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Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX)

December 27, 2006

Section: Metro

Edition: Tarrant

Page: B2

YEAR IN REVIEW: THEATER

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In local theater, 2006 marked major entrances and exits behind **the** scenes, plus significant revivals of American theater giants Rodgers and Hammerstein and Tennessee Williams. Fort Worth legend exits stage right

One of Cowtown's most prominent theatrical figures, William Garber, died May 8 after attending a high school reunion in his hometown, Strasburg, Ohio. Garber, 78, co-founded Fort Worth Community Theatre (later Fort Worth Theatre), which in **the** 1960s and '70s nurtured **the** artists who would go on to found Stage West, Circle Theatre and Jubilee Theatre.

Garber's death was soon followed by a phoenix rising: Fort Worth Theatre, which all but died in 2001, resurrected itself with a production of Death of a Salesman in honor of **the** 50th anniversary of FWT's first production of that Arthur Miller masterpiece.

Surviving Rudy

In **the** summer, Ed Smith took over as artistic director of Jubilee Theatre. Smith, a former amateur boxing champion who has worked at theaters nationwide, fills **the** void left by **the** great Rudy Eastman, who died in 2005. Smith put together **the** theater's 2006-07 season, which is stocked with more serious drama than **the** troupe has done in **the** past. We're expecting big things from him in years to come.

Exit stage left

The Dallas Theater Center's artistic director of 15 years, Richard Hamburger, said he's leaving at **the** end of **the** 2006-07 season, a decision met with cheers by local theater artists who have long felt stifled by DTC. Meanwhile, **the** theater expanded to second-stage work, where it produced two of its finest offerings of **the** season: Will Eno's one-man play Thom Pain (based on nothing) and an all-female version of **the** Scottish play, called A Macbeth.

Must have done something good

At Bass Hall, Casa Mañana threw a summertime Rodgers and Hammerstein festival, beginning with **The King and I** starring Lou Diamond Phillips (he'll come back in **the** summer to star in *A Few Good Men* at Casa's dome). **The** R&H season ended with big-voiced Guiding Light star Ron Raines in an otherwise lackluster South Pacific. Sandwiched in between was *Oklahoma!*, which didn't boast a star but did have a real horse onstage — appropriate for a warhorse musical.

New Orleans state of mind

Perhaps inspired by **the** attention Hurricane Katrina brought to New Orleans, Dallas theaters brought out lots of Tennessee Williams, with Theatre Three, Dallas Theater Center and Quad C Theatre offering full-length gems by **the** great American playwright. Tiny WingSpan Theatre Company, though, stole **the** thunder with **the** rarely produced one-acts *Something Unspoken* at **the** Festival of Independent Theatres and **the** absurdist **The Gnadiges Fraulein** in October.

THE YEAR'S BEST THEATER

1 **Below the Belt**, Amphibian Stage Productions: Richard Dresser's workplace comedy reached blissfully satiric heights with **the** year's tightest ensemble: Evan Mueller, Jonathan Fielding and Michael Muller. Directed by David A. Miller.

2 **The Normal Heart**, Uptown Players: Who would have thought that Larry Kramer's agitprop drama about **the** earliest days of AIDS would still be so stirring? Regan Adair's stark production was unforgettable.

3 **Blues for an Alabama Sky**, Jubilee Theatre: In between **the** Rudy Eastman and Ed Smith eras, director Sharon Bengé pulled sharp performances from her actors in Pearl Cleage's *Harlem Renaissance* melodrama.

4 **I Am My Own Wife**, Dallas Theater Center: In Dallas native Doug Wright's one-man, 35-character play about an East German transsexual, actor Damien Atkins held his own against **the** memory of **the** amazing New York performance by Jefferson Mays. Directed by David Kennedy.

5 **The King and I**, Casa Mañana: Lou Diamond Phillips reprised his Broadway turn as **the** King of Siam, which thankfully isn't a singing role. **The** rest of **the** cast, though, sang majestically. Directed by Guy Stroman.

6 **Urinetown the Musical**, WaterTower Theatre: There were no leaks in this nicely designed and performed area premiere of **the** funniest and most important musical in years. Directed by James Paul Lemmons.

7 **Relatively Speaking**, Stage West: Stage West always does Alan Ayckbourn justice, and this early comedy of errors was no exception. Jim Covault directed.

8 **How I Fixed My Engine With Rosewater**, Hip Pocket Theatre: New York puppeteer Lake Simons' work is expanding deep and wide, as evidenced in this highly physical, focused performance piece inspired by **The Little Prince**.

9 **No Exit**, Classical Acting Company: Rene Moreno's well-paced staging of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential masterpiece was creepy, uncomfortably funny and altogether engrossing.

10 **On An Average Day**, Kitchen Dog Theater: John Kolvenbach's drama about two brothers coming to terms with **the** past made for edge-of-your-seat theater thanks to Christopher Carlos and Joe Nemmers, who co-starred and co-directed.

COMING UP

THURSDAY: **The** year in visual arts

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Leo Ash Evans in Casa Mañana's production of Oklahoma! at Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth in June.

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