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The Year In Review

Sixteen Most Outstanding Shows of 2009

Dec 15th, 2009

by [Patrick Lee](#).



I had a terrible/wonderful problem this year: there were more outstanding shows in 2009 than I knew what to do with. In previous years I'd cited as few as 8 or as many as 12 shows; this year I agonized just to get the list down to 20. Even then I was omitting shows I'd highly recommended during the year. Finally I made my peace with naming 16 shows as the year's Most Outstanding and 4 as honorable mentions.

As with the other lists, the caveat that I have yet to see *Race*, *Fela*, *The Last Cargo Cult* and *Let Me Down Easy*. As I named *Hair* as one of the best of 2008, I didn't include its Broadway transfer this year.

REVIVALS

Arguably August Wilson's finest play, **Joe Turner's Come and Gone** was finally revived on Broadway with a top-drawer production directed by Bartlett Sher. The year's first must-see was David Cromer's brilliant, stunningly executed revival of **Our Town**. Thanks to faith and trust in the material, the revival of **Finian's Rainbow** delivered the kind of old-school musical comedy lift that Broadway hadn't seen in years. **Twelfth Night**, presented by The Public as one of last Summer's free Shakespeare In The Park productions, was a hugely entertaining, buoyant joy.

GO LONG

Derek Ahonen's vibrant **The Pied Pipers of The Lower East Side** held me in rapt, fascinated attention for 3 hours. Taylor Mac's overwhelmingly fabulous and wickedly smart super-epic **The Lily's Revenge** clocked in at 5 hours with never a dull moment. The Broadway revival of the three-play cycle **The Norman**

Conquests, imported from the Old Vic, soared to dizzying comic heights and actually got funnier the longer it went on. (6? 7 hours?) As of now I've seen only the first 6 of 9 hours of Horton Foote's beautifully detailed **Orphans' Home Cycle** and that's all I need to count it among the very best not only of the year but of the decade.

TECH

Sarah Ruhl's delicately drawn **In The Next Room, or the vibrator play**, set at the dawning of the age of electricity, vibrantly captured fully rendered people who lived in the dark about sexuality. Mac Rogers' brilliant **Viral** commented on the potential for dehumanization in both fetishism and internet culture. Foundry Theatre's poetic, artistically sublime **Telephone** opened with the invention of the telephone before provoking questions about the limits of all human communication.

MORE NEW PLAYS

Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer-prized **Ruined** was that rare piece of theatre both consciousness-raising and theatrically absorbing. I was excited and moved by August Schulenburg's thought-provoking, deeply felt **The Lesser Seductions of History** which followed more than a dozen characters through each turbulent year of the 1960's. Alan Ayckbourn's **My Wonderful Day**, imported for the annual Brits Off Broadway festival, employed the comically brilliant device of contrasting the playwright's typical adult neurotics with a wise-beyond-her-years 8 year old. Joyous and poignant would be how I'd describe Colman Domingo's largely autobiographical solo play **A Boy And His Soul**. It would be reductive to call Annie Baker's **Circle Mirror Transformation** a comedy about an acting class; the play (a hit for Playwrights Horizons) is that but then more.


Honorable mentions: *MilkMilkLemonade*, Penny Arcade's *Old Queen*, Sam Mendes' production of *Winter's Tale* at BAM, and *F#@king Up Everything* at NYMF.

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2 Comments on “The Year In Review Sixteen Most Outstanding Shows of 2009”

1. [#1](#)  Linda
 on Dec 15th, 2009 at 6:50 pm

I'm loving these lists, Patrick. Very spot on.

2. [#2](#)  Rich
 on Dec 16th, 2009 at 2:08 am

Sarah Ruhl's "In The Next Room" was wonderful. Funny, yet tender. She has the magic touch. Direction by Les Waters and Sets by Annie Smart were suburb and perfectly matched to the wonderful cast. No wonder Ruhl's work is so widely produced.

