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2012 Arts Year in Review: Creativity, ambition trumped economy in season of astonishing shows

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By Suzanne Van Atten

The economy continued to cast its gloomy shadow on the Atlanta arts scene, resulting in gallery closings, the end of a theatrical institution, and a temporary lock-out of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in a battle over pay cuts. Nevertheless, the year saw some astonishing productions and exhibitions in venues both big and small. For every mega show like Thornton Dial's retrospective at the High and "Twyla Tharp's The Princess and the Goblin" at the Atlanta Ballet, there was Ben Roosevelt's "The Blue Flame" show at Get This! Gallery and the CounterPoint Festival of electronic dance music in a field 20 miles south of Atlanta. Low points aside, there was plenty to celebrate in 2012. Our critics share their favorite events from the year.

Pop Music: A year of big tours, festivals and the return of rap

As Frank Sinatra might say, it was a very good year for music in Atlanta.

Major tours from Coldplay to Madonna to Rush to D'Angelo to Macon native Jason Aldean (who celebrated his first two sellouts at Aaron's Amphitheatre at Lakewood) cruised through the city. A couple of festivals on back-to-back weekends in September drew more than 100,000 music fans to the area. And the genre synonymous with the city – rap – experienced a renaissance year.

Here are some highlights:

Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band

The band's show in March marked the launch of its first tour since the death of Springsteen's literal right-hand man and musical consigliere, Clarence Clemons. With Clemons' nephew, Jake, stepping out with poise and lungs as potent as his uncle's, Springsteen and the band romped through an emotional opener. It wasn't one of his epic four-hour shows – those came later in the tour – but there was something in the air that the audience sensed was special.

CounterPoint Festival

The brainchild of Atlantans Jonathan Fordin and Brett Keber – who brought the Echo Project to town five years ago – culled more than 75 top names in the electronic dance music industry (as well as some hip-hop) to convene on 350 acres of sprawling property about 20 miles south of downtown. Rain forced some postponements and cancellations, but the blissed-out thousands who attended made this their digitized mini-Woodstock.

Music Midtown

When Music Midtown returned in 2011 after a five-year hiatus, music fans rejoiced...quietly. Yes, it was back, but only for a day and with a decidedly non-diverse lineup. Festival organizers listened and this year tacked a second day onto the event and added acts such as Ludacris and T.I. to complement major rockers Foo Fighters and Pearl Jam and new kids such as Civil Twilight and Neon Trees.

Rebirth of rap

For years, the sounds of the Dirty South have been familiar to rap fans. In December, two of Atlanta's elite lyrical whizzes, Big Boi (of OutKast fame) and T.I. (these days of VH1 fame as much as music) released their first new albums in several years – "Vicious Lies and Dangerous Rumors" and "Trouble Man: Heavy is the Head," respectively. They're both excellently crafted, but 2012 also made room for the next generation of Atlanta-grown talent. B.o.B. duetted with Taylor Swift; 2 Chainz scored a No. 1 debut album (and a Grammy nomination); Future's debut album arrived in the Billboard Top 10; and Lecrae proved that Christian rap is an immensely successful niche as he scored a major breakthrough with his sixth album, "Gravity," which is also up for a Grammy.

— *Melissa Ruggieri*

Theater: Economics pain continue but Broadway beckoned

Atlanta theater was big news in 2012 — not all of it good.

Marietta's Theatre in the Square shut its doors after 30 years. Georgia Shakespeare crawled from the brink of financial ruin — only to announce that it will drop its repertory format in the summer of '13. The Alliance Theatre staged its long-awaited Stephen King-John Mellencamp musical, "Ghost Brothers of Darkland County," to jarringly mixed reviews.

And yet for every misstep, there were at least two winners. At the top of the year, Kenny Leon had two shows on Broadway — Lydia R. Diamond's "Stick Fly" and Katori Hall's "The Mountaintop," which his True Colors Theatre mounted in Atlanta in the fall with a new cast. And when "Bring It On: The Musical" joined "Sister Act" on Broadway in July, the Alliance had two world premieres running currently on the Great White Way. Nothing shoddy about that. Here, then, are my personal picks for the top five shows of 2012, with honorable mention going to Pearl Cleage's "What I Learned in Paris" at the Alliance and Larry Larson and Eddie Levi Lee's "The Waffle Palace" at Horizon Theatre.

