman crony) Allan Nicholls. The music-laden production ran during the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival, providing a glimpse into the hard work and life battles many of those musicians have no doubt had to fight themselves.

June -- On one level, "The Drowsy Chaperone" was the perfect bit of musical-comedy froth to open the St. Michael's Playhouse summer season. On another level, though, the Broadway-styled bit of entertainment is a fairly deep exploration of just what makes the all-American musical-theater production so emotionally important to so many aficionados. The ensemble in the play-within-a-play was terrific, but the performance of Broadway veteran Craig Wells as the Everyman narrator delving into his own love for a particularly obscure musical was so believably heartwarming it was tempting to give him a standing ovation before the first act was over.

November -- There might not be a more provocative playwright than Martin McDonagh, whose script "The Pillowman" digs into ugly taboo topics such as child murder and police brutality. The on-the-rise Saints & Poets Production Company made a similarly provocative choice at the Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center in Burlington to incorporate the harsh, darkly comic play into its puppet-driven body of work. The scary-clown-like title character was guaranteed to haunt your dreams, but the work of live cast members Seth Jarvis and Jordan Gullikson in what might just be the veteran Burlington actors' best performances made "The Pillowman" truly powerful.