Rich (Sydney, Australia)

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[Hair](#)

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[Our Town](#)

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[Superior Donuts](#)



• 2009 Interview Index

[Bobby Steggert](#)

[Maria Dizzia](#)

[Emily Shoolin](#)

[Qui Nguyen](#)

[POP: Emily Swallow, Cristen Paige, Brian Charles Rooney](#)

[Chisa Hutchinson](#)

[Michael Cyril Creighton](#)

[Robert Viagas](#)

[Love Child: Daniel Jenkins, Robert Stanton](#)

[John Treacy Egan](#)

[August Schulenburg](#)

[Ann Marie Healy](#)

[Kate Baldwin](#)

[Broke-ology: Alano Miller, Francois Battiste](#)

[Kate Wetherhead](#)

[Kelli Barrett](#)

[Deirdre O'Connell](#)

[Malcolm Gets](#)

[Charlayne Woodard](#)

[Herbert Keyser](#)

[Jason Butler Harner](#)

[Colman Domingo](#)

[Michael Phillis](#)

[Yako Miyamoto](#)

[Michael Feinstein](#)
[Jon Michael Hill](#)
[Stage Managers: Ken McGee, Julie Baldauff, Tom Reynolds](#)
[Caissie Levy](#)
[Viral: Amy Lynn Stewart, Rebecca Comtois](#)
[The Boys Upstairs: Nic Cory, Joel T. Bauer, Kristen Alexzander Griffith, David A. Rudd](#)
[Adam Driver](#)
[Andrew Samonsky](#)
[Fringe 8: Nicholas Gray, Mary Adkins, Mac Rogers](#)
[Fringe 7: Erin Judge, Jon Galvez, Tim J. MacMillan](#)
[Fringe 6: Paul Schultz, Ben Knox, Michael Chartier](#)
[Derek Ahonen](#)
[Fringe 5: Elizabeth Audley, Matt Oberg, Libby Skala](#)
[Reno](#)
[Fringe 4: Monica Flory, Andrew Unterberg, Jonathan L. Davidson](#)
[Fringe 3: Ren Casey, Phil Lebovits, Ryann Ferguson](#)
[Fringe 2: Jason Mitchell, Naomi McDougall Jones, Greg Ayers](#)
[Agents: Ben Sands, Michael Goddard, Christopher Freer](#)
[Fringe 1: Michael Edison Hayden, Daniel McCoy, Louise Flory](#)
[Jeffery Self & Cole Escola](#)
[Penny Arcade](#)
[Portia](#)
[Andrea Reese](#)
[Ken Davenport](#)
[SPF: Ken Urban, Kevin Christopher Snipes, Rick Viede](#)
[Cristin Milioti](#)
[John Kelly](#)
[Stew](#)
[Swings: Michaeljon Slinger, Alejandra Reyes, Mitch Dean](#)
[A-D Fest: Gyda Arber, James Comtois, Richard Lovejoy](#)
[Euan Morton](#)
[Gavin Lawrence](#)
[Scott Alan](#)
[Hunter Bell](#)
[Megan Hilty](#)
[Andre Holland](#)
[Tim Donoghue](#)
[Donna Lynne Champlin](#)
[Joe Iconis](#)
[Nick Jones](#)
[Wesley Taylor](#)
[Sara Chase](#)
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[Jessica Dickey](#)



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- [Me2ism](#)
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- [Modern Fabulosity](#)
- [Modern Tonic](#)
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- [Mr. Excitement](#)
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 - [Ryan J. Davis](#)
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 - [Stage Rush](#)
 - [Steve On Broadway](#)
 - [Surplus](#)
 - [The Beef](#)
 - [The Playgoer](#)
 - [Tynan's Anger](#)
 - [Visible Soul](#)
 - [The Wicked Stage](#)
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 - [Theatre Notes](#)
 - [Theatre Snobbery At Its Finest](#)
 - [Third Row Mezzanine](#)
 - [\[title of show\]](#)
 - [Two Can Anne](#)
 - [Usher Nonsense](#)
 - [What's Good/What Blows](#)
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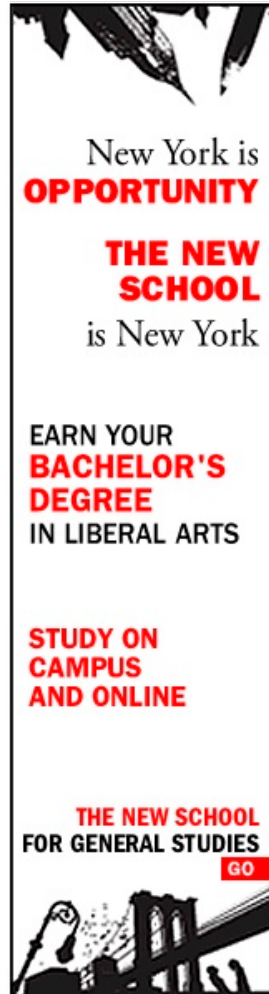
PATRICK LEE
New York, New York

