

Stage Magic

Maxed Out in the Houston Theater District!

OR

Stage Presence

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Story by Randy Mallory

“All the world’s a stage,” William Shakespeare penned, “and all the men and women merely players.”

If that’s true, then last fall I cast myself in one heck of a role. My motivation? Pack as many shows as possible into one weekend in the Houston Theater District. A clear call for method acting: Be the audience, just be the audience!

Acting requires preparation, so I boned up on the Bayou City’s stage presence. Opera, ballet, music, theater—with major resident groups in all four disciplines, Houston is one of few American cities so artistically endowed. In fact, it ranks second only to New York City in number of theater seats concentrated downtown—that’s more than 13,000 seats in a half dozen venues an easy walk apart. Arias, pas de deux, symphonies, and soliloquies annually attract two million fans to downtown’s north end.

The theater district offers so many performances, in fact, that in two days I could max out on four shows—a Broadway musical, symphony performance, opera, and classic play (darn it, the ballet was in rehearsal). My four-act weekend even played out with a few show surprises.

ACT ONE: TUTS, TUTS

My entrance to the theater district—break a leg, right?—was on foot down Smith Street from my hotel, one of a dozen close-in lodgings. In Hermann Square at McKinney Street, I happened

upon the annual Asian American Festival in progress around the reflecting pool at city hall. Indian dancers flowed across the open stage in colorful costumes, proffering a graceful prelude to my theatrical weekend. In the next block, a minor street drama pulled me into Tranquility Park. Teenaged skateboarders skidded down heavy metal handrails as fellow bit players videotaped the action.

At the park's other end I rushed across Bagby Street into the looming glass lobby of the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. Inside the center's 2,650-seat Sarofin Hall, I admired the midnight-blue walls, gold-leaf columns, and curved upper levels. The house lights dimmed, and the curtain opened on the 2 p.m. showing of *Dreamgirls*. I had not seen the 1981 Tony-winning Broadway musical, but I *had* grooved to the Sixties sounds of The Supremes, a girl group like the musical's Dreamettes. The fictional group rises to the top of the charts only to experience a break-up and, predictably, a kiss-and-make-up reunion. Clever lighting, on-the-fly set changes, and 30 toe-tappin' tunes rekindled the magic of Motown for me.

Dreamgirls was produced by the musical theater organization, Theatre Under the Stars. TUTS began in 1968 by staging free musicals at Hermann Park's Miller Outdoor Theatre...hence its al fresco name. After the \$100 million Hobby Center debuted in 2002, TUTS moved its six-show subscription season inside, while continuing free summer shows in the park.

Sarofin Hall stages another half-dozen Broadway musicals each year through Broadway in Houston, the local affiliate of Broadway Across America, a national show producer. Hobby Center's 500-seat Zilkha Hall stages shows of more than a dozen non-profit local groups—ranging from musicals by Masquerade Theatre to dances by the Colombian Folkloric Ballet—throughs the center's Uniquely Houston program.

ACT TWO: Symphonic Spring

Act Two opened three blocks away at Jones Hall. In front of the hall in Jones Plaza, an unexpected intermission turned up. The annual Houston Women's Festival was cranking into high gear, so I paused to hear jazz singer Kellye Gray's voice echo off adjacent buildings.

One of those buildings, Bayou Place, caught my eye. A 35-foot replica of Texas blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughn's guitar rose from atop the Hard Rock Café, one of the entertainment complex's several eateries. Bayou Place also features the eight-screen Angelika Film Center (independent and first-run films) and the 2,400-seat Verizon Wireless Theater (concerts and roller derby).

Outside Verizon, a crowd wearing Sammy Hagar t-shirts queued up for the rocker's show. I slipped through the throng into the Hard Rock for a big burger and beer. From my bar stool I admired guitars on display from Bob Dylan, Bo Diddley, and Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead—plus Elton John's iconic Statue of Liberty show costume.

A classical music icon—my favorite American composer, Aaron Copland—was on my mind as I walked into venerable Jones Hall.

The Houston Symphony was already half a century old when Jones Hall opened in 1966 as the symphony's new home. At the same time, the Society for the Performing Arts formed to help keep the 2,900-seat hall booked year-round. The SPA is now the Southwest's largest independent, non-profit performance organization, offering two dozen music, dance, and theater productions annually at Jones Hall and nearby Wortham Center.

