

# The Sun

By ERIC GRODE

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The problem in assembling a 2006 best-of list isn't finding 10 highlights but narrowing the field down from about 135 candidates. As such, I've included 10 runnersup and also disqualified [Tom Stoppard's](#) "The Coast of Utopia" and Suzan-Lori Parks's "365 Days/365 Plays" from contention, since both are still unfolding through 2007. Based on what I've seen so far, though, either or both could easily find their way onto next year's list. Assembling a Bottom 10 would have been just as easy, but nearly all of the offenders have already shuffled off to oblivion and require no further abuse. (I would avoid swinging on any vines in Midtown, however.)

1. 'THE THUGS': Anyone lamenting the lack of exciting new voices in American theater probably didn't catch [Adam Bock's](#) pitch-perfect black comedy, a squirmy blend of "The Office" and [George Orwell](#), at SoHo Rep. Under the masterful guidance of director Anne Kauffman, each one of Mr. Bock's haughty, bored, terrified temps behaved like someone you've had the misfortune of working alongside at one point or another; none of them behaved like any character you've ever seen in a play or film. Short, stylish, and unforgettably creepy.
2. 'BRIDGE AND TUNNEL': Virtuosity, uplift, wit, pathos, joy: Just about everything you could hope to see on Broadway was on glorious display in [Sarah Jones's](#) onewoman show about an outer-borough immigrant poetry slam. Rarely has a week gone by in the last year without my thinking of Ms. Jones's timid Dominican student, maladroit Pakistani emcee, or heartbreaking Chinese mother.
3. 'SPRING AWAKENING' Sure, quibbles can be made about the soft ending or the underwritten adult roles. But [Duncan Sheik](#) and [Steven Sater](#) have taken the much maligned rock musical and, with the help of [Michael Mayer's](#) shrewd staging, propelled it into the 21st century. Packed with stars in the making, this inspired reimagining of Franz Wedekind's coming-of-age drama deserves to shake, rattle, and rock audiences for years. The era when cast recordings like "West Side Story" and "My Fair Lady" sat atop the pop music charts suddenly doesn't seem so long ago.

4. 'WAITING FOR GODOT' (BOTH PRODUCTIONS): While classical music fans had a glut of [Mozart](#) and [Shostakovich](#) from which to choose during this centennial year, theater fans had to dig around to find anything by their birthday boy, [Samuel Beckett](#). I would have preferred to see his smaller works addressed with something more than a one-night reading here and there (which is essentially what [New York](#) got), but Beckett's masterpiece did receive two sensational productions. [Dublin's](#) Gate Theatre swung through town in October with as close to a definitive "Godot" as you're likely to see; even more thrilling was June's Classical Theatre of Harlem mounting, daringly set in a flooded, post-Hurricane Katrina seascape.
5. 'THE HISTORY BOYS': Sarah Jones's one-woman menagerie received some competition on the acting front from the eight rambunctious Oxbridge wannabes and their four professors in [Alan Bennett's](#) unexpected Broadway hit. Mr. Bennett and director [Nicholas Hytner](#) turned the accumulation of knowledge, even (or especially) useless knowledge, into a captivating, almost erotic pleasure. And the octet of young performers — along with a sublime [Richard Griffiths](#) as their adoring but flawed instructor — turned their tutorials into a master class in ensemble acting, anchored by an exquisite pedagogical pas de deux between Griffiths and Samuel Barnett.
6. 'BILLY THE MIME': [John F. Kennedy Jr.](#) [Anne Frank](#). Predatory priests. All in a day's work for the fearless Billy the Mime, who enacted these and plenty of other skits in his noholds-barred one-man show at the New York Fringe Festival. The surprise was his willingness to find the hurt as well as the shock value — a [Terri Schiavo](#) segment was remarkably evenhanded, and one piece devoted to abortion reduced the woman next to me to tears. An exciting new, um, voice on the New York scene. (Extra credit to producers John Pinckard and Britt Lafield, who attempted to find a home for this and other deserving Fringe shows — plus a few undeserving ones — in their postfestival "FringeNYC Encores.")
7. 'THE DROWSY CHAPERONE': Shut-ins with unhealthy attachments to schlocky Broadway musicals don't necessarily make for good protagonists. But [Bob Martin](#), who also cowrote this daffy and enormously likable entertainment, makes unsocialized obsessiveness enviable as his shabby apartment morphs into a beloved piece of 1920s fluff, complete with dancing mobsters and a lesbian aviatrix. The most ingeniously constructed Broadway musical since "City of Angels," "Drowsy" also finds something meaningful to say about the way even the most innocuous shards of pop culture sneak into our consciousness and stay there.
8. 'INDIAN BLOOD': After some two dozen plays over the last 30 years, [A.R. Gurney](#) can be counted on for sharply drawn characters and a wry bemusement at human foibles. He's shifted his focus to politics in recent years, but he reverted to his familiar milieu of WASPdom with this gentle, clear-eyed evocation of his testy childhood amid the fading

fortunes of 1940s Buffalo, N.Y. This sort of bittersweet nostalgia would ultimately earn [Neil Simon](#) a whole new generation of fans and a [Pulitzer Prize](#). Mr. Gurney's own backward glimpse is even better.

9. 'THE PAIN AND THE ITCH': The smug pieties of an "enlightened" upper-class family explode in a torrent of rage and intolerance, resulting in accusations of pedophilia and a tragic death. Sounds hilarious, right? Bruce Norris wrote the closest stage approximation I've seen to [Tom Wolfe's](#) equalopportunity-offender works like "The Bonfire of the Vanities," and director Anna D. Shapiro assembled a brave cast led by [Christopher Evan Welch](#) and the priceless [Jayne Houdyshell](#). The humor landed with force; the chills came later.

10. '[TITLE OF SHOW]': Okay, so maybe the references are a bit too thick on musical-theater arcana for your typical viewer. (A whole song devoted to Broadway obscurities like "Bagels and Yox"?) But [Hunter Bell](#) and [Jeff Bowen](#) turned their own humbling experiences of writing a musical on deadline into a bawdy bit of self-referential mayhem about ... writing a musical on deadline. In the finale, they explain why they'd "rather be nine people's favorite thing than a hundred people's ninth-favorite thing." Sorry, guys, but 10th-favorite thing in 2006 will have to do.

RUNNERS-UP (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER): "A Chorus Line," "The Emperor Jones," "Heddatron," "The Lieutenant of Inishmore," "Satellites," "The Seven," "Shining City," "Tuesdays & Sundays" (a wonderful, haunting play that has reached the Fringe Festival twice now and is crying out for a commercial off-Broadway production), "Two Trains Running," and "Well."