"Clyde 'n Bonnie: A Folktale," Aurora Theatre

Hunter Foster and Rick Crom turned the infamous crime saga into a musical caper that cleverly skewered the "Swamp Gravy" style of community theater. Karen Howell ruled.

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," True Colors Theatre

Playwright Todd Kreidler brought a creaky race drama into the light of the present political day, with Kenny Leon directing a top-notch Tom Key, Tess Malis Kincaid, Andrea Frye and Bethany Anne Lind.

"Apples & Oranges," Alliance Theatre

Homeboy Alfred Uhry found tears and poetry in journalist Marie Brenner's memoir of her brother.

"Next to Normal," Alliance Theatre

An exquisite treatment of Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey's soul-shattering Pulitzer Prize winner, a rock musical that touches are dark subjects including mental illness, suicide and drug abuse.

"Wolves," Actor's Express

Steve Yockey's study of a small town boy unhinged by jealousy is his best play to date — smart, gory, bewitched.

— *Wendell Brock*

Dance: A year of innovation and ambition

It's said that dancers don't compete with other dancers, they compete with themselves. This year, local dance artists trained harder, dug deeper for inspiration and carried out ambitious plans. In many cases, results were astonishing. Here are a few noteworthy ones:

Off the EDGE, Rialto Center

The first-ever, week-long dance initiative curated by gloATL connected local contemporary companies with choreographers from as far as New York, Los Angeles and Tel Aviv. Guest artists performed in two evenings of eclectic works that ranged from Andrea Miller's haunting "Dust" to Barak Marshall's sardonic and tumultuous "Below Stairs at Mrs. Margaret's" to Lar Lubovitch's celestial "Duet From Meadow."

"Twyla Tharp's The Princess and the Goblin," Atlanta Ballet

The legendary choreographer incorporated more than a dozen children into this vivid and intricately woven adaptation of George MacDonald's 19th century children's fantasy. Through a rigorous rehearsal process, dancers amped up technical power and built nuanced characters; Tharp's fame helped thrust Atlanta Ballet into the national spotlight.

"Shadows of Doubt," D'AIR Aerial Dance Theatre

The expression, "Who's on top?" takes on new meaning when two performers hang from a hoop suspended from a 30-foot ceiling. In just five years, the D'AIR Aerial Dance Theatre has carved out a niche in Grant Park with a thrilling dance form that transcends mere circus stunts. Tensions inherent in climbing, clenching and plummeting charged this lighthearted character study with metaphor and risk.

"Threshold," Lucky Penny

It's rare that a young, independent dance-maker gains resources to realize a large-scale vision: in this case, a dance inside a life-sized cardboard house. In this remarkable collaboration, The Lucky Penny, Georgia Tech, Mack Scogin Merrill Elam Architects and a host of artists and volunteers set the stage for choreographer Blake Beckham's intimate and surreal exploration of the meanings of home.

"The Firebird" and "Serenade," Georgia Ballet

The Georgia Ballet's dancers imbued Janusz Mazon's Russian-inspired story ballet and George Balanchine's signature work with purity, honesty and rapturous passion. To artistic leaders Gina Hyatt-Mazon and Mazon, who are moving back to Hamburg, Germany, after 15 devoted years with the company, it was a poignant expression of thanks.

— *Cynthia Perry*

Visual arts: Some galleries close; others redefine themselves

Audiences had to take the good with the bad this year. There were notable gallery closings, including Solomon Projects (at the tail end of 2011), Kiang Gallery, Jennifer Schwartz Gallery and Saltworks Gallery. But though they often gave up their brick and mortar spaces, several of these shuttered galleries launched "pop-up" shows at venues from the W Midtown to Schwartz's one-night-only shows at sites around the city. Established galleries hung tight in a tough economic climate, but plenty of independent curatorial ventures such as Dashboard Co-Op continued to stage inventive, provocative shows in unusual spaces, including Nathan Sharratt's navel-gazing solo show about his own life installed in a Peoplestown shotgun house.

