

# Los Angeles Times



**CULTURE MONSTER**

ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

## 2011 year in review: Best in theater December 13, 2011



The theater gave us plenty to celebrate in 2011. In fact, it was a better year by theatrical standards than by most other measures. Here's what had me clapping loudest at home and abroad, followed by a plea.

**“Blackbird,”** Rogue Machine. Scottish playwright David Harrower's fierce psychodrama about the confrontation between a young woman and the man who sexually abused her when she was 12 took such unpredictable turns that Robin Larsen's unsparingly intimate staging starring Corryn Cummins and Sam Anderson left audiences questioning their sympathies and momentarily doubting their moral compasses.

**“The Book of Mormon,”** Eugene O'Neill Theatre, New York. The national tour production of this irreverent Broadway juggernaut by the creators of “South Park” and “Avenue Q” arrives at the Pantages Theatre next fall, and I can't wait to hear the doorbell chimes of those proselytizing

young men in white shirts and black ties during the show's fiendishly delightful opening number, "Hello!"

**"Circle Mirror Transformation,"** South Coast Repertory. Annie Baker, a breath of playwriting fresh air, turned a creative drama class into an obliquely profound exploration of its participants' lives, in a superb production directed by Sam Gold that rippled like a mesmerizing brook with delicate emotion.

**"The Cripple of Inishmaan,"** Kirk Douglas Theatre. Under Garry Hynes' keen direction, this revival of Martin McDonagh's jolly dark comedy about the havoc wrought in a small community when a Hollywood film crew invades one of the Aran Islands was so raucously funny that it was only after the laughter had subsided that one noticed the mercilessness with which Irish clichés were being stripped.

**"Jesus Christ Superstar,"** La Jolla Playhouse. Des McAnuff pulled off something of a minor miracle in making this Broadway-bound revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera seem as fresh and vital as when it first appeared in all its hippie glory in the early 1970s.

**"Let Me Down Easy,"** the Broad Stage in Santa Monica and the Lyceum Stage in San Diego. Anna Deavere Smith lent her protean genius to the hotly contested subject of healthcare in a stirring documentary collage that asked us to put aside our ideological conflicts and contemplate instead the vulnerability and resiliency of the all too mortal bodies that define us.

**"Peace in Our Time,"** The Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre. **The more serious side of Noel Coward's dramatic imagination provided an opportunity for the Antaeus Company to display its ensemble brilliance in a musically enhanced production directed by Casey Stangl that convincingly brought to life a counterfactual portrait of Britain under Nazi occupation.**

**"Luise Miller,"** Donmar Warehouse, London. Michael Grandage's exquisitely acted revival, featuring a radiant Felicity Jones as the doomed title character caught in political cross hairs, made this lesser-known domestic tragedy by Friedrich Schiller seem like the best-kept theatrical secret of the 18th century.

**"The Mother... With the Hat,"** Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, New York. Stephen Adly Guirgis' pummeling comedy about love and other perilous addictions was enacted with such ferocity by a cast that included Bobby Cannavale, Chris Rock and Elizabeth Rodriguez that Broadway has rarely seemed so authentically — and assaultively — streetwise before.

**"The Normal Heart,"** John Golden Theatre, New York. Larry Kramer's momentous *cri de coeur* over the laggard public response to the AIDS epidemic in this country in the early 1980s lost none of its urgency in this potent Broadway production directed by George C. Wolfe and Joel Grey that starred a devastatingly good Joe Mantello as Kramer's surrogate crusading self and a rousing Ellen Barkin as a doctor fighting a mysterious tide of death with few drugs but an enormous store of courage and empathy.

**"One Man, Two Guvnors,"** National Theatre, London. Richard Bean's British romp, inspired

by Carlo Goldoni's classic Italian comedy "The Servant of Two Masters," unleashed one of the greatest feats of clowning in recent memory in James Corden's performance that left grown men weeping with laughter at the National and will likely do the same when Nicholas Hytner's production arrives on Broadway this spring.

**Bête noire:** Can we call for a moratorium on Jane Austen stage adaptations? The Old Globe's kitschy "Jane Austen's Emma — A Musical Romantic Comedy" and South Coast Repertory's lightweight "Pride and Prejudice" suggest that film is a better vehicle for these tales, but why not just read them instead?

For more, here's an [essay on theater in 2011](#).

-- Charles McNulty

*Photo: Paul Nolan as Jesus with members of the company in "Jesus Christ Superstar." Credit: David Hou.*