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THE ART THAT SHOCKED OUR SENSES

Electrified Art

In 2003, Portland audiences had front-row seats at a creative revolution.

BY KELLY CLARKE, GRANT MENZIES, STEFFEN SILVIS AND RICHARD SPEER

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With the economy still down the grate, arts organizations continued to scrape for funding in 2003 while stretching shoestring budgets even tighter.

For the first time ever, though, Portland audiences witnessed a collective creative revolution, thanks to the newly appointed directors at the helms of our town's largest arts organizations. But all the hoopla over the classical arts was nearly eclipsed by a couple of do-it-yourself visual and performing arts festivals, which invigorated audiences with the shock of the new.

1. Classical Clarity. This season, **Oregon Symphony's** new music director, **Carlos Kalmar**, made magic out of the staples of the Romantic and post-Romantic repertory, Berlioz's *Symphonic fantastique* and Stravinsky's Suite from *The Firebird*. These pieces let audiences envision a musically glorious future, as the former was passionately hallucinatory yet streaming with lyricism, while the latter was rich with a fairy-tale iridescence that never compromised Kalmar's signature clarity. Add to that the conductor's especially deft touch with Mozart and Haydn, and classical music fans have plenty to look forward to.

2. Retro Ballet. When **Oregon Ballet Theatre's** King James--Canfield, that is--abdicated the OBT throne last spring, arts patrons were in a tizzy over the fate of *le ballet*. But OBT's new artistic director, **Christopher Stowell**, calmed the storm with the announcement of a seasonlong classical kegger of Balanchine works, along with world premieres and a nod to the Royal Ballet's Sir Frederick Ashton. Who knew the company known for rock ballets and thong costuming would go retro so successfully? We all did.

3. Edinburgh-on-Willamette. The city's first **Time Based Art Festival** was a sumptuous bacchanal of performance art. To have had a chance to hear the electric (and eclectic) **Shelley Hirsch** sing, and to see the choreography of **Ros Warby, Eiko**

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and Koma, and **Akram Khan** was astonishing. For good measure, there was also poultry puppeteer **Susan Vitucci**, plus **Cie Felix Ruckert's** interactive *deluxe joy pilot*, a full-on world of wild motion and seductive stances. With luck, the **Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's** festival will be on this city's boards for a very long time to come, though attendance must increase to keep the festival and PICA's coffers afloat.

4. Modern Zoo Lights. The **Portland Center for the Advancement of Culture's** 100,000-square-foot warehouse full of constantly changing art was criticized for its loose curating and variable quality. But like Walt Whitman's poetry, the **Modern Zoo** boasted pockets of transcendence amid the surfeit and won points for sheer ambition. Such an undertaking would have been a ballsy move for established institutions, let alone a struggling newbie like **PCAC**, but the group pulled it off so successfully that its board is now changing the organization's name to the Modern Zoo.

5. Dance's Double Agent Act. The **White Bird** series continued its dual role as *agent provocateur* and big-money lover with its bill of wildly different companies. Throughout the season, Portland audiences saw a variety show of dance, from the athletic Brazilian company **Grupo Corpo** to **Mark Morris Dance Group's** visionary yet accessible works. But it was Montreal's alien and wonderful **Compagnie Marie Chouinard** that gave us the biggest jolt last January. Chouinard's band of screaming and shaking forms stormed with such abandon through their paces on the Lincoln Hall stage that mere mortals shivered.

6. Ontologically Speaking. In August, **Performance Works NorthWest** redefined party games when Linda Austin gave more than 25 local artists one week to create a short work based on Richard Foreman's online rant, *Roly Poly in China*. The ensuing **Richard Foreman Mini-Festival** exposed us to the familiar concept of "the deadline" and showcased the curious beauty, brilliance and pure rubbish that is possible whenever it's so very short. But for Portland's performing-arts audience, these proved to be two of the most encouraging evenings of performance in ages. Highlights included **Mike Barber** and **Cydney Wilkes'** wild pas de deux, Imago's **Carol Triffle** and **Jerry Mouawad**, and **Ted Roisum** and **Christine Calfas'** piece that was foremost of the Foremanians.

7. Language Arts. With only a fraction of the personnel and budget of the PAM Biennial and PICA's TBA Festival, **2Gyrlz** put together a monthlong, interdisciplinary orgy that showed how smaller, nimbler arts organizations can sometimes outrun and outperform their bigger brothers and sisters. Mixing visual artists such as **MB Condon**, **Rhoda London** and **Christopher Rainone** together with provocateurs such as gonzo performance artist **Jean-Louis Costes**, gender activist **Kate Bornstein** and white-hot trannie rapper **Katastrophe**, 2Gyrlz exulted in go-for-broke theatrics that, more often than not, blazed with fire in the center of the smoke.

8. Chamber Made. Kaul Auditorium was too small for **David Schiff's** rollicking, Chagall-tinted chamber opera *Gimpel the Fool*, but that didn't subdue its superb music or its superb musicians, including internationally renowned baritone **Richard Zeller** as Gimpel, **D'Anna Fortunato** as his cuckolding wife, Elka, and baritone **Kevin Walsh** as the Badkhen to end all Badkhens. This was another victory for the **Third Angle New Music Ensemble**.

9. Staging Love. The local theater scene continues to be a



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disappointment, especially in the larger houses. But there were a few bright spots, such as **Dennis Bigelow**'s production of Beckett's *Happy Days* (with an excellent performance by **Gretchen Corbett**), and **Amber Leigh Martin**'s solo, *Hi!* But 2003 will be remembered most for Sojourn Theatre's *7 Great Loves*, a kaleidoscopic look at love that utilized three floors of a defunct warehouse in Southeast. How rare to leave a theatrical performance in this town with hope.

10. Father, Where Art Thou? Setting aside the excitement of events like TBA Festival and the Richard Foreman weekend, there's still nothing quite like seeing a master actor at work in an intimate space. Actor-playwright **Raymond J. Barry**'s welcome return to Portland came with a handful of performances of his newest piece, *And Then I Did This, And Then I Did That*, a haunting examination of a father-son relationship that still reverberates in memory months after its staging.

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