

The Year Downtown Opened Up

How Art and Art Venues Shaped the Area in 2005

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CALENDAR EDITOR

Downtown has long boasted some of the finest cultural facilities in Los Angeles, with top notch theaters and performance venues. While that alone would ensure entertainment highlights, in 2005 some of those behind the scenes got particularly crafty, creatively gutsy, and pushed the boundaries.

YEAR IN ENTERTAINMENT

In a suddenly amped up cultural landscape, Downtown audiences enjoyed an array of non-stuffy, often free events. Even better, the area's theaters, museums and art attractions frequently stayed open late.

But it wasn't just local venues that took risks: A very unlikely cornfield became both art project and park; new galleries arrived; landmark exhibits and shows rolled through; and everything from masked Mexican wrestling to blowout New Year's Eve parties made their mark.

Story of the Year: The Rejuvenation of Venues: In spring, see Calendar, page 11

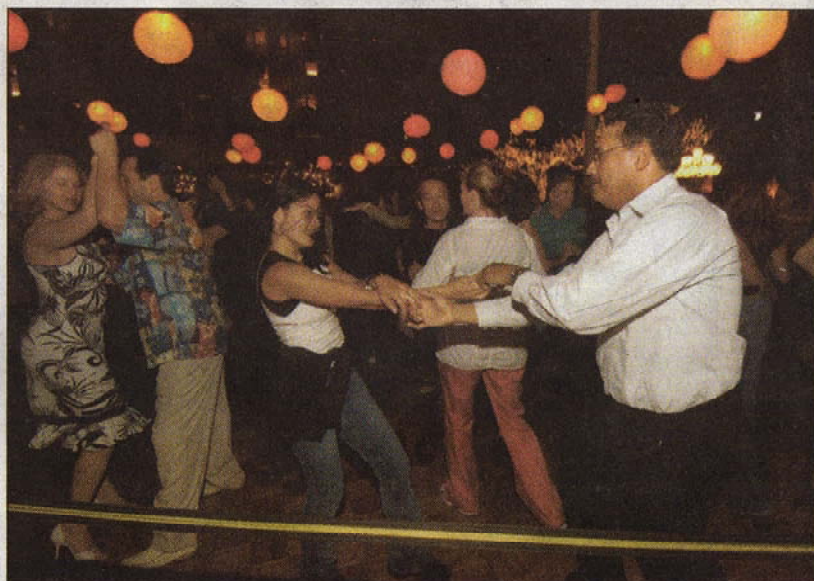


photo by Gary Leonard

"Dance Downtown," the summer series that inspired hundreds of people to shake it on the Music Center Plaza, was one of numerous new additions to the Downtown cultural calendar in 2005.

CALENDAR

Continued from page 1

the Music Center kicked off its Informal Arts Initiative, a fancy title for the simple idea of making the Music Center more community-friendly. The "Taste of Dance" and "Dance Downtown" events featured dance classes and a chance for the public to try out new moves. They drew hundreds to the outdoor Music Center Plaza, and in the place where opera and theatergoers normally stroll quietly, there were bouncy masses of all dance levels.

MOCA, Grand Avenue introduced the series "Night Vision" during its summer Basquiat retrospective. For 12 consecutive Saturday nights, a slate of film screenings, live music, DJs, spoken word and mini-theatrical events spilled out of the museum until midnight. The museum stayed open for late-night viewings.

Meanwhile, the Natural History Museum (NHM) hosted its sophomore season of the "First Fridays" series. The discussion and performance slate, which usually has thematic ties to an exhibit, lured author Jared Diamond, myriad DJs and former Rage Against the Machine frontman Zack de la Rocha. It was a far, and grown-up cry from the NHM's daily kid audience.

The Cornfield That Was, and Wasn't: In June, artist Lauren Bon and a team of volunteers planted corn seed in a barren plot of land north of Chinatown. The resultant 32-acre, \$2 million art installation called "Not A Cornfield" proceeded to perplex, then charm, the city. The corn grew through the summer and was harvested in November. But the project went beyond simple crops: Bon's field hosted film screenings, lectures, drum circles and music performances, and in the process became a community gathering space. Even now, joggers run its perimeters. Kids play in the grass just outside the field and couples stroll arm in arm through the paths.

Gordon Davidson's Swan Song: The decades-long head of Center Theatre Group finished up with a bang, giving Downtown Los Angeles audiences a slate of thrilling and challenging works. February brought Edward Albee's *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?* The beguiling Taper production was about a man who falls in love — carnal love — with the female goat of the title. Another Taper highlight was Luis Alfaro's April production of *Electricidad*, a modern-day adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra*. That same month, Ahmanson audiences took in Matthew Bourne's *Play Without Words*. The highly expressive dance offered parallel story lines, live jazz and nary a spoken syllable.

Michael Ritchie Arrives: Davidson was replaced by Ritchie, who in April announced the schedules for the Taper and Ahmanson. What drew more early attention, however, was his decision to halt CTG's play development initiatives, and labs that focused on disabled, Latino, Asian- and African-American artists. He stood by his guns, saying his expertise was in producing, not developing.

His season debuted in September with an expensive, rarely staged *Dead End*, then he brought David Mamet to the Taper with the comedy *Romance*. Though critical reaction to the pieces (four so far) have been mixed, his aesthetic is starting to be revealed: He's a fan of big, bold theatricality, and for better or worse, a play's message and poetry come second.



