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Planet earth calling

Kyle Lawson
The Arizona Republic
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Planet Earth had something for everyone.

The downtown theater served up gratuitous (if simulated) sex, frequent nudity, language that would take years off a nun's life.

advertisement

Of course, it was too good to last.

When Planet Earth closed in 2000, after being found in violation of the Phoenix fire codes, many feared experimental and cutting-edge theater had gone the way of pet rocks and dodo birds.

But as Mark Twain once pointed out, don't write the obituary until you've seen the body.

This past weekend, Nearly Naked Theatre Company opened *The Rocky Horror Show*, proving the Time Warp can't be dated. Over on Grand Avenue, Stray Cat Theatre just wrapped the hilarious and partially unprintable *Poona the (Expletive) Dog*.

On Thursday, director-playwright and Alternative Theatre founder Joe Marshall began taking a stroll on the dark side of gay life with *The Player*. On Sept. 22, the iconoclastic Chris Danowski of Theatre in My Basement weighs in with *The Constant Epiphanies of Billy the Blood Donor*. Two days later, Shakespeare Theatre brings back the always-provocative *Marat/Sade*.

For a dead dog, this one's barking pretty loudly.

The theaters have little in common, except their underground attitude. And, more importantly, their inspiration - Planet Earth.

"When Planet Earth went down, I thought it was all over," says director Mike Cordy, whose production of *Altar Boys in Chains* is planned for next spring. "For a year or so, it was nothing but *Annie* and *The Sound of Music*. I thought I was going to have to throw myself in front of Gammage as a human sacrifice. How many dead musicals can one town take?"

Planet Earth's closing wasn't the only thing that put the fear of deprivation into



Larry Ellis
Dion Johnson (left), Damon Dering and Traci McCormick star in Nearly Naked Theatre's *Rocky Horror Show*. Dering founded the group on the heels of Planet Earth's demise in 2000.

Related

'The Rocky Horror Show'

Through Sept. 18. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, alternating 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Audience participation shows 10:30 p.m. Saturdays. Nearly Naked Theatre Company, the Little Theatre at Phoenix Theatre, 100 E. McDowell Road. \$12-\$15. (602) 274-2432.

'The Player'

Sept. 9-25. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays. Alternative Theatre, the Space, 4700 N. Central Ave., Phoenix. \$20-\$25. (602) 279-1409.

'The Constant Epiphanies of Billy the Blood Donor'

Sept. 22. 8 p.m. Theater in My Basement, Modified Arts, 407 E. Roosevelt St., Phoenix. \$5. (602) 870-8918.

'Marat / Sade'

Full title: *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates*

Feast of Fools left town, PlayWright's Workshop ran out of money and Blackball Ensemble, a group whose members were fearless, discovered that you could only starve for so long.

Memories, thank heavens, are harder to kill.

Christine Dwyer was an 18-year-old Arizona State University student when she saw her first Planet Earth production.

"I was dumbfounded. I didn't know theater could be like that," she says. "In a way it was scary. The people onstage were actually saying things I had thought about, but was way too timid to express in public. After I saw *Shopping and (Expletive)* (about drug use among teenagers), I staged an intervention in my kid brother's life. There are a lot of us who won't forget that theater."

Many of the key players in the alternative-theater community worked at, or were influenced by Planet Earth, which was housed in a run-down building at Third and Roosevelt streets. If they were too young to have been there when director Peter Cirino and his wife, actress Mollie Kellogg, founded the troupe in 1991, they've heard the stories.

Cirino was legendary for his approach to his art. His productions were multicultural before the word was coined, wildly inventive and intensely visceral. He scoured downtown dumpsters for set materials. When he couldn't fill out a cast, he rounded up the homeless in the neighborhood. On cold nights, he let the working girls (and guys) of the area come into the lobby to warm up with a cup of free coffee.

The theater was equally notorious. The building, whose block-long exterior mural was a downtown landmark (or eyesore, depending on one's taste) was dank and seriously funky. When the risers didn't collapse, the seats did. The single bathroom was unisex - when it worked, though it must be said the plumbing boasted a better record than the evaporative coolers, which never seemed to get much accomplished.

"It's no surprise that most of us who worked there were young," Cordy says. "We weren't used to anything better."

Not every production was good. Nudity, a Planet Earth trademark, uncovered as many failings as it exposed unsuspected talents. Yet, there were memorable efforts, chief among them a quirky *Tempest* and a stunning, voodoo-inspired *Medea*.

Playwrights shunned by other companies found a home at the space. Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and (Expletive)* took a bleak but sympathetic look at addicted and aimless teens. Cuban-American writer Maria Irene Fornes savaged the far right with *The Conduct of Life*, about a South American general and his prepubescent sex slave.

Trista Baldwin, then an Arizona State University graduate student, now an internationally produced playwright, had her career jump-started with the first full-blown production of her satire *Chicks With Dicks*.

"It was an opportunity to do plays that we really cared about, instead of the junk that other companies were picking," says Benjamin Monrad, who starred in Ravenhill's play and went on to establish Stray Cat Theatre 2 1/2 years ago with Ron May, who found his way to Planet Earth with Baldwin and her friends.

That's the way Cirino and Kellogg, whose later marriage ended, wanted it. Cirino, a member of the theater faculty at the University of California-San Diego, was a visionary whose ideas exceeded his technological resources - but he never staged a production that didn't challenge its audience.

"I don't want to sound pompous, but no one else was doing our kind of work," he

of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade. Sept. 24- Oct. 9. 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. The Shakespeare Theatre, The Little Theatre at Phoenix Theatre, 100 E. McDowell Road. \$15. (602) 796-2038.

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says. "Phoenix theater was pretty conservative in those days."

Cirino's shows pushed the boundaries of what could happen on a local stage.

"Planet Earth was about as off-beat as you could get," May says, "but it was a touchstone for artists who wanted to expand the definition of theater and use their work to say something meaningful."

"We never did it just to see how naked we could get," Cirino says. Damon Dering, founder and artistic director of Nearly Naked Theatre Company, arrived on the scene just as the fire marshal was issuing the eviction notice. It galvanized him.

"Planet Earth encouraged a lot of us to speak out for ourselves," he says. "No one wanted to lose what it stood for. People are hungry for that kind of theater."

Today, the only physical remnant of Cirino's theater is a concrete slab with weeds growing through the cracks. It saddens Cordy.

"I never drive by it without crying a little bit inside," he says.

Buildings can be replaced. It's been harder to rebuild "public awareness for fringe theater," Monrad says.

"It's coming back but, for many, it's a challenge to find out what we're doing and where we're doing it. Back then, people knew if they showed up at Planet Earth, they'd see something interesting."

"At its best, the stuff they did there was art," Dwyer says. "At its worst, it made you want to come back and see what they would do the next time."

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