

WINTER BRAVO! 2011

EUGENE WEEKLY'S GUIDE TO THE PERFORMING ARTS



Hit Play

Everything's happening. What do you choose? BY SUZI STEFFEN

Former *Oregonian* arts editor Barry Johnson says that performing arts previews do the arts a disservice. Why?

Because they (that is, we) “provide one-stop culture shopping” (read his essay for *Oregon Humanities* magazine here: <http://wkly.ws/10h>) and, in addition, it's impossible for critics/reviewers/reporters to predict “when and where magic is going to show up in the next three months or so.”

Exactly. I've been to plays that I thought, based on experience with the actors, director and script, would be superb — but didn't gel with that particular combination. I've been surprised by the Eugene Symphony's performances of small pieces I didn't know well and underwhelmed by visiting soloists, no matter how famous (though I *did* enjoy Alisa Weilerstein, who's performing Dvorák's Cello Concerto Jan. 20, last time she was here).

Last year the experience of watching rehearsal after rehearsal of Upstart Crow's *Annie*, a show that causes most experienced theater folk to roll their eyes, forced me to

rethink the origins of that particular musical and its conflicting political messages — how the comic strip was virulently anti-government but the musical celebrated FDR and all of his safety net policies. Art's about the performance, but art's also about how the performance connects to everything else we know and feel.

Sometimes. Sometimes the moments of emotion that swell during concerts, plays, dance performances, operas, arise only at that specific time and place. Johnson argues in his essay that arts previews pick and choose from the arts listings as if the arts were a glittery row of mall stores; the shiniest get the most attention (I'm going to call *Cirque de la Symphonie* the shiniest in terms of cool pictures, and I do expect that to be a display of kinetic joy and enjoyable music).

I don't think Eugene audiences should or ever could be passive consumers, in general, despite our absolute enthusiasm for just about anything, our willingness to stand at the conclusion of any concert or opera and applaud like mad. We're generous to musical performers in that

way, with whoops and flowers and a lot of applause. The only problem with that is that we don't differentiate, at least in our approval just at the end of shows, between the acceptable and the great.

Still, Eugene's full of passionate, knowledgeable fans of many different arts, and we're entirely spoiled for our size of town with everything from the symphony to chamber music groups to a ton of American songbook and jazz concerts to ballets both familiar and sparkingly new.

Then we also have Portland to our north (with the extremely cool Oregon playwrights Fertile Ground Festival, not in our listings, running Jan. 20-30; more details at <http://wkly.ws/10i> — I saw some truly wonderful, and some truly bizarre, and some beautifully experimental, works last year) and Ashland to our south, which *EW* does tend to write about since we're the closest sizeable city to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. From Portland, we get groups like Portland Baroque Orchestra, here for the so-far always excellent Chamber Music@Beall series on the UO campus.

I do worry about the Hult Center, one of the reasons Eugene's so spoiled for what are often called the fine arts. How is the Hult, both an amazing space to have in a city this size and an albatross of expense for a city this size, going to survive this recession? Various of the resident companies seem to be doing well. The Symphony's in the black, thanks to its good management and a carefully cultivated support network; the Oregon Bach Festival had one of its best years ever last year; the Mozart Players just keep on selling out their performances. Still, the Hult needs to book a lot more acts. Luckily, this year, we've got *Wicked* to fill, and overflow, the Silva, and a few other Broadway in Eugene events as well — I'm looking forward to *Spring Awakening* in particular.

Meanwhile, though I also worry about the wonderful Wildish Theater, Chamber Music Amici also keeps selling out (this is *such* a classical music town, y'all!), and I've been charmed by almost everything Fred Crafts' Radio Redux performers have put on in that solidly enjoyable space.

In the ballet world, the Eugene Ballet continues to work its (their?) collective ass off, bringing new choreography to the Silva stage. I enjoy the times when I get to watch them rehearse and interview the dancers or artistic director Toni Pimble. The dancers, like many artists, work a bunch of jobs, and it's a miracle that they can keep doing what they're doing with love, devotion, passion and energy.

Meanwhile, the “chamber ballet” group Ballet Fantastique keeps plugging away, its pretty new rehearsal space in the old Tiffany's store a testament to the elbow grease of its executive director and her army of volunteers, its aspirations different from those of the Eugene Ballet but complementary (yes! Audiences *can* attend and support both).

But anyway, that's just me. When I look at the performing arts calendar, a frisson of joy runs up my spine. So much to do, to see, to hear. What do you choose? **EW**

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