

A Year of Musical EXTRAVAGANZAS

By Dr Oh Jen Jen

"I have found my heaven in musicals. When I watch a musical, it makes me believe life is still beautiful." – John Woo

The local stage musical scene has enjoyed a revival in recent years, but 2013 was nothing short of epic! From well-loved classics to more recent hits, featuring international and Singaporean casts, the standards were exceptional. Here's a rundown of my top favourites.



Photo: Jersey Boys

JERSEY BOYS

Famously known as "the story of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons", the Broadway original won a fistful of Tony Awards in 2006 (including Best Musical). The South African production ran for two months at the Marina Bay Sands Grand Theatre. I was apprehensive about seeing this version, having caught a performance by the Tony-winning cast in 2007. However, the show exceeded all my expectations, and I ended up watching it twice. The entire production was terrific, and the four talented lead actors (Grant Almiraal, Daniel Buys, Emmanuel Castis and Kenneth Grant Meyer) matched their American counterparts perfectly.



Photo: The Phantom of the Opera

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

Definitely the highlight of 2013, with a sold out run and multiple extensions due to overwhelming demand! I'd seen it twice before (at the Kallang Theatre and on Broadway), but this version had by far the most spectacular sets and costumes. The New York cast may be superior to this international group, but the latter still did a fine job and left audiences ecstatic with their performances.



Photo: Dirty Dancing

DIRTY DANCING

Brought to Singapore by BASE Entertainment Asia and Showtime Management, the same companies that produced *Jersey Boys*, this production also featured a South African cast. While the former dazzled via astounding vocals, *Dirty Dancing* wowed audiences with its fancy footwork and beautifully choreographed routines. An almost identical reproduction of the 1987 film, the performance took me on a wonderful journey down memory lane, with the gorgeous lead actor Luigi Vigliotti setting hearts aflutter.



HAIRSPRAY

This musical was staged at the Esplanade for a limited week-long run, which sadly did not sell out. Reasons may include poor timing (school exam period) or unappealing material (an overweight protagonist and the civil rights movement, set 50 years ago), but I consider it a huge loss for those who missed it because it was astounding. The UK-based actors and musicians kept me beaming from beginning to the end with their flawless performances, which were a million times better than the 2007 film adaptation.



NEXT TO NORMAL

Local theatre company Pangdemonium!, founded by Adrian and Tracie Pang, turned me into a diehard fan with its stunning production of *Spring Awakening* in 2012, and matched it 18 months later with a heart-wrenching interpretation of the Broadway hit, *Next to Normal*. This tale – about a woman who suffers from bipolar disorder and her tormented family – contains more than 30 songs, all of which require physical and emotional stamina of the highest level. The predominantly local cast (except for West End theatre star, Sally Ann Triplett in the lead role) earned well-deserved accolades and my ever-increasing respect for their fearlessness and immense talent. Keep a close eye on young actors Julia Abueva and Nathan Hartono – I predict stardom on a Broadway stage in the not-too-distant future!



BROADWAY BENG

This isn't a musical, technically speaking, but is too awesome to leave out from my list. My virgin foray into Sebastian Tan's colourful, Hokkien-spewing world of *getai*, Broadway number mash-ups, double entendres and hilarious spoofs made my tear ducts go into overdrive from laughter. Lest you think it's a solo effort, Tan was joined by a quintet of *chiobus*, including *The Noose's* delightful Judee Tan (who seriously needs to stage her own show soon!). And eight-year-old Ian Lee, as a mini Broadway Beng, almost outshone Sebastian when he launched into perfect Hokkien, reciting a lengthy monologue and singing in the dialect.

If you've never felt the urge to see a stage musical, I encourage you to find a way to overcome the inertia and experience one first-hand. To whet your appetite, BASE Entertainment Asia has informed me that *My Fair Lady* will arrive in February 2014, while Pangdemonium!'s musical line-up for 2014 includes *The Rise & Fall of Little Voice* (1 to 18 May). For more information on current or upcoming shows, visit the websites of BASE Entertainment Asia, Dream Academy, the Esplanade, Marina Bay Sands and Pangdemonium!

If you would like recommendations for theatre productions (staged locally or otherwise), feel free to contact me at ojj75@yahoo.com. **SMA**



Dr Oh Jen Jen is a consultant at the Department of Emergency Medicine, Singapore General Hospital. When not battling endless patient queues at the hospital, she spends way too much time in front of the TV. An avid blogger since 2002, she also hopes to write a screenplay or novel someday – if she manages to survive her three-monthly episodes of job burnout.