

BEST OF L.A.

Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum. In '88-'89, look for Marilyn Horne in Rossini's *Tancredi*.

Despite some fears, Angelenos haven't abandoned the lively arts for their ever-more-elaborate home entertainment centers. Far from it. There are more than one hundred full-time professional theaters in the city, and a hundred more operating part-time. Glittering new playhouses such as the \$16-million, four-stage Los Angeles Theatre Center, which opened just over a year ago smack in the middle of Skid Row, help revitalize seedy parts of town as well as add to the Los Angeles theater scene. And when a production is good, there's an audience.

The stunning *Tamara*, a terrific melodrama staged throughout all the rooms of a simulated Italian villa, has been playing in Hollywood for more than two years. Drivers traveling down Highland in mid-evening have learned to keep an eye out for the Mussolini-era fascist policeman out front, guarding the car the characters hope to use for a getaway. Steven Berkoff's *Kvetch*, a brilliant dark comedy that played at the Odyssey in West Los Angeles, was so successful here that the original cast took it to New York.

"I've been very excited by the growth of what's happened in the twenty-year history here," says the Taper's Davidson. "Both our own and the growth of some of the smaller theaters that have been doing good work—the Matrix, the Back Alley, the Odyssey. I think we've shown there is both a developing audience and a certain sense of adventure."

Davidson hopes to appeal more to younger theatergoers in coming seasons. "A good percentage of our subscribers have been with us for twenty years," he says. "That means they're getting gray with me. I do not cast them out because they're gray-haired, but I want the young audience—not only the so-called Yuppies; I hope that term is almost passé—but students." They are, after all, the gray-haired season subscribers of the future.

"I'm also very interested in a large ethnic diversity," Davidson adds. "By that I mean on-stage as well as in the audience."

Young audiences have always been loyal fans of Los Angeles's burgeoning comedy clubs, a testing ground where so many famous comics got their start—and where they often return to try out new material. Perhaps the best is the Groundling Theatre on Melrose, home of the Groundlings, an improvisation troupe that gave birth to Laraine Newman, Pee Wee Herman, Elvira and Jon ("Yeah, that's the ticket") Lovitz.

"A lot of comedians come here because they're hoping to get some TV work out of their live club work," says George McGrath, an actor/writer (he now works on the Saturday morning Pee Wee Herman show) who sits on the Groundlings' board of directors. "There's not much angst here; I think comedy starts in places that are less mellow. But people come here to be discovered, which is why L.A. is a comedy capital."

But the biggest performing arts event this year is the Los Angeles Festival in September, which, like the Olympic Arts Festival, presents a variety of international performers organized by Robert Fitzpatrick. These range from the acrobats and jugglers of Quebec's Cirque du Soleil to a production of Strindberg's somber *Miss Julie* (in Swedish, no less) directed by Ingmar Bergman.

Other major festival events include performances by three leading French dance companies, notably the Lyon Opera Ballet in its West Coast debut; a week-long celebration of Los Angeles-born composer John Cage, and the North American premiere of Peter Brooks's nine-hour (shades of *Nicholas Nickleby*?) staging of *The Mahabharata*, a three-thousand-year-old Indian epic.

It all sounds rather exotic, but Fitzpatrick thinks Los Angeles is ready. The Olympic Arts Festival, he says, "triggered a sort of intellectual and artistic hunger for things that were unfamiliar or uncomfortable," he says. "You can see the fallout of that in the kind of pro-

gramming now done by UCLA and other ventures which are far more adventuresome than five years ago. People have stopped prejudging the audience, stopped talking down to the public." Unlike arts festivals in other cities, the Los Angeles Festival is aimed less at tourists than at residents. "It's a complement," Fitzpatrick says, "to a very strong, yearlong cultural life."

MUSEUMS AND FINE ARTS

Probably nothing has brought more immediate attention to Los Angeles culture than the two new museum additions. Last winter saw the opening of both the Robert O. Anderson Building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), a huge gallery devoted to modern and contemporary art that almost dwarfs the rest of the museum by comparison, and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) downtown, a long-awaited permanent home for contemporary art designed by the much-admired Tokyo architect Arata Isozaki.

These two new buildings have been twin beacons to the international art world, inspiring a flurry of attention that has suddenly made all those "cultural wasteland" jokes seem outdated. "When it comes to art museums, California is fast becoming the promised land," writes Thomas Hoving, editor of *Connoisseur* and former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Such serious showcases—and serious appreciation—inspire more collectors to take contemporary art seriously as well.

