

Stage Magic
Two Days, Four Shows in the Houston Theater District

Stage Presence

Title to come (MAXED OUT SEEMS TO SUGGEST YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH AND ARE READY TO GO HOME)

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 one weekend last fall I cast myself in one heck of a role. My objective? To learn as much as I could about Houston's vibrant 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. PLEASE ADD SOMETHING IN THIS PARAGRAPH—A QUOTE FROM A PRODUCER, WRITER, PERFORMER—THAT PROVIDES SOME CONTEXT. WHERE DOES THE THEATER DISTRICT FIT INTO HOUSTON'S ENTERTAINMENT WORLD? CAN YOU GIVE US SOME SENSE THAT IT'S THE MAINSTREAM WING OF

HOUSTON'S ART SCENE? DO PRODUCERS LOVE TO BRING THEIR SHOWS TO HOUSTON BECAUSE SUCH AND SUCH?

“As Houston has grown over the past decades, so has its performing arts community, with local productions and traveling shows in all disciplines,” reports Everett Evans, theater critic for the *Houston Post*. “The crown jewels of the downtown theater district—the Houston Grand Opera, Houston Symphony, Houston Ballet, and the Alley Theater—are regarded as world-class resident companies with the same high level of sustained national prestige.”

The theater district offers so many **highbrow** performances, in fact, that in two days I managed to take in 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 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, offering a graceful prelude to my theatrical weekend. In the next block, a minor street drama pulled me into Tranquility Park. Teenaged skateboarders rattled 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,

the midnight-blue walls, gold-leaf columns, and curved upper levels create an elegant atmosphere. TWEAKED THIS—**OKAY**, OR IS IT ANOTHER TYPE OF ATMOSPHERE? The house lights dimmed, and the curtain opened on the afternoon showing of *Dreamgirls*. I had not seen the 1981 Tony-winning Broadway musical or the recent hit movie starting (**shouldn't this be starring...**) Houston's own Beyoncé Knowles, but I *had* grooved to the Sixties sounds of The Supremes, the real-life girl group that inspired the play's story. In the production, the fictional group—the Dreamettes—rises to the top of the charts only to experience a break-up and, ultimately, a kiss-and-make-up reunion. Clever lighting, on-the-fly set changes, and 30 **POWERFUL? SOULFUL?** tunes rekindled the magic of Motown for me.

Dreamgirls was produced by the musical theater organization known as 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..

THIS GRAPH SEEMS LISTY AND BETTER SUITED FOR ESSENTIALS, OR DELETE. PLEASE WEIGH IN. *Mentions such as this focus on performance organizations thought of as among the nine main theater district groups. They need to be included somewhere, so I chose putting them in with the venue they call home or use most often. Moving to 'essentials' works fine for me and would make for more flowing copy, I'm sure.* Sarofim 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 Zilkhia 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—through 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 **silky** ADJECTIVE? EXPRESSIVE? voice echo off adjacent buildings.

One of those buildings, ~~ADJECTIVE OR BRIEF DESCRIPTION~~ Bayou Place, caught my eye. WHY’D IT CATCH YOUR EYE, IN OTHER WORDS? **because atop one end of the boxy building rose a** 35-foot replica of Texas blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughan’s guitar. **It pinpointed** 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). WHAT ABOUT: ANGELIKA FILM CENTER, A POPULAR DATE-NIGHT SPOT FOR INDEPENDENT AND FIRST RUN FILMS, **OKAY** AND THE THEATER, BRIEFLY DESCRIBE. ...**Verizon Wireless Theater, a multipurpose venue that hosts events ranging from rock stage shows to 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 **A BIGGER?** beer. From my barstool I admired displays of guitars OWNED BY? PLAYED

BY? DONATED BY? SIGNED BY? *Hard Rock gets donations of rock memorabilia and buys some...part of what they call the world's largest collection of rock memorabilia...don't know which of these is donated or bought...says 'used by' would be safe...* Bob Dylan, Bo Diddley, and Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead—plus Elton John's flamboyant 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. LET'S JUST SAY THAT COPLAND WAS PLAYING THAT NIGHT AND YOU WERE EXCITED TO SEE HIM. WAS THIS YOUR FIRST TIME? *This was my first time in the venue, if that's what you're asking. I had heard Copland compositions before...*

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 the nearby Wortham Center.

From my red velvet orchestra section seat, I got a close view of the Houston Symphony's evening 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.

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 wearing regular street clothes like me. 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 of Giuseppe Verdi's three-hour *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 (MEANING? SAY WHAT THEY WORE? *The costumes were often elaborate, also involving gold-colored masks in the 'ball' scenes...all this contrasted well with a relatively unadorned stage setting; you get an idea of it from the small pic at:*

<http://www.houstongrandopera.org/page.aspx?pageid=12016969>) 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 Riccardo** faces his fate **slumped to the stage, surrounded by the chorus dressed in scarlet robes and golden masks and crowns.**

His song of forgiveness blends with Verdi's beautiful music **to suggest** that the human spirit can triumph over tragedy. ANYTHING YOU COULD ADD ABOUT WHAT THE VOICES SOUND LIKE? THE COSTUMES? DID THIS AFFECT YOU IN ANY WAY?

Again here I've added another group I did not see...but it's importance and the tie-in with the building design might warrant leaving here. 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 yet another arts organization, 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.

THIS PARAGRAPH SEEMS CHOPPY. COULD YOU SMOOTH IT OUT SOME, VARY THE SENTENCE STRUCTURE? The Alley Theatre began six decades ago as a small community theater housed in a dance studio. In 1969 it moved to **the current modernistic concrete home. Major shows are staged in the 824-seat Hubbard Stage, a "thrust" stage which brings the action out close to the audience. The Alley's second stage, the 310-seat Neuhaus Stage, holds smaller, more experimental productions. In 2001 Tropical Storm Allison inundated the Neuhaus, which was quickly rebuilt. The storm also destroyed the theater's rehearsal and production spaces. The Alley overcame that tragedy by turning the top five stories of an adjacent parking garage—originally reserved for a third stage but used for theater storage—into a state-of-the-art, 75,000-square-foot production facility and offices. The 60-foot-high scene shop is so large that each upcoming production's set can be constructed and tested, then quickly disassembled and reassembled in the nearby theater when the current show closes. Such quick-change capacity permits a busy show schedule. And that's important because the Alley is a rare act among regional 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 THE 7:30 p.m. show. As theater patrons scurried about Jones Plaza, overhead a blue and tangerine sunset silhouetted a 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 financial gain—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 a slapstick comedy that seems almost acrobatic in its rapid pace.

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 returning for a *three-day* weekend of performance fun in the Houston Theater District.

COULD YOU GIVE US A FUN ANECDOTE SOMEWHERE, ALONG THE LINES OF “WHEN PHANTOM/TONY BENNETT/THE RUSSIAN BALLET PLAYED HERE, SUCH AND SUCH HAPPENED. THIS COULD EARLY IN THE STORY, POSSIBLY, PART OF SETTING THE SCENE? *I've tried to focus on this one 'Weekend of performance fun in the Houston Theater District' so I'm not sure how an anecdote of something memorable from the past would help set that scene. I've tried to make it a*

light, rollicking account, but if that's not evident to you early on, maybe I need to flesh out something.

RANDY MALLORY has long enjoyed Houston's rich visual arts heritage found in its famous Museum District. This was his first big dose of Houston's vibrant theater scene. Randy plays out many of his Texas experiences on his website (www.RandyMallory.com).

If possible, I'd like to make it standard to mention my website...thanks.