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A&E 2009: The year in review

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Did someone say something about a recession?

The down economy didn't do much to keep people from packing area theaters and concert venues this year.

Comedian/puppeteer Jeff Dunham brought one of the largest crowds in years to the Prairie Capital Convention Center, and Jerry Seinfeld nearly sold out his third Sangamon Auditorium appearance this decade.

And the Illinois State Fair did reasonably well with a scaled-back Grandstand lineup, with four of the five concerts attracting more than 5,000 fans (only two of last year's six concerts were so popular).

Even local companies had to add shows to accommodate unexpected demand — Springfield Theatre Center added performances of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" and "Our American Cousin."

And in the midst of a financial crisis in which officials from the Hoogland Center for the Arts worried whether they would be able to pay the mortgage in 2010, the venue found enough success with "Nonsense" that the show was revived for a second two-weekend run.

Beyond the bottom line, there were also plenty of artistic and entertainment successes. Here are some of the highlights:

'Our American Cousin'

Springfield Theatre Centre

Feb. 5, Hoogland Center for the Arts

As the story goes, John Wilkes Booth knew the play well and waited until a specific punch line to shoot Abraham Lincoln, hoping the sound of laughter would drown out his gunshot.

No one was laughing when Matthew Husky spoke the line, but several people jumped when the sound of a gunshot rang out. All at once, the stage went dark, the president's box was bathed in red light, and Husky froze in place.

We learn in school that Lincoln was killed while watching a play. But history lessons cannot impart the weight of what it must have been like to be in a theater, five days after Lee surrendered to Grant at the Appomattox Courthouse, and have the president of the United States shot in the head before your very eyes.

'Rod Blagojevich, Superstar!'

The Second City

Feb. 10, The Second City, e.t.c. (and later at the Hoogland Center for the Arts)

The opening song of The Second City's musical "Rod Blagojevich Superstar!" asks a question that's been on everyone's mind for more than a year.

"Blagojevich, Superstar! Are you as nuts as we think you are?"

Blagojevich may be a disgraced former governor, but he's our disgraced former governor. And it took an Illinois group — a Chicago group — to finally satirize him well.

'As You Like It'

UIS Theatre

April 17, Studio Theatre, University of Illinois Springfield

Aasne Vigesaa, playing the leading role of Rosalind, gave the best performance by an actor I've seen in Springfield.

Watch as, when her character is disguised as a boy, she rapidly yet subtly shifts between the affects of a male and female. Or when her character resorts to cartoonish efforts to repel the advances of the shepherdess Phoebe (Sarah Clinch), who falls in love with Rosalind's male persona.

That's not to slight the rest of the cast. With 18 actors in 22 roles, "As You Like It" requires a deep bench.

'The Producers'

Springfield Muni Opera

June 26, The Muni

As Max, Gus Gordon was the show's bawdy heart, a funny and commanding presence in almost every scene he was in.

Gordon is well-known to local theater audiences and just about everyone else in town as the chief meteorologist at WICS-TV (Channel 20). Part of the thrill of seeing him perform comes from the juxtaposition of his reserved on-air persona with Max's leering, swearing, obscene-gesturing ways.

'The Last Five Years'

Hoogland Center for the Arts in association with Gordon Productions

July 24, Hoogland Center for the Arts

If you think local theater companies rarely take chances, if you roll your eyes when you hear we'll be treated to the umpteenth staging of the same old mid-century musicals, if you care as much about the future of musical theater as its past — you owe it to yourself to

support this kind of show.

Kelly Clarkson

Aug. 15, Illinois State Fair

For many of the 5,067 people who went to the Grandstand concert — many, if not a majority, of them young women — Kelly is just like us. A nice young woman with girl-next-door appeal who, with a combination of luck and talent, went from nobody to star in the blink of an “American Idol” season.

Josh Turner

Aug. 16, Illinois State Fair

Josh Turner has a bass voice that must be heard to be believed, but he didn’t begin to show what he could do until the third song of his set.

Turner was the closing act of a youthful country triple bill the first Sunday night at the Illinois State Fair Grandstand.

Partway through that third song, “Backwoods Boy,” the music came to an abrupt halt and the lights went out. Then Turner sang a few solo notes, dropping his voice to subterranean depths before bending the note back to the surface. He sounded as deep as a Harley but polished as the leather on a new pair of boots.

Heart

Aug. 22, Illinois State Fair

Don’t ever let anyone tell you that Ann and Nancy Wilson of Heart are two of the greatest female rockers who ever lived.

At the final state fair Grandstand concert of the year, they showed they’re two of the greatest rockers who ever lived — period.

The duo shredded more than a dozen of their own hits and a handful of covers for a crowd of 8,694, the biggest by more than 1,000 among this year’s five Grandstand shows.

After so many disappointing concerts by aging rockers — Huey Lewis’ inability to hit the high notes at last year’s state fair springs to mind — it bears mentioning that both Ann and Nancy Wilson sounded as great as ever.

Jerry Seinfeld

Oct. 9, Sangamon Auditorium

Seinfeld’s brand of observational comedy has become so popular, so common, that it’s easy to forget how hard it is to do it really well.

I rolled my eyes when Seinfeld began a bit about a commercial for a pharmaceutical product that instructs clients to call their doctor if a certain side effect lasts for more than four hours. That joke has been hacked to death by every comic and funny guy in your office, so why would Seinfeld choose such a well-trod path?

Because he had something new to say about it. New, fresh and so funny I couldn’t see my notes for laughing so hard by the end of the bit.

Four hours? “I’m making some calls in the third hour,” Seinfeld said, adding that he wants to know what a doctor can do about that particular problem before he “puts on a poncho and waddles down there.”

‘The Rocky Horror Show’

Hoogland Center for the Arts in association with ADHD Productions

Oct. 23, Hoogland Center for the Arts

“You freaks ready to have some fun?” an usherette shouts to the audience during the opening number. Many of the audience members showed up in costume and answered with a resounding chorus of screams and whoops.

Few theater works demand that the actors endure countless insults hurled from the audience almost every minute they’re on stage. In their underwear.

It’s all part of the fun, and the actors — to their credit — appeared unfazed.

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