"I think artists are enjoying increased sales of their work," says Los Angeles art critic and lecturer Hunter Drohojowska. "There are probably twice as many galleries selling contemporary art today as ten years ago. Certainly the visual arts scene has become much more lively in almost every way."

Joan Quinn, an art collector, member of the California Arts Council and West Coast editor of *Interview* magazine, points out that these

days exhibits have begun to originate in Los Angeles and go on tour instead of the other way around. "It shows we've finally gotten that stamp of approval," she says. "The mere fact that Frank Gehry, an architect from here, is going on national tour shows what our future can be—it shows that we've always had it."

LACMA has benefited greatly from the appointment of Director Earl A. (Rusty) Powell III in 1980; since then, membership has doubled to over eighty thousand, and exhibits have broadened to include the balance of two major current shows: "Avant-Garde in the '80s" (through July 12) focuses on the controversy over whether there really is an avant-garde, while "Treasures From the Holy Land" (through July 5) is the largest exhibit of antiquities from Israel ever to leave the country.

In August, two much-awaited exhibits open at LACMA: "The Machine Age in America 1918-1941," an enormous, definitive show that caused much excitement when it opened at the Brooklyn Museum last year, and "The Arts and Crafts Movement: Design Reform in America, 1875-1920," a look at the rebellion against the industrial revolution that's enjoying a revival today.

Los Angeles is also becoming the international center of photography appreciation. In 1984, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu quietly bought more than fifty thousand fine art photographs, amassing what is probably the most important collection in the world. A promising exhibit, "Rare States and Unusual Subjects: Photographs by Man Ray, Paul Strand and André Kertész," opens there in July. In June, LACMA unveils "Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946."

RESTAURANTS

Has anything changed more dramatically in Los Angeles over the past few years than the new restaurant scene? And a scene it definitely is: The food has gotten better, more varied and sophisticated, but so has the general experi-

The acceptance of the performing arts is part of the good life, part of the reason one chooses to live in California.
—Charles Champlin,
L.A. Times arts editor

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ence of dining out.

The hottest eateries now double as art galleries. A few that come to mind are the modern, elegant Michael's and trendy, nouvelle Mexican Rebecca's in Santa Monica; Primi, known for Italian-style grazing, in West Los Angeles; and City on La Brea, where diners can watch chefs prepare an eclectic menu on video monitors. Inspired by the emphatically visual surroundings, people dress up to go out these days—in a carefully casual California way, of course.

"I think California's always had trends in a lot of other areas, and it finally became time to set a trend in what's offered in restaurants," says Peter Morton, who's something of a genius when it comes to creating "in" spots. Morton's in West Hollywood is *the* place for the entertainment industry to establish its pecking order, and lines still form around the block to get into Morton's Hard Rock Cafe in the Beverly Center, a favorite hangout for the young and aggressively hip.

Equally important is the vision of Wolfgang Puck, whose Spago in West Hollywood introduced the idea of topping individual pizzas with unexpected items like lobster, caviar and duck sausage and baking them in an open kitchen of wood-fired ovens. Can't get in for dinner? Go with a group for a platter of late-night desserts. No less successful is Puck's Chinois on Main in Santa Monica, where imaginative creations such as ginger-stuffed sizzling catfish offer an exciting blend of Chinese, French and California cooking.

This cross-cultural trend is perhaps the key to Los Angeles restaurants today. "We eat food that's more authentic now—real Italian food as opposed to fake Italian food," says Ruth Reichl, restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Times*. "And the number of Southeast Asian immigrants have changed our tastes. There's hundreds of Thai and Vietnamese restaurants now. But chefs have also started to switch cultures. You get French food with a Japanese influence, or Italian food with a Chinese influence." It sounds strange, but the Thai chicken

pizza at the California Pizza Kitchens in Beverly Hills, the Beverly Center and Canoga Park is the best thing on the menu.

Authentic American food is just as important, though. The Cajun/Creole cuisine of The Ritz and Orleans in West Los Angeles has been enormously successful. In fact, Merrill Shindler, restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, considers The Ritz's blackened steak the best in town.

Melrose Avenue, a testing ground for international trends, has become Los Angeles's new restaurant row. Practically every new food trend can be seen here: the retro fifties diner feel of the always-packed Johnny Rockets; the hip, high-tech Tommy Tang's Siamese Cafe and Sushi Bar; the Border Grill, a fantasy of Southwest cooking; and the new upscale home delivery of Angeli and Bangkok River. Especially notable is Melrose's string of innovative Italian bistros. Places like Bocca, Silvio, Rondo, Angeli and Cucina are turning this street into a culinary dream of garlic, basil and rosemary.