From my red velvet orchestra section seat, I got a close view of the Houston Symphony's 7 p.m. performance of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, followed by his signature *Fanfare for the Common Man (Third Symphony)*. Only 13 instruments performed *Appalachian Spring*, as originally scored for the 1944 Martha Graham ballet. Such spare orchestration of Copland's simple melodies conjured up a soft dawn in a pine forest. By contrast, the full orchestral treatment of

Fanfare for the Common Man—horns in unison and kettledrum pounding—transported my thoughts to a dramatic mountain vista.

The hotel van transported me back to the hotel after the show, as a bright half-moon hung between downtown skyscrapers as if a set prop.

ACT THREE: Operatic Ball

Enroute to Act Three the next day, I passed sightseers in a horse-drawn white carriage clip-clopping down Prairie Street near Wortham Theater Center, the venue for my 2 p.m. opera.

Built with \$70 million of donations raised, amazingly, during the 1980s oil bust, the Wortham remains a tribute to local commitment to the arts. Inside the imposing pink-brick structure I rubbed elbows with opera devotees, most dressed to the nines, but also average Joes (and Jills) like me. No wonder. Founded in 1955, the Houston Grand Opera's reputation rests not only on producing world-class new works (36 world premieres and seven American premieres since 1973), but also on attracting diverse audiences to classic operas.

I lucked into an aisle seat in the Wortham's 2,400-seat Brown Theater, near the large stage and half-sunken orchestra pit. My seatmate, opera glasses in hand, pegged me as a greenhorn and kindly explained that the narrow electronic panel above the stage displays surtitles, the English translations of the Italian libretto.

The surtitles made it easy to follow the nonstop action—all three hours, nine minutes—of Giuseppe Verdi's *A Masked Ball*. Its tragic story interweaves a love triangle and a royal assassination diabolically dispatched during a masked ball. The leading roles and the 48-member chorus were elaborately dressed and masked as they danced and sang across a sparse stage. The nondescript setting made the theme seem timeless. In the finale, the dying king faces his fate heroically. His acceptance and Verdi's beautiful music suggested to me that the human spirit can triumph over tragedy.

The Wortham is also home to the Houston Ballet, the nation's fifth largest ballet troupe. In fact, the center's two halls—Brown Theater and Cullen Theater—each feature two floors. A lower floor handles heavy operatic sets, and a retractable upper floor is more resilient for ballet dancers. The Wortham's 1,100-seat Cullen Theater stages smaller operas, ballets, and touring shows, as well as chamber music and jazz productions by Da Camera of Houston.

ACT FOUR: Arsenic and Old Laughs

I had a couple of hours interlude before my final show at the Alley Theatre. So I followed other theater-goers around the corner to Birraporetti's, a self-proclaimed "Great Italian Restaurant...and heck of an Irish Bar!" So as not to rewrite the script, I enjoyed a classic lasagna and washed it down with Guinness Stout...all to the musical backdrop of a jazz flutist.

The Alley Theatre began six decades ago as a small community theater housed in a dance studio. In 1969 it moved to its modernistic concrete home with 824-seat thrust stage and 310-seat performance space. The smaller hall and rehearsal and production rooms were inundated by Tropical Storm Allison in 2001. The stage was rebuilt as was a state-of-the-art, 75,000-square-foot production facility atop a structure behind the theater. That's critical, because the Alley is a rare act among theaters—a true resident repertory company employing actors, designers, artisans, and craftspeople year-round.

Mother Nature performed quite a warm-up act before I entered the Alley for my 7:30 p.m. show. As theater patrons scurried about Jones Plaza, overhead a blue and tangerine sunset silhouetted a veritable cloud of starlings swarming into trees for a night's rest.

I'm sure the birds didn't sleep a wink, at least not until the laughing subsided from the Alley's production of the 1940s Broadway and film hit, *Arsenic & Old Lace*. You probably know the story by playwright Joseph Kesselring. Two sweet old ladies, the Brewster sisters, seem like model citizens, while secretly poisoning lonely old men—for their own good, of course—with arsenic-

laced homemade elderberry wine. The eccentric plot throws in two nephews—one who believes he's Teddy Roosevelt and one trying to hide the dirty deeds. The playbill calls the piece "American Screwball Comedy," a perfect description for slapstick comedy almost acrobatic in its fast-paced performance.

My exit—stage left—from a fast-paced weekend of acting, singing, and playing came only after I had packed 10 solid hours of stage magic into two days. In fact, I've been considering a curtain call. I'm considering a *three-day* weekend of maxed-out performance fun in the Houston Theater District!

