

Recap: Onstage in the 2nd quarter

By GRAYDON ROYCE and ROHAN PRESTON

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Rohan Preston: Graydon, it's officially summertime. But before the living gets too easy, we should look back at the second quarter. What's the best thing you've seen recently?

Graydon Royce: If I had to pick a winner for the past three months, I'd go with the Jungle. "Virginia Woolf" was terribly strong, with an instinctive and deeply wrought performance by Stephen Yoakam as George and an etched portrait of cynicism in Michelle Barber's Martha. Sean Dooley also made me sit up and notice young Nick.



RP: Instead of the usual slinking George, Yoakam made him a razor-sharp tactician who relished the verbal jousts. Barber's bluesy gloss on boozy Martha, a woman whose only outlet for her talents is her stalled husband, was just as bitterly absorbing.

GR: The Jungle flipped from that acid bath to the frivolity of "The Mystery of Irma Vep" without missing a beat.

Bradley Greenwald and Steven Epp bash their way



through eight characters, and director Joel Sass spots his stage tricks perfectly.

RP: Peter Rothstein's opera-infused revival of David Henry Hwang's "M. Butterfly" at the Guthrie was aurally arresting and visually grand. Randy Reyes donned elegant kimonos to play the title character but did not disguise his voice much, showing how love is about projection and how projection blinds the viewer. Love as a different kind of blind, I guess.

GR: "M. Butterfly" and "Irma Vep," seem part and parcel of a few key productions that pumped up the razzle-dazzle -- the stuff that makes a



show a show. "Queens of Burlesque" at the History Theater needed to be shorter and needed to be a real play but it drew big crowds with song, dance, costumes, flesh, comedy and action. Similarly, "The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity" used another fleshy show-biz gimmick, pro wrestling, to animate its story. Oddly, in that case the spectacle didn't sell well.

RP: I'm not sure how "Chad Deity" did at the box office, but I was pleased with how artfully it grappled, no pun intended, with heady issues. The Mixed Blood production starred Ansa Akyea, who went from that comic-book character to playing a frightening military commander in another new play, Cori Thomas' "Pa's Hat." That premiere, just now closing at Pillsbury House, is a wry, bittersweet valentine to memory that boasts Marion McClinton's cinematic direction



and compelling performances by Bruce Young, Namir Smallwood and the estimable Regina Marie Williams.

GR: Glad you brought up new shows. I loved "Transdimensional Courier's Union," written by John Heimbuch for Walking Shadow Theatre. The intellectual architecture of that piece just stunned me, and the production -- a small technical masterpiece -- had great acting. I really like that group. It was not technically "new," but Rebecca Gilman's adaptation of "Dollhouse" at the Guthrie got the essence of Ibsen's classic and successfully illustrated why this play needed to be put into the 21st century. Ibsen's timeless and withering eye never seemed so apt in its glance at our post-principles money-grubbing era.

RP: While "Transdimensional Courier's Union" was imaginative and ambitious, the script needed tightening. I thought the play was more interesting as a work of futurism. Another new play was Gus Edwards' senior-buddy comedy, "Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking." It's hard for two straight old men to say "I love you" to each other, even when they're the last denizens of a senior home. But director Lou Bellamy and actors James Craven and Abdul Salaam El Razzac made the attempt at



platonic intimacy memorably funny. Over at the Dowling Studio, actors Tracey Maloney, Bill McCallum, Angela Timberman and Chris Carlson transformed Annie Baker's flimsy play, "Circle Mirror Transformation," into something with theatrical heft.

GR: Great actors can do that. The best performance I saw this spring was [Steve Hendrickson's](#) turn as Henry Higgins in "[My Fair Lady](#)" at Ten Thousand Things. The actor built Higgins from the inside out and showed the shattering transformation of a man who allows himself to be vulnerable.



RP: Hendrickson also turned Sherlock Holmes into a cool 19th-century Spock in "[Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily](#)" at Park Square.



On the touring circuit, Bartlett Sher's "South Pacific" at the Ordway, with stars Carmen Cusack and Rod Gilfry, was lush and surprisingly relevant. And count me a Patti LuPone enthusiast. Her bravissima Orchestra Hall concert brought back memories of when I first saw her in the early '80s on Broadway as Evita. The lady with a torch has still got brass pipes and, boy, can she blow.