HOTELS

Los Angeles has always boasted fine hotels. The legendary pink Beverly Hills Hotel is celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary this month, and the shopping-convenient Beverly Wilshire and secluded Bel-Air have long been counted among the world's best places to stay. But while in the past the attraction of a great Los Angeles hotel has generally been in its glamorous history—something along the lines of "Clark Gable slept here" (which indeed he did, at the Beverly Hills Hotel, among other places)—a clientele that includes an increasing number of foreign visitors has begun to expect an international level of comfort and service.

What does that mean? Well, among other things, larger rooms and greater attention to detail. The Beverly Wilshire, which was bought a year-and-a-half ago by the Hong Kong-based Regent International, is begin-

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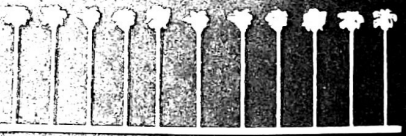
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ning a major renovation this month that will reduce the number of guest rooms so the size of each one can be increased, to 650 square feet on the average. The emphasis will be on the huge new bathrooms, which take their cue from the spectacular glass-walled showers and sunken tubs of the Regent in Hong Kong.

The L'Ermitage group of all-suite luxury hotels (the flagship L'Ermitage in Beverly Hills, plus Le Dufy, Le Mondrian, Le Bel Age and Le Parc in West Hollywood) underscore Los Angeles's new commitment to art. All have original art on the walls. "People come for the art ambience," says Jayne Levant, director of Small Luxury Hotels, of which L'Ermitage is a member. "When they dine at Cafe Russe in L'Ermitage, they hear of the Renoir that keeps them company."

FASHION AND SHOPPING

It's only been a few years since Melrose Avenue, once a sleepy crosstown thoroughfare of retirement homes and mattress stores, suddenly burst forth as the Carnaby Street of the eighties, the heart of the city's new status as a fashion capital.

Anyone who still thinks there's nowhere to walk in Los Angeles hasn't been to Melrose, where every weekend a parade of trendier-than-thou pedestrians provide the best people-watching in the West. Many of the stores come and go, but two that no shopper should miss are Buddy's, which has a beautiful selection of art pottery and mission furniture, and Hipper-Hipper (the name echoes London's famous Hyper-Hyper), a new emporium—it opened in March—of thirty vendors selling everything from vintage clothing to high-tech electronics.

Many Melrose-like shops have opened recently on the intersecting La Brea Avenue, so this shopping renaissance still seems to be at its peak. On the Westside, the same thing is happening in Venice, where new boutiques along Washington Boulevard are turning it into a new Main Street.

Stores across the country are turning more and more to Los Angeles designers for stylishly relaxed sportswear. "These clothes are definitely for a lifestyle where you drive," says Leon Max, who won the latest California Designer Award. "Lots of thought is given to comfort."

For the past several years, the California Mart, a garment industry trade center, has held a spring press preview to promote local designers. While the first shows were attended by a few dozen West Coast editors, now they're crammed with national fashion press—an indication that the rest of the world is taking Los Angeles fashion more seriously.

"In years past, we were a little overdone in that drastic punk look as well as the rhinestoned Beverly Hills matron look," says California Mart spokeswoman Karen Witynski. "Now I'm seeing a lot more individualism. More people are going out to events, and they're aware of great accessories that are conversation starters at galleries and openings. I think people are discovering the downtown L.A. art scene, and they like being more visible at these types of events."

No longer is Los Angeles a city that shuts down late at night. Since so many people are now going to the theater, a real need developed for some late-night place to go after the theater.

Of particular interest is the revived popularity of the coffeehouse, something that hasn't been around since the fifties.

And despite all the gloom about current reading habits, bookstore browsing in Los Angeles has never been more popular. Shops like George Sand and Book Soup in West Hollywood, Hunter's in Beverly Hills and Scene of the Crime in Sherman Oaks always seem to be filled with enthusiasts. "I'm amazed at the level of culture here," says Davis Dutton of Dutton's Books in North Hollywood. "Los Angeles has a very solid literary foundation."

"I would like to say," Dutton adds, "that one of my favorite quotes is from Clark Powell, who was for many years head librarian at

"The Olympic Arts Festival triggered a sort of intellectual and artistic hunger for things that were unfamiliar or uncomfortable."