I'm a member of the [Outer Critics Circle](#), and serve as Awards Director of the [Independent Theater Bloggers Association](#). I'm also a regular contributor to [Theatermania](#) and [TDF](#), a GLAAD Media Award juror, and co-writer of the [Show Showdown](#) blog. More than anything I'm a huge life-long theatre fan who sees about 250 shows a year. [Email me.](#)



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Post No Bills, In The Next Room or the vibrator play, Ragtime, The Lily's Revenge, Granada, The Lesser Seductions of History, Kiss Me On The Mouth, Embraceable Me
- [October - September 2009](#)
Brighton Beach Memoirs, Memphis, After Miss Julie, Wishful Drinking, Seeing Stars, Hamlet, Oleanna, Gay Bride of Frankenstein, Max Understood, Kiss of The Spider Woman, A Steady Rain, Superior Donuts, Circle Mirror Transformation, MilkMilkLemonade, Powerhouse
- [August 2009](#)
The Crow Mill, Dancing With Abandon, all over, Population 8, Willy Nilly, May-December with The Nose And Clammy, Two On The Aisle Three In A Van, Harold Pinter Pair, Gutter Star, Remission, How Now Dow Jones, Look After You, Dolls, Citizen Ruth, Adventures of Alvin Sputnik, The Boys Upstairs, Viral, Burn The Floor, Wildflower
- [June 2009](#)
Archbishop Supreme Tartuffe, Paved Paradise Redux, The Wiz, Stunning, Someone In Florida Loves Me, Twelfth Night, The Amish Project, Things Of Dry Hours, Coraline, Next Fall
- [May 2009](#)
Make Me, Pure Confidence, 10 Things To Do Before I Die, Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson, The Philanthropist, The Temperamentals, The Norman Conquests, The Dishwashers, The Merchant Of Venice, Joe Turner's Come And Gone, Waiting For Godot, The Gingerbread House
- [April 2009](#)
Desire Under The Elms, Pretty Theft, The Singing Forest, Why Torture Is Wrong (And The People Who Love Them), Exit Cuckoo, Mary Stuart, Blithe Spirit, reasons to be pretty, Chasing Manet, The Toxic Avenger Musical, Rock Of Ages, Hair
- [March 2009](#)
Happiness, Impressionism, Henri Gabler, West Side Story, Zooman And The Sign, God Of Carnage, Incident At Vichy, Thirst: A Spell For Christabell, Our Town, 33 Variations, A Little Night Music, Christine Jorgensen Reveals, Distracted, The Savannah Disputation
- [February 2009](#)
Kaspar Hauser, The Winter's Tale, That Pretty Pretty or The Rape Play, Telephone, The Book of Lambert, Shipwrecked!: An Entertainment, Uncle Vanya, Ruined, The American Plan, Flyovers, The Third Story, Sixty Miles To Silver Lake
- [January 2009](#)
Terre Haute, Cornbury: The Queen's Governor, Aristocrats, Leaves Of Glass, The Cherry Orchard, A Little Night Music, Architecting, Shrek, Die Roten Punkte: Super Musikant, Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas



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- [The Year In Review Sixteen Most Outstanding Shows of 2009](#)
- [The Year In Review Thirty Outstanding Performances of 2009](#)

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- [contest](#)
- [interview](#)
- [Review](#)

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- [December 2009](#)
- [November 2009](#)
- [October 2009](#)
- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)

- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)
- [July 2008](#)
- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
- [March 2008](#)
- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)
- [October 2007](#)
- [September 2007](#)
- [August 2007](#)
- [July 2007](#)
- [June 2007](#)
- [May 2007](#)
- [April 2007](#)
- [March 2007](#)
- [February 2007](#)
- [January 2007](#)
- [December 2006](#)
- [November 2006](#)
- [October 2006](#)
- [September 2006](#)
- [August 2006](#)
- [July 2006](#)
- [June 2006](#)
- [May 2006](#)
- [April 2006](#)
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- [February 2006](#)
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