

5 Picks for best performing arts productions in 2014



Shotgun Players produced Enda Walsh's *New Electric Ballroom*.

By Elizabeth Costello

It's hard to choose the best among the many fine performances I've seen this year, and categories often seem reductive. It takes a lot to put on a show, and performers, directors, and crew work hard to make it look easy.

As a rule I recommend checking out anything that might even remotely tickle your fancy. In 2015, make a resolution to sample the smorgasbord of Bay Area performance delights, maybe even that peculiar dish at the edge of the table. Below are five of my 2014 standouts, with categories shaped to fit the winners, rather than vice versa. I couldn't help spouting off about three performances I didn't cover here—Chris Black's *TOUGH*, Shotgun Players' *New Electric Ballroom*, and Rent Romus's *The Other World Cycle*. To that list add two I did review, *Sasha Waltz* at CalPerformances, and *Superheroes* at the Cutting Ball Theater.

• **Best Shape Shift/Time Travel:** Chris Black's *TOUGH* at Z Below.

It's not every day that a petite wiry 21st-century female moves and speaks as a 19th-century bare-knuckle boxer. Chris Black has been a force in the Bay Area dance scene since the early 90s. I've enjoyed her work for years, but was particularly intrigued by *TOUGH*, in which Black stepped stylishly into the persona of John L. Sullivan, last of the great 19th century bare-knuckle boxing bad-asses – a man who worked himself out of poverty by going into bars and offering to beat anyone in the house.

Black created the choreography for *TOUGH* using archival images of Sullivan, who traveled across the U.S., the UK, and Australia in the late 19th century, drawing huge crowds and becoming famous as a man impossible to beat.

With the help of a top-notch all-woman team, Black manifested Sullivan in order to tell her own truth about what it means to be a performer constantly reinventing body and mind.

"Sullivan held his ground in the face of wave after wave of pressure. Like Cuchulain, the 'Irish Achilles' and hero of the Yeats' poem 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea,' Sullivan stared down the horses of the sea and fought the invulnerable tide," said Black.

"A boxer has to do that, and so does any other performer – hold ground, command space, and in one way or another face themselves and the other," she added.

With *TOUGH*, Black wasn't doing Sullivan in drag. She used his story to frame the place he held so

well and that all performers hope to occupy – a place of fearlessness, ferocity, and self-possessed honesty. *TOUGH* was a rare treat, full of good humor, keenly intelligent and surprising choreography.

I must admit that a rendition of "I'm a Man You Don't Meet Everyday" moistened my half-Irish eyes.

• **Best Play that Packs Poetry's Punch:** The Shotgun Players' *New Electric Ballroom*

Speaking of Irishmen, playwright Enda Walsh certainly deserves the accolades he's received, as do The Shotgun Players for their excellent performance of Walsh's *New Electric Ballroom* (reviewed in these pages by Robert Hall).

In this darkly humorous play about lives utterly crippled by nostalgia and fear, an outstanding cast brought Walsh's vivid language and clever use of repetition to discomfiting life. Sisters Ada (Beth Wilmurt), Breda (Anne Darragh), and Clara (Trish Mulholland) live in a small village where Ada makes a living at a cannery "turning fish into numbers." Breda and Clara, now in their 60s, keep the younger Ada in thrall as they obsessively reenact their brush with rock-n-roll and free love one night many years before.

Their routine is interrupted by Patsy the fishmonger (Kevin Clarke), who for a moment encourages Ada to dream of a different life. With remarkable sensitivity and subtlety, the actors shaped

and re-weighted the lines over the course of the play, bringing not so much new meaning as a confirmation of dread. When the end came in the guise of the beginning, I felt implicated in the human habit of obsession, as I might when reading a masterful villanelle.

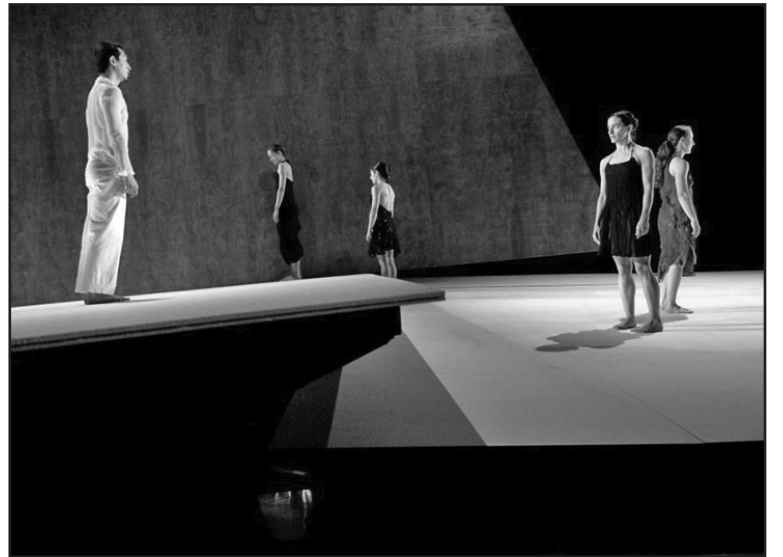
• **Best Transformation of an Ancient Epic into Music that Swings:** Rent Romus's *The Other World Cycle*

The *Other World Cycle* is saxophonist and multi-instrumentalist Rent Romus's deep take on the Finnish epic poem, the *Kalevala*, as well as other sources of Northern European cultural mythology. Over the past 14 years, Romus has developed his exploration of his ancestral cultural mythology into a potent source of musical inspiration. In October, he brought a group of local music luminaries (using voices, saxophones, cellos, and kantele and more) together as the Life's Blood Ensemble and enchanted a full house at San Francisco's Community Music Center for an evening of music that is truly otherworldly – and yet totally swings. You still have a chance to see this if you are in Sacramento on January 18. www.romus.net/Otherworld.html

• **Best Dance Across Geometric Planes:** Sasha Waltz and Company

There were several outstanding shows at CalPerformances in 2014, but the one that struck me most forcefully was Sasha Waltz and Company's *Impromptus*. I am still not entirely sure why it moved me so much, and that, dear readers, is a good thing. I am always looking for dance that takes my words away.

One of the great pleasures of this piece was its set (by Thomas Schenk), composed of three different planes, two along horizontal axes, and a third trapezoidal parallelogram hanging (and, in a surprise turn, swinging) along a vertical axis. The large planes brought the dancers' movements into high relief, making them seem more elegant and particular. I was reminded of the way a human face can shine out of a daguerreotype with alarming precision. Here's hoping 2015 brings this company back to the Bay Area.



Sasha Waltz and Company appeared at Zellerbach Hall courtesy of Cal Performances



The production of *Superheroes* at the Cutting Ball Theater.

• **Best Boogie Down While Telling It Like It Is:** Sean San Jose's *Superheroes*

As I wrote here just a few weeks ago, *Superheroes* at the Cutting Ball Theater used music and dance to explore the crack epidemic. The play was inspired by the work of Gary Webb, a reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News* whose reporting on the ties between the CIA, the Contras, and South American drug lords ultimately led to his professional undoing and death. This play takes

an allegorical approach to a complex story, and I found I was stimulated, engaged, and yes, though I had heard some of this before, a bit outraged. It made me want to pay attention.

As another year of beauty and excitement in Bay Area performance comes to a close, I'd like to offer up a bit of gratitude to the *Piedmont Post* and my fellow reviewers. Thanks for sharing the page with me and offering some great arts coverage. Here's a toast to much more in the coming year!

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