—Robert J. Fitzpatrick, Olympic Arts Festival organizer

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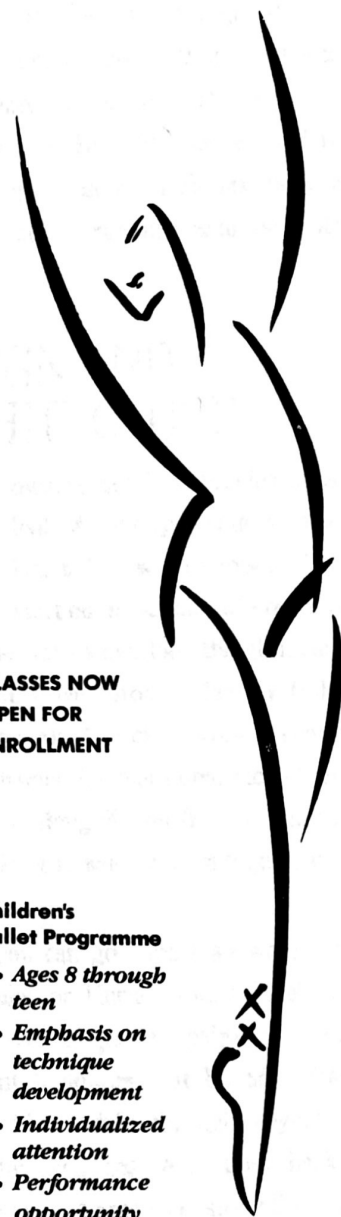
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UCLA. He once said that the true measure of a city's cultural life is the number of secondhand bookstores found in its boundaries. I got to thinking about the Durants, and Huxley, and the number of literary people who've written here. We have nothing to be ashamed of."

PUBLIC TELEVISION

What is the future of public television in Los Angeles? "KCET wants to export programs showing the vast cultural riches of this extraordinary city to the rest of this country and to the world," says William H. Kobin, president and chief executive officer. "This community has the talent and it has the financial and cultural resources to make that happen. We, the KCET staff, have the dream and the vision of what this can and should become. Together—the staff, the board, the community—we can accelerate KCET's progress and make it the station that Los Angeles and the country deserve."

FILM

This is the year—the centennial of the birth of Hollywood, U.S.A.—that Los Angeles celebrates its most glamorous aspect. Among the special events planned are the June 4–7 Centennial Weekend, with a revival of the Hollywood Canteen, a fireworks and laser show at the Hollywood sign, and dancing in the streets at Hollywood and Vine. And the Natural History Museum in Exposition Park gets the Smithsonian's traveling "Hollywood: Legend and Reality" exhibit in December.

"I still think there's nothing like going out to a movie," says *Los Angeles Times* arts editor Charles Champlin. "The Royal [in West Los Angeles], Fine Arts and Music Hall [in Beverly Hills] are my favorites. For a certain spectacular movie, the Plitt theaters [in Century City] are large and have nice sound systems." Not to

mention the most comfortable seats in town.

Three Hollywood movie houses worth the drive and parking fees are the Cinerama Dome, the Egyptian, which took its design from the King Tut mania of the twenties, and, of course, the Mann's Chinese, with all those cement handprints. In Westwood, the spaciousness of the Village and the National take the edge off the long lines. And in the past few years, the fourteen-screen Beverly Cineplex and refurbished Cineplex Odeons on Fairfax and La Brea have brought first-run movies to the center of the city.

DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

Nowhere but Los Angeles does the look of the city change so much in just a few square miles. You can start out in Malibu, where secluded estates and stables overlook the glittering Pacific Ocean; drive through Beverly Hills and see a fairy-tale "witch's house" sharing a street with imposing mansions; and detour into Pasadena or along Wilson Avenue just outside Hancock Park to see some vintage Craftsman bungalows.

Then you can go almost anywhere in the mid-Wilshire or Fairfax area to look at the modest rows of pastel, palm tree-framed apartment buildings that haven't changed since the thirties; drive through canyons to see how rustic urbanites share their backyards with coyotes and raccoons; stop off at the restored Victorians on Carroll Avenue in Angelino Heights.

It's all terribly eclectic, but that's the charm of this city—a charm that isn't always apparent to a casual visitor. "I still find a lot of beauty in metal, concrete and chain-link fencing, because that's what I grew up around," says Rochelle Reed, a design writer for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* and *Metropolitan Home*. "That's what makes us wacky to the rest of the country." It catches on. "Everybody wants this wonderful life we have here." ■