

# BEST PLAY(S): 'HOUSE & GARDEN'

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The world is so much with us, racing forward, that it's restorative to pause, recall the theatrical year past and savor its pleasures. You should try it yourself — just use the search box on the Post-Gazette website, post-gazette.com.

But the odds are you don't have as many memories to sort through as we do, and that makes it hard when faced with the annual directive to pick the top 10. There is too much range and variety in Pittsburgh's professional theater scene, both local and touring, plus the best of the semi-pro and university shows, to make it easy.

Though it falls to me to wield the pen, PG theater criticism is a team effort. Of the 80-some local shows reviewed in 2011, I did the most, then Sharon Eberson, then Bob Hoover. Both spoke up for their favorites. Nine others reviewed at least one show, led by Kate Angell. I also queried a few trusted others whose help is enhanced by their anonymity. But the final decisions were necessarily mine.

It was particularly tough selecting No. 1. It came down to "House & Garden" and "Maria de Buenos Aires," both excellent collaborations in unusual ways. The former won out because two plays staged simultaneously and (literally) on top of each other is simply the greater feat.

We also struggled with the bottom of the top 10 — "Lost Boy Found in Whole Foods" could easily have moved up. I further relieved pressure on the top group by creating a category for solo shows; otherwise, "The Amish Project" would be in the top 10, as well.

**1. Alan Ayckbourn, "House & Garden," Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre:** Two interlocking plays ("House" and "Garden") in adjacent theaters trace the comic haps and mishaps at an English country estate. Actors exited one play just in time to enter the other, keeping two audiences entertained with Mr. Ayckbourn's rueful comedy. Good as separate plays, the two multiply their effect when served in tandem.

**2. Astor Piazzolla (music) and Horacio Ferrer (libretto), "Maria de Buenos Aires," Quantum Theatre:** A tango opera, mixing a melancholy song cycle, surreal poetry and smoky music, then using ballet noir, operatic voices and a rich video accompaniment to create a story despairing, romantic and ultimately mythic. The space played its part, a cabaret wrapped around ramps and platforms in a derelict East Liberty Y, a dusty echo of the battered streets of turn-of-the-20th-century Buenos Aires.

**3. Tarell Alvin McCraney, "Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet," City Theatre:** A story about a Louisiana teenager coming to terms with his sexuality, told by a theater poet with original myth-making power. Part of Mr. McCraney's Brother/Sister trilogy, it draws on the oldest strands of Yoruba folklore and the newest hip-hop rhythms.

**4. John Logan, "Red," Pittsburgh Public Theatre:** A play about art and the war between



Suellen Fitzsimmons

Teddy, portrayed by Martin Giles, blathers incomprehensibly as his British wife, played by Helena Ruoti, left, and French fling, Nike Doukas, face off on this unlikely field of amatory battle in the "House" half of "House & Garden" at Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre.

over his immediate predecessors and sneers at his pop art successors. There's also a surrogate son with whom to tussle, while man's tenuous place in the universe is in the balance.

**5. Leslie Prince (book, lyrics) and Frank**

played the lead on Broadway) returned to re-stage and re-jigger his previous CLO success with a largely new cast, especially strong in its women.

**6. Oscar Wilde, "The Importance of Being Earnest," PICT:** Director Alan Stanford added