

Live From Los Angeles

A play-by-play look at West Coast theater

THEY SAY THE NEON LIGHTS are bright on Broadway, but in Los Angeles, a shining new theater scene is beginning to hold its own against New York. Innovative companies, supported by local subscribers and generous grants, are staging new plays and adventurous productions that manage to be entertaining as well as experimental. Once considered a town of warmed-over road shows and vanity (or "showcase") theater featuring aging movie stars, L.A. is proving that its legitimate stage is now a dramatic force.

Some think the Olympic Arts Festival—which brought world-class plays and directors to L.A.—was a cultural shot in the arm that's still having an effect. "Standards could never drop after that," says *The Orange County Register* Theater Critic Thomas O'Connor. "Once audiences have been exposed to quality productions, it's very hard to go back to a steady diet of Neil Simon revivals."

And then there's the migration of actors from New York to Los Angeles: while attracted by the money in film and TV, they still hunger to do theater. Of course, this can be a double-edged sword. "The biggest problem in Los Angeles theater is both its salvation and its damnation," says *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* Theater Critic Richard Stayton. "There's a huge pool of Hollywood talent, but theater here operates in the shadow of Hollywood." The New York-based national media think of Los Angeles as a film town and not much more, so theater here doesn't get the coverage of Broadway openings. But that doesn't mean it's not happening.

This May and June a wide array of plays is on the boards. There are the imported commercial hits: Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*,

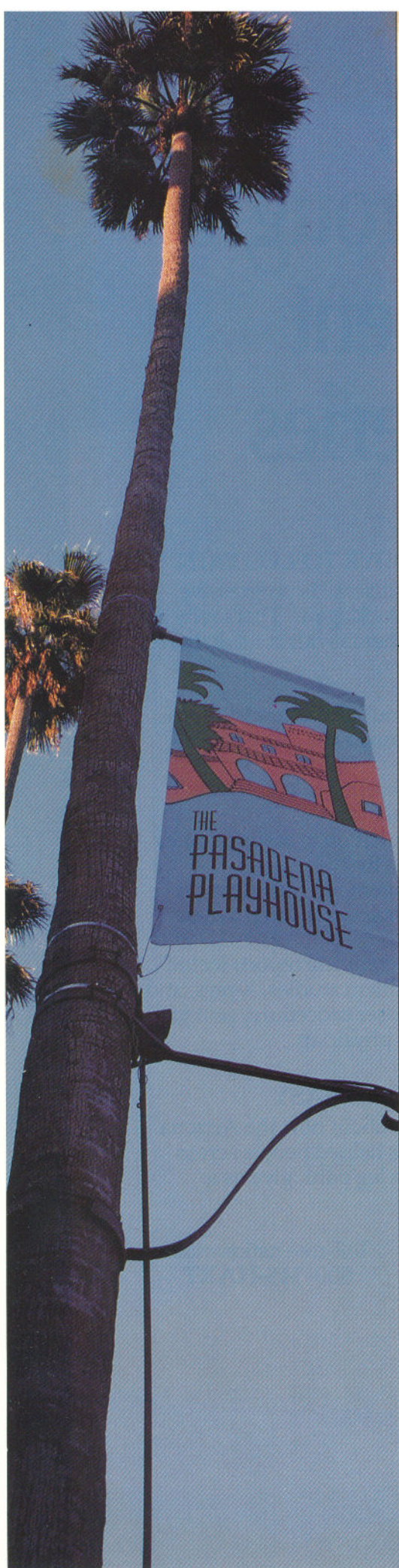
with Michael Crawford of the London and Broadway productions repeating the title role, comes to the Ahmanson downtown for an expected two-year run beginning May 31. Last month saw the Hollywood openings of Alfred Uhly's *Driving Miss Daisy*, last year's Pulitzer Prize-winning comedy about an aging Southern belle (Julie Harris) and her black driver, (Brock Peters) at the Henry Fonda, and *Hapgood*, Tom Stoppard's new spy thriller, at the Doolittle. *Les Miserables*, at the Shubert in Century City, has been extended through July 2.

But the big change comes with the new excitement of locally generated theater: *Sansei*, a concert theater piece created and performed by the jazz fusion band Hiroshima, is at the Mark Taper Forum downtown through May 7. South Coast Repertory in Orange County's Costa Mesa continues with the premiere of Pulitzer Prize-winner Beth Henley's new work *Abundance*, described as a stage western, through May 25; Marlane Meyer's *The Geography of Luck*, about an ex-con who lands in Las Vegas, debuts on another South Coast stage May 16. The Pasadena Playhouse has *The Boys Next Door*, Tom Griffin's bittersweet comedy about four mentally retarded young men, May 5 through June 4 and begins Richard Harris's *Stepping Out*, a sort of "Rocky" with tap shoes, June 16.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, about a black boardinghouse in turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh by Pulitzer- and Tony-winner August Wilson, is at the Los Angeles Theater Center downtown through June 4. The LATC also contin-

An organic signpost (left) directs traffic to the Pasadena Playhouse. A scene (right) from the New York production of Phantom of the Opera.