Here are some of our favorites from 2012.

"Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial," High Museum of Art

In the South it's easy to be a little jaded when it comes to folk art. Too often such self-taught art reinforces clichés about the region that involve religious obsession. Alabama seer Thornton Dial's operatic canvases shatter that stereotype with a dark, poetic vision and a profound engagement with social issues.

Dashboard Co-Op, "100,000 Cubicle Hours," Atlanta Contemporary Art Center

This freelance curatorial group founded by Beth Malone and Courtney Hammond garnered a prestigious \$30,000 grant from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation this year. They also staged a tight, clever show-within-a-show, upstaging the Contemporary's "Day Job: Georgia" with their own fugue on working life. "100,000 Cubicle Hours" proved these young'uns can hold their own against established spaces and deliver a cohesive vision.

Meg Aubrey, "Domiciled," Whitespace Gallery

In her chilly, pared-down paintings, Meg Aubrey continues to deliver scathing visions of suburban life. But in this show the artist enlarged her view to show how the economic crisis is affecting the cul-de-sac set.

Martha Whittington, “deus ex machina” Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia

This Atlanta-based sculptor delivered an immersive, profound installation at the Buckhead museum that centered on soul-crushing labor, a topic treated with both despair and humor in a vivid, canny show with shades of Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town” and George Orwell’s “1984.”

Ben Roosevelt, “The Blue Flame,” Get This! Gallery

In this atmospheric show, Ben Roosevelt transformed the small Westside gallery into a David Lynch-style dive bar. There was art, a working bar with cheap beer and a suggestion that rather than an elitist, inaccessible institution, the art gallery could be a comforting gathering place that just happens to feature art on the walls.

— *Felicia Feaster*

Classical music: Rocky year behind-the-scenes; outstanding performances onstage

It was a bumpy year for classical music in Atlanta, with events offstage often overshadowing the music.

During the summer, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s management proposed major pay cuts to close a large deficit, and wound up locking out the musicians. An agreement was reached one week before the season opened, but the mood was hardly upbeat and the long-term effect is hard to gauge.

Meanwhile, opera fans learned in mid-August that Denis Hanthorn, Atlanta Opera’s general director, had resigned. Hanthorn had broadened the Opera’s audience and raised the company’s profile by performing a healthy number of newer works and less traditional productions of warhorses. Board chairman William Tucker said the company would focus more on “conservative things.” No new director has been hired.

Highlights of the year included:

“A Flowering Tree,” ASO

Based on an Indian folk tale, John Adams’ opera was given a stunning, semi-staged performance by the ASO in June. Eric Owens, the opera world’s equivalent of a rock star, led a fine cast in a revival of one of the best new operas in recent years. Edgy new technology powered the production.

“St. Matthew Passion,” ASO

The ASO performance of Bach’s rarely performed “St. Matthew Passion” last March was a tour de force, showing off the orchestra’s Chamber Chorus, the Gwinnett Young Singers and a strong group of soloists. Robert Spano’s energetic conducting made the three and a half hours time well spent.

ASO season opener

ASO’s fall season opener was an emotional moment for everyone, coming only two weeks after the end of the lock-out. Violin superstar Midori was the headliner, and she performed the Beethoven Violin Concerto with understated grace. On this occasion, however, the spotlight was on the orchestra, as relieved fans relished a return that had seemed uncertain. Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony was the comeback work that proved nothing had been lost over the summer.

“Carmen,” Atlanta Opera

Atlanta Opera opened its fall season with a lively production of “Carmen.” Part of a season assembled by Hanthorn before his departure, the popular warhorse opera featured a strong cast, especially Marie José Montiel, who sang the title role. The colorful production, often on the verge of being hijacked by the choreographer, staged the opera from Don José’s point of view.

— *James Paulk*

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