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essentials HOUSTON THEATER DISTRICT

The Houston Theater District is located in the northern end of downtown Houston. Nine performing arts groups stage performances in four major halls an easy walk apart: Hobby Center (800 Bagby St.), Wortham Theater Center (501 Texas Ave.), Jones Hall (615 Louisiana St.), and Alley Theatre (615 Texas Ave.). In addition, Bayou Place entertainment complex (500 Texas St.) houses the Verizon Wireless Theater and the Angelika Film Center.

For details, contact the Houston Theater District (658-8938, www.houstontheaterdistrict.org).

Following are opening shows for the 2008-2009 season and phone numbers for tickets. **All dates are 2008; the area code is 713.**

Alley Theatre, *OPENING SHOW TBA* (220-5700; www.alleytheatre.org). The Alley also offers backstage tours each month.

Theatre Under The Stars, Sept. 16-28, *Oprah Winfrey Presents The Color Purple* (558.2600, www.tuts.com)

Houston Symphony, Aug. 29-31, Big Band Pops Concert, Sept. 6, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and Sept. 12-14, Dvorak's *New World Symphony* (224-7575, www.houstonsymphony.org)

Houston Ballet, Sept. 4, 6-7, 12-14, *Onegin* and Sept. 18, 20-21, 26-28, Classically Modern featuring various performances (227-2787, www.houstonballet.org)

Houston Grand Opera, Oct. 17, 19, 24, 26, 29, and Nov. 1, Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* and Oct. 30, Nov. 2, 8, 12, and 14, Berlioz's *Beatrice and Benedict* (228-6737, www.houstongrandopera.org)

Cadillac Broadway Across America–Houston, Oct. 21–Nov. 2, *Frost/Nixon* (622-7469, www.broadwayacrossamerica.com/Houston)

Uniquely Houston, Aug. 8, *Little Women* (315-2413, www.thehobbycenter.org)

Da Camera of Houston, Oct. 4, Mozart's *String Quintet in C Major, K. 515* and *Divertimento for string trio in E-flat Major, K. 563* (524-5050, www.dacamera.com)

Society for the Performing Arts, Oct. 4, Compania Flamenco José Porcel and Oct. 21, David Sedaris (227-4SPA, www.spahouston.org)

Verizon Wireless Theater, 230-1600, www.verizonwirelesstheater.com: OPENING SHOW TBA

...wrote. A block from Verizon is another entertainment complex, the **Downtown Aquarium** (410 Bagby St., 223-3474, www.aquariumrestaurants.com), with a Ferris Wheel, restaurant, and half-million-gallon aquarium.

Other venues and events:

Angelika Film Center, 225-5232, angelikafilmcenter.com.

Asian American Festival, Oct. 11-12, Hermann Park, 861-8270, www.asianfestivalhouston.com.

Houston Women's Festival, Oct. 25, Jones Plaza, www.hwfestival.org.

Hard Rock Cafe, 502 Texas St., 227-1392, www.hardrock.com.

Birraporetti's, 500 Louisiana St., 224-5870, www.birrarestaurant.com.

SIDEBAR

Theater Sneak a Peek

On August 24, 2008 from noon until 5 p.m. the Houston Theater District's four main venues—the Alley Theatre, Wortham Center, Jones Hall, and Hobby Center—fill with 15,000 or so theater-goers for the 15th annual Open House. The family-oriented event offers previews of the 2008-2009 theater season, as well as special deals on season subscriptions, behind-the-scenes tours, and the chance to meet performers.

The Alley Theater offers backstage tours and on-stage sketches from upcoming shows. Kids also get the chance to dress up in costumes from past shows. The Houston Symphony will perform selected pieces, and kids can try out brass, string, or wind instruments in the orchestra's "Instrument Petting Zoo." Costumed dancers from the Houston Ballet will perform then pose for photos with visitors. Other groups previewing new season shows include Theater Under the Stars, the Houston Grand Opera, the Society for the Performing Arts, Uniquely Houston, and Da Camera of Houston.

The Open House also boasts a "Taste of Downtown" culinary event. Each venue offers food samples prepared by chefs from theater district restaurants. Visitors also can enjoy free boat tours of the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade, a new waterfront park along the theater district stretch of Buffalo Bayou.

For details contact the Houston Theater District, 713/658-8938, www.houstontheaterdistrict.org.

RESOURCES

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