BY CATHERINE SEIPP



L.A. THEATER

.....

ues with the premiere of *Minimata*, an experimental piece about toxic waste by Reza Abdoh and Mira-Lani Oglesby, through May 21 and opens Steve Carter's *Eden*, a West Indian *Romeo and Juliet* set in 1920s Harlem, May 19.

Like American theater in general, Los Angeles theater falls into several categories. There are the big commercial houses: the Shubert; the Nederlander-owned Pantages, Henry Fonda, and Wilshire; and the Ahmanson, the profit-making arm of the Music Center. There are the mid-sized rental theaters, like the Westwood Playhouse and the Tiffany on Sunset Strip. And there's a thriving of small theaters (99 seats or less) with growing reputations.

In a class by itself is *Tamara* by John Krizank, L.A.'s longest-running play. For five years audiences have been flocking to the Il Vittoriale in Hollywood, a former American Legion post converted for the production into a villa of 1920s fascist Italy. The gimmick is to have the audience follow 10 actors through the house. Several scenes, all revolving around various plots of political intrigue, murder and debauchery, are usually going on simultaneously, so it helps to see the play more than once. Some *Tamara* groupies have come back dozens of times, unfazed by the top-ticket price of \$80. This includes a buffet at intermission. There are discounts for repeat visits.

But the heart of the Los Angeles stage is its big four not-for-profit institutions. These are:

The Mark Taper Forum: The smallest of the three-structure Music Center downtown, the Taper, a 752-seat hatbox-shaped building with a thrust stage, has for more than two decades been putting bold new work before Los Angeles audiences—often with national success. Taper-premiered plays that have become Broadway hits include *The Shadow Box*, *Zoot Suit*, *Children of a Lesser God*, and *Burn This*.

From the beginning, artistic director Gordon Davidson hasn't shied away from controversy. FBI agents were regular attendees of Daniel Berrigan's *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* in 1971, hoping to nab the fugitive dissidents the play was about. Ronald Reagan is said to have walked out of *The Devils*, the Taper's raunchy premiere

performance.

An ex-New Yorker, Davidson moved west to assist the late John Houseman with his struggling Theater Group on the UCLA campus in 1964, and took charge of the Taper when it was completed three years later. "One of our marks has always been plays that deal with social and political questions," he says. "Theater is a great communicator of value systems, because it's created live in front of you." The Taper Forum also stages performance art and experimental plays in its 90-seat Taper, Too theater in the Hollywood Hills. And Davidson is taking over the Ahmanson when its season moves to the Doolittle in Hollywood because of the expected two-year run of *Phantom* downtown.

The Doolittle's smaller size (1,000 seats as opposed to the Ahmanson's 1,900) and Davidson's vision should bring some changes. "I've trained the audiences at the Taper to come to the theater and deal with the unexpected," he says. "Up until recently the Ahmanson has been mainly star attractions. Perhaps we can do more provocative plays that ask questions about society."

The Los Angeles Theater Center: Called "the miracle on Spring Street" by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley when it opened four years ago, the LATC is a dazzling four-theater complex in a restored 1916 bank building that sits smack in the middle of downtown's Skid Row. "Some people stay away because of that," says artistic director Bill Bushnell, who's committed to experimental, unexpected theater. "But we're looking for an adventurous audience."

The scuzzy location has its disadvantages: actor Judd Nelson, dressed as a bum for a production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, was detained by police who thought he was a real bum while taking a cigarette break outside between scenes. But after an initial dropping-off following the first season, the LATC now has a healthy subscription base of almost 30,000. Part of that is because half of LATC plays deal with non-white storylines and themes, and Bushnell has managed to attract a healthy share of Latinos and blacks to his audience.

"There are some national statistics floating around that indicate the non-white theater audience is less than

1%," he says. "Our surveys show 13% of our audiences are non-white. I'm not happy; I wish it were more. But it's a helluva lot better than anyone else is doing."

Past hits have included *The Kathy and Mo Show: Parallel Lives* and Jon Robin Baitz's *The Film Society*, both of which went on to New York. But Bushnell notes that while "it's amazing how these things enhance your reputation,

whether or not the play moves to New York doesn't really mean anything. Our entire focus is on plays for this market. We want you to walk out knowing something you didn't when you walked in. If we allow people to walk away and immediately say, 'where's the car,' we're not doing what we're in business for."

The Pasadena Playhouse: A national historic monument, this mis-

sion-style theater opened in 1925 and was the first in the country to stage all three dozen of Shakespeare's plays. The famous school, now closed, includes Gene Hackman, Dustin Hoffman, David Niven, Robert Young and Elaine May among its alumni. For two decades, the Playhouse was boarded up. But its two stages reopened four years ago under the direction of Susan Dietz, who also hopes to start up the school again within five years. And since then it's had, in the words of *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* theater critic Stayton, "just one hit after another."