MOCA's Main Events: Jean-Michel Basquiat was the posthumous museum star this summer, when MOCA hosted a massive retrospective at its Grand Avenue campus. More than 100 pieces, some never seen by the public, were on display. Earlier in the year, *Visual Music* explored the concept of synaesthesia, the experience of one sense evoking another — music, in this case, influencing art. That was trippy, but nothing compared to *Ecstasy: In and About Altered States*, the exhibit that fills the museum's Geffen Contemporary annex through February. There, MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel has assembled a show about art created under the influence, or art intended to make viewers feel as if they're under the influence.

Galaxy Couture: The Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising Museum and Galleries were heretofore best known for an annual show in which costumes from films of the previous year, including those nominated for Best Costume Design, are displayed. But in September, the *Star Wars* junkie crowd streamed in for *Dressing a Galaxy: The Costumes of Star Wars*, which featured more than 100 original outfits, photos and paraphernalia from all six George Lucas films, going back to the 1977 original.



photo by Joe Pugliese



photo courtesy of MOCA



photo courtesy of Giant



Clockwise from top left: The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels' plaza was the new summer home for Ben Donenberg and Shakespeare Festival/LA; crowds flocked to MOCA's Basquiat exhibit; Giant attracted 12,000 people to a New Year's Eve bash; Lucha VaVoom's wrestling/burlesque shows became a Downtown staple; FIDM hosted a Star Wars costume exhibit; Michael Ritchie took the reins and shook things up at Center Theatre Group.

We got to see Queen Amidala's elaborate gowns, the evolution of Chewbacca's accessories, Jedi cloaks and alien fashion.

When the Lights Were on at the LATC: While developers, theater administrators and city officials grappled over the future of the Los Angeles Theatre Center, two theatrical events ignored the politics and took advantage of the hulking building's stage space. In March, a multi-month run of *Shag With a Twist* began, an original musical based on the art of L.A.-based painter Josh Agle (aka Shag) and choreographed by Cindy Bradley. In October, the six-year-old Edgefest staged 31 plays in just a few weeks. Most were premieres

and on Fridays and Saturdays, the plays ran until midnight. Just like in the LATC's storied, 1980s days, the lobby was buzzing.

Shakespeare Gets Religion: After Department of Recreation and Parks budget cuts nixed its traditional home of Pershing Square, Shakespeare Festival/LA scrambled to find a new venue. After talks with Union Station and the Orpheum, the company brought its annual summer offering to an entirely different kind of public space — the plaza at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, after the Archdiocese of Los Angeles stepped up to save the day. *The Comedy of* see Entertainment, page 12



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Entertainment

Continued from page 11

Errors ran for a week in July and massive crowds turned out, preserving a 20-year summer tradition of free outdoor Shakespeare.

Opera Standouts: Garry Marshall's sitcom direction of *The Grand Duchess* and Robert Wilson's slow, untraditional movements in the just-closed *Parsifal* brought mixed reactions. But there were plenty of unanimous winners at the Los Angeles Opera. Early in the year, Mexican Rolando Villazón and Russian Anna Netrebko brought palpable heat to *Roméo et Juliette*. In the summer, Welsh baritone Bryn Terfel sung his signature role, *Falstaff*, and Downtown artist Gottfried Helnwein brought a fresh, eye candy aesthetic to *Der Rosenkavalier*. Also memorable was husband and wife team Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu, who played a murderous clown and his cheating mate in fall's winning *Pagliacci*.

East West Players Turns 40: EWP was founded in 1965 by a small group of Asian

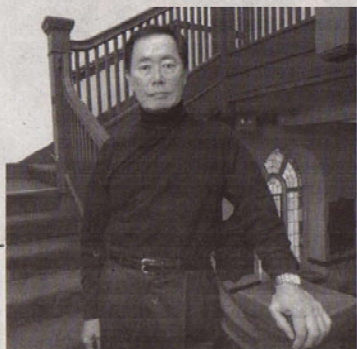


photo by Gary Leonard



photo by Tazoo Papadakis

American actors; the company started in a church basement, moved to Silver Lake and, in 1998, arrived in Little Tokyo. In keeping with its roots, EWP moved into a refurbished church.

The company celebrated its landmark 40th birthday with a good *Proof*, an original and charming musical about the Filipino shoe queen, *Imelda*, and a bold *Equus*, replete with nudity and "Star Trek" star George Takei.

Galleries Just Keep On Coming: The stream of new galleries into places like Chinatown and the Historic Core continued in 2005. There are now about 20 art spaces in the former, while in the latter, 14 new spaces opened this year. Five galleries are clustered around Fifth and Main streets — an area



photo by Gary Leonard

not previously known for sleek visuals. The Gallery Row Organization, unveiled in 2004, assisted many of the newcomers, in addition to producing a pair of art events at the Caltrans building. All year long, the new galleries' walk-in business was boosted by the Downtown Art Walk, a monthly, self-guided tour that on good nights can bring hundreds into a space.

Welcome Returns From the Hip

Department: Lucha VaVoom, the Mexican wrestling/burlesque stripping amalgam, is a little-known spectacle no more. With appearances on various TV shows and in the pages of *Vanity Fair*, the frequent shows at Hill Street's Mayan Theater now sell out with a velocity rivaled only by the speed with which

Clockwise from top left: The LATC got groovy with *Shag With a Twist*; "Not a Cornfield" artist Lauren Bon; George Takei starred in *East West Players'* production of *Equus*.

the "mini" wrestlers fly out of the ring.

Bookending the year were two massive New Year's Eve parties, brought Downtown by the event producer Giant. Last year, 12,000 revelers filled a four-block party that emanated from the corner of Hope Street and Wilshire Boulevard. This Dec. 31, the party grows to six blocks, and the music line-up features Flaming Lips and the Black Eyed Peas. An estimated 18,000 are flocking Downtown this year — a destination indeed.

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