

18 greatest moments on New York stages in 2019

December 21, 2019 by [Jonathan Mandell](https://dctheatrescene.com/author/jonathan-mandell/) (<https://dctheatrescene.com/author/jonathan-mandell/>)

In a year that has ended so dramatically *off-stage*, and during which so many people talked dismissively about “political theater” — when they didn’t mean anything actually happening in a work of art — it’s good to celebrate the memorable moments that happened nightly on New York stages.

These were moments that were memorable as a visual spectacle or a verbal tickle or an emotional punch, moments that meant something because of off-stage events, or meant nothing but stayed with you nevertheless. Some moments were memorable because they were lovely; some because they were ugly. There were enough memorable moments this year in so many shows (even some one might not otherwise have cared for) that the list below is just a sample — as was the one last year, (<https://newyorktheater.me/2018/12/30/memorable-moments-on-stage-in-2018/>) and the year before that, (<https://newyorktheater.me/2017/12/28/memorable-moments-on-stage-in-2017/>) and the year before that (<https://newyorktheater.me/2016/12/30/memorable-moments-on-stage-in-2016/>). I’m forced to focus on the moments with human actors — leaving out the unforgettable moments involving a live goat, a rabbit, and most of the puppets, though, in once case, I couldn’t resist breaking that rule.

Some of the moments on stage were so special that the producers didn’t provide photos; in such cases, I use a different photo from that show.

4.8 Psychosis



4.48 *Psychosis*, an opera based on Sarah Kane's play about her mental illness, featured this exchange, the words projected onto the back wall as the performers sang them:

With the words projected onto the back wall, the psychiatrist had the following exchange with the patient:

“Have you made any plans?

Take an overdose, slash my wrists then hang myself.

All those things together?

It couldn't possibly be misconstrued as a cry for help.”

Ain't No Mo'



In *Ain't No Mo'*, the play by Jordan E. Cooper, making his Off-Broadway debut as both a playwright and an actor, African-Americans are leaving the United States en masse on flights to Africa. In the final scene, Cooper, as pink-garbed stewardess Peaches, is left behind. The final stream-of-consciousness monologue, accompanied by the voices of famous black Americans –Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, James Brown, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X — is a metaphor for the black experience in America, as Peaches can't uproot the bag of black history, and is left defeated, stripped down to a bare black man, shouting “Give it back, give it back.”

Ashes



Ashes, a haunting work of theatre that told the real-life story of an arsonist, was peopled with dozens of characters — all but the narrator were puppets. In one of many astounding moments of magic, the narrator’s father (a puppet) who is dying, smokes a cigarette, and exhales the smoke, which then curls up into the air and magically forms the text: “The last thing I did to my father was lie to him.”

Alice By Heart



In *Alice By Heart*, the entire colorfully-clad cast turned into a single giant caterpillar

Deluge



In an arresting moment in *Deluge*, a tall white dancer dressed in black tossed up a short black dancer dressed in red, accompanied by a score that included recordings of some of the most fulsome public comments by Donald Trump and other politicians (“These are animals... Pocahontas...legitimate rape...”)

The dance company whose members wrote, choreographed and performed this remarkable piece is called Loco-Motion Dance Theater for Children, and they were performing as part of the 16th annual Rebel Verses Youth Arts Festival, an exciting and inspiring show presenting artists ages 13 to 19 from some dozen youth theater companies. The festival was almost as impressive for what was not on stage as for what was: There were no teenage cliques, no obsession with popularity. It was not the standard depiction of teenagers in even well-meaning shows on Broadway

Dragon Spring Phoenix Rise



Dragon Spring Phoenix Rise is a kung-fu musical that was the inaugural show in the mammoth McCourt Theater during the inaugural season of The Shed, the arts center that's part of the gleaming and sterile new Hudson Yards neighborhood. The musical took advantage of the space, when the performers soared up 80 feet in the air for aerial acrobatics and then back down again.

Hadestown



Andre De Shields commands the stage in *Hadestown* from the get-go. The show begins in complete silence as the rest of the cast watches Hermes, in his elegant, grey silk suit, slide across the stage, pause, and open a button to show a loud and splendid vest, before trombone player Briane Drye lets out a blast from jazz heaven and De Shields launches into the get-down “Road to Hell.” It’s the quietest, and most mesmerizing, opening of any show on Broadway.

Jagged Little Pill



In “You Oughta Know,” the exhilarating show-stopping number from *Jagged Little Pill*, Jo confronts her girlfriend Jackie, whom she had discovered in bed with a new boy in their high school named Phoenix:

“Every time you speak his name,
does he know how you told me you’d be there until you died.
Til you died, but you’re still alive...you, you, you oughta know. You, you, you, you...”

As Jo, Lauren Patten's delivery of the song is so forceful and electric that it prompted a standing ovation.