Among the standout world premieres have been *Mail*, a musical about a man attacked by singing junk mail, and the tricky thriller *Accomplice*, which took the play-within-a-play concept to new extremes. "I think it's important for you to give your patrons a varied diet," says Dietz. "We all get tired of the '40s revival, the breast-beating drama.

"I think L.A. theater has grown up," she adds, "from an avocation to a vocation." Since coming to Los Angeles from New York in the 1970s, Dietz says she's seen the emphasis move from small stages to big professional houses. She doesn't miss New York theater at all. "When *Mail* moved there it bombed," Dietz recalls. "I stood in the back of the theater and the same show that cost \$250,000 to mount here cost \$2.5 million there, and the theater wasn't as nice as mine. I thought, what is wrong with this picture?"

South Coast Repertory: Twenty-five years ago, co-artistic directors Martin Benson and David Emmes gave their first performance out of the back of a station wagon. They later took over a bait-and-tackle shop, then an abandoned five-and-dime store and finally, a decade ago, a luxurious new two-stage theater on land donated by the owners of the South Coast Plaza shopping center across the street. They've staged world premieres by prize-winning playwrights, commissioned dozens of new plays that have gone on to greater fame, and last year won a Tony for excellence in regional theater. But the emphasis remains on doing theater for the local community.

"We want to produce plays for ourselves," says Benson. "I think there's a real danger of regional theater in this country becoming tryout houses for

Broadway." The company is dedicated to new plays, even if commissioned first drafts don't always make it to the stage. "If we encourage the playwright, then maybe he'll think of us later when he's successful," says Benson. "But we're very chary of putting it before an audience and critics before it's ready."

Orange County, about an hour south of downtown Los Angeles, is known for its political conservatism and, lately, for its yahoo boomtown wealth. Not what you'd think of as the most sophisticated audience for theater. As *The Register's* critic O'Connor puts it: "People here have always been told they're cultural degenerates who can barely appreciate the significance of the Matterhorn at Disneyland." But SCR has found its local support to be loyal and open-minded. "While my political views are liberal, and I use that word proudly," says Benson, "Orange County has from the beginning reacted to us with a certain innocence."

In the end, that may be what matters most. The heart of the theater in any city is its continued ability to surprise and provoke. As the Taper's Davidson notes, "A theater begins to establish a reputation when audiences can trust they'll see something interesting there, even if they don't like everything about it."

Small Theaters

Los Angeles has no "off-Broadway" district: like the big houses here, small theaters are spread out all over town. They have their share of misses as well as hits. But these five are known for generating plays that often make the trip worthwhile.

The Odyssey, 12111 Ohio Avenue, West L.A., (213) 826-1626. For 20 years, former film executive Ron Sossi has been directing experimental work and innovative musicals in this three-theater equity-waiver site. In June the Odyssey will be moving to an interim site, pending the completion of a large contract-theater complex. Current productions include Steven Berkoff's dark comedy (and three-year hit) *Kvetch*; and *Symmes' Hole*, a musical based on the true story of a man who believed the earth is hollow.

The Cast, 804 N. El Centro Avenue, Hollywood, (213) 462-0265. Artistic director Ted Schmitt gave up a successful business career to take over the Cast on a shoestring budget 12 years ago; the two-stage theater has since garnered dozens of awards for its dedication to new plays and playwrights. Not everything works, but the odds are good you'll see something interesting: Last year the Cast produced 15 world premieres and 70 staged readings of new plays.

The Back Alley, 15231 Burbank Boulevard, Van Nuys, (818) 780-2240. Ten years ago drama coach Laura Zucker and her actor husband Allan Miller decided that the San Fernando Valley (that infamous cultural wasteland of Valley Girls and mini-malls) could use a professional theater. Since then they've had much success emphasizing new work and small-scale musicals. Now playing: John Olive's *The Voice of the Prairie*, about early 20th-century storytellers, and *Bittersweet: One More Time*, a musical revue with original music by Elliot Weiss and Michael Champagne.

The Groundlings, 7307 Melrose Avenue, Hollywood (213) 934-9700. Not just another improvisation troupe, the Groundlings has for the past few years been staging full-length comedies on Wednesdays and Thursdays developed from the weekend improv skits. Past successes include *The Pee-wee Herman Show*, *Casual Sex* and *Just Like the Pom-Pom Girls*, (which became the new movie "Baby Bump"). Now playing: *Holiday Dinner*, about a reunion between an uptight mother and her two odd daughters.

Theater 40, 241 Moreno Drive, Beverly Hills, (213) 277-4221. This group began 25 years ago as a Shakespeare reading group in a member's home, and moved to its present site on the Beverly Hills High School campus in 1974. Traditional theater is emphasized here, but classics and revivals are balanced with occasional new work. Coming up in June: Agatha Christie's *The Unexpected Guest*.