Moulin Rouge



Moulin Rouge was thrilling from the moment you entered the theater... until about ten minutes after it began. That's because the brightest star in this stage adaptation of Baz Luhrmann's 2001 movie musical is designer Derek McLane's set. Before we even take our seats, it envelopes us in love, or at least in lots of red – a huge red neon “Moulin Rouge” sign above red lights in the shape of a half a dozen hearts nestled lovingly within each other, a full-sized, red windmill full of lights perched on the box seats above us to our left, a life-sized elephant (which, for variety, is purple) in the box seats to our right...

Novenas for a Lost Hospital



At the end of *Novenas for a Lost Hospital*, which sweeps through the 161-year history of St. Vincent's Hospital in Greenwich Village, focusing on the cholera and AIDS epidemics, Kathleen Chalfant as Mother Seton leads the audience down the narrow staircase to the street, and then the block and a half over to the so-called St. Vincent's Triangle, a new park across the street from where the hospital once stood. It's the site of the New York City AIDS Memorial. The audience stood in a circle for the epilogue, beneath the white steel triangle canopy of the memorial.

Oklahoma!



Ali Stroker as the fun-loving, oversexed Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!*, teases and kisses, flirts with and sings to the dim Will Parker (James Davis), — and most memorably swings with him gleefully on her wheelchair.

Scotland, PA



There is one spectacularly funny moment in *Scotland, PA*, the musical comedy version of *Macbeth*, which is based on Billy Morrisette's 2001 movie, and is set in a fast-food restaurant in the "podunk town" of Scotland, Pennsylvania in 1975. After married couple Mac and Pat Kill Duncany take over his restaurant. All the fast-food workers are dressed in construction jumpsuits and the establishment is covered with canvas. Suddenly, all the workers strip off their outfits, and simultaneously all the canvas falls off, and we see red and gold costumes, red and gold décor, a huge yellow M sign, and the new name of the restaurant: McBeth's.

This is one of the two shows this year in New York that featured a funny scene involving McDonald's. The other was *Soft Power* — which opened the same week!

Sincerity Forever



Sincerity Forever, one of the five plays in Perfect Catastrophes, a festival of Mac Wellman plays, takes place in a fictional Southern town named Hillsbottom. Jesus H. Christ, a black woman, comes visiting and the town's teenagers, dressed casually in Klu Klux Klan's outfits, are oblivious. In the first of several memorable moments, two of the teens admit that they are ignorant — "I don't know why the sky is blue, and I don't know what 'blue' is, and I don't know why I don't know," — but conclude that their ignorance must nonetheless somehow be God's plan. "the most important thing is not what you know, but whether you're sincere or not."

The Cake



In Bekah Brunstetter's *The Cake*, Debra Jo Rupp portrayed Della, a good-natured Christian baker in North Carolina who refuses to bake a cake for a lesbian wedding, and then feels guilty about it. Late at night, in bed with her husband Tim, she tries to explore her conscience with him as sounding board. Tim doesn't want to hear it. He thinks she was right to turn down the lesbians.

Tim: It's – it's just not natural.

Della: Well, neither is confectioner's sugar!

The Courtroom



Ruthie Ann Miles as Immigration Judge Craig Zerbe presided over *The Courtroom*, a re-enactment by Waterwell theater company of actual deportation proceedings, using the transcript. What made this an especially memorable moment was that it marked Miles' first performance in New York after a reckless driver last year killed her four-year-old daughter and caused the loss of her unborn baby.

The Great Society



In *The Great Society*, which chronicles the final four years of LBJ's presidency, we get out of the White House in just a handful of scenes. In the most memorable, Jimmy Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old Alabaman tries to register to vote, and is killed doing so, which leads to the confrontations between Civil Rights marchers and Alabama troops on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The Inheritance



This sexy scene in *The Inheritance* is not actually the most memorable in the play. That comes at the end of the first part of this two-part play, when the young gay men who died during the peak of the AIDS epidemic walk from the back of the theater one by one to the stage to shake hands with the living.

Tina, The Tina Turner Musical



At the end of *Tina*, *The Tina Turner Musical*, Adrienne Warner — dressed in trademark tight red leather mini-dress, highest of heels and tallest of wigs, ascending a staircase of flashing lights backed by a raucous band each in his own Hollywood Square — delivers Tina Turner’s greatest hits – “Nuthin’ But a ‘G’ Thing,” “Proud Mary” (“Rollin’, rollin’ rollin’ on the river...”) – and we all rise as one, ecstatic, and swoon.. I’m not sure what it says – but it says something – that this greatest moment in the musical’s nearly three hours occurs after the curtain call.

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About Jonathan Mandell

Jonathan Mandell is a third-generation New York City journalist and a digital native, who has written about the theater for a range of publications, including Playbill, American Theatre Magazine, the New York Times, Newsday, Backstage, NPR.com and CNN.com. He holds a BA from Yale and an MA from Columbia University, and has taught at the Columbia School of Journalism and New York University. He blogs at <http://www.NewYorkTheater.me> ([http://www.NewYorkTheater.me /](http://www.NewYorkTheater.me/)) and Tweets as @NewYorkTheater.

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