

## Reggae Christmas:

*Downtown celebrates the  
holidays with Urban Dread.*

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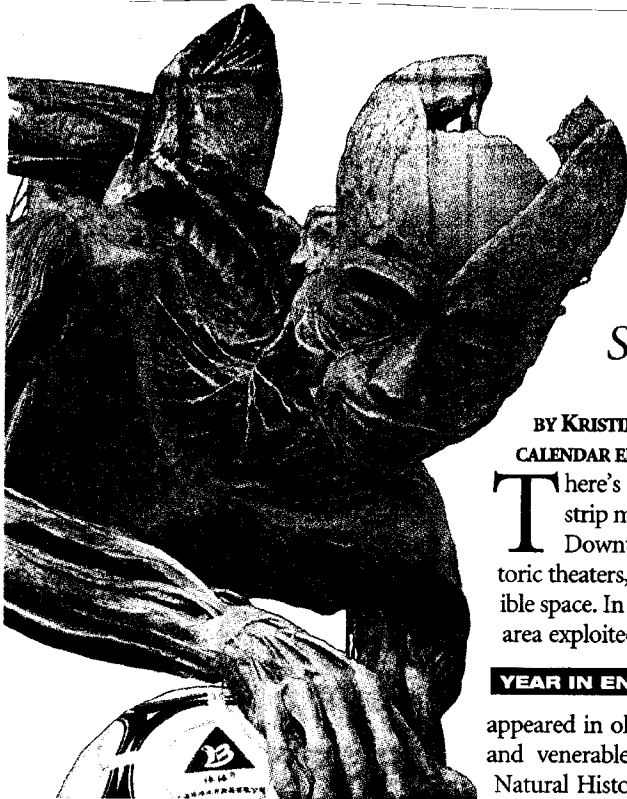
■ **AROUND TOWN:** *Historic Morrison Hotel faces lawsuits from all sides.*

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■ **CLICHE STADIUM:** *Tracking the explosions and implosions of 2004.*

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*The California Science Center's Body Worlds exhibit featured over 200 human specimens in various states of undress.*

# Exploiting What We've Got

*In 2004 Downtown Popped,  
Showed and Bowed*

BY KRISTIN FRIEDRICH  
CALENDAR EDITOR

**T**here's not much in the way of strip malls and movie multiplexes Downtown, but it's long on historic theaters, stately museums and flexible space. In 2004, like never before, the area exploited its resources. New shows

### YEAR IN ENTERTAINMENT

appeared in old storefronts and theaters, and venerable institutions such as the Natural History Museum dusted themselves off. The programming at the still-new Walt Disney Concert Hall and RED-CAT was as sharp, if not sharper, than in

their inaugural seasons. To show off its range, the Museum of Contemporary Art hosted shows that were sometimes serious, and sometimes less so.

Venues aren't Downtown's only asset, however. Residents and stakeholders formed social and cultural groups that gathered momentum and membership. Old and new gallerists formed a re-occurring art walk, and a swank new bar opened. Amid these additions, there was one departure: A heralded arts leader said goodbye, leaving with a much deserved round of applause and four decades of theater in his wake.

Here's a look at the notable arts-related stories of 2004, and the ways in which they took advantage of the Downtown landscape.

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# CALENDAR

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■ **Story of the Year: Pop Goes the Concert Hall:** Though Esa-Pekka Salonen remains the king of this court, and he and his Los Angeles Philharmonic routinely blow audiences away at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, the one-offs at the venue in 2004 were impossible to ignore. They began during the summer, when the Phil



migrated west to play the Hollywood Bowl, leaving the stage open for interlopers.

Singer-songwriter Jason Mraz was the fall's first pop performer, with a two-night run in June. Folk rock guitar duo the Indigo Girls showed up in July and Jewel appeared later that month. August held an appearance by David Byrne. The former frontman for '80s art pop group Talking Heads proved once again that the coolest people are those who don't try to be cool.

But no one topped Brian Wilson. Watching his two-night run in October, you would have thought Frank Gehry designed the hall specifically for the former Beach Boy. Wilson's intricate harmonies and rich orchestral textures came alive. After running through highlights of his back catalog, including a surprisingly touching a capella version of "Surfer Girl," Wilson and his band delved into a bold and sometimes quirky performance of *Smile*, the mythic album that was abandoned in 1967, then reawakened and completed last year. By the time Wilson exited the stage after several rousing encores, there was nothing left to do but smile.

■ **REDCAT Defies the Sophomore Slump:** Executive Director Mark Murphy's first season hinted that CalArts' Downtown performance venue was ready to host the raw, exotic programs that didn't quite belong anywhere else, but that certainly needed a home. His second season's eclectic slate proved that REDCAT is much more than just an arty sideshow to Disney Hall. Highlights included the Wooster Group's Poor Theater in September. The group visited and then rebuilt: Pol-



ish theater guru Jerzy Grotowski's studio, watched hours of his productions, and mimicked his actors' physicality—developing their own homage, from the outside in. It was bold, out-there stuff, and somehow, very funny too.

In November, between singing Mahler and Bach at Disney Hall, German baritone Thomas Quasthoff came to REDCAT for a night of, surprisingly, American standards. He righteously channeled Satchmo, scatted like Ella, cracked the audience up with riffs and impressions, then made it go soft with an earnest "Moon River." He was followed in December by a one-man *Macbeth*. British actor Stephen Dillane chewed through all the characters himself—the tormented warrior king namesake, his diabolical, and in this case, French-speaking wife, and all the people, and witches, scratched by the couple's murderous ambition. At one point Dillane took off his coat—drenched in sweat and seemingly trampled by the dozens of characters running through his body—and we wondered how, physically, he lived through the performance every night.

■ **The Pluck and Peculiarity of 'Alma':** Some people loved it, some hated it, and many just scratched their heads. *Alma* wasn't exactly good theater, but you had to admire thechutzpah of the team that brought it to Broadway in the fall. Austrian impresario Paulus Manker directed and produced it, the Los Angeles Conservancy stewarded the production to the Los Angeles Theater, and the Delijani family, the venue's owner, allowed a zany production to unfold in every nook and cranny of their sleeping beauty of a space.

The multiple storylines somehow involved Alma Mahler-Werfel, the randy wife of composer Gustav Mahler, architect Walter Gropius, writer Franz Werfel and mistress to, among others, painters Oskar Kokoschka and Gustav Klimt. Eyebrow-raisers included the cafeteria-style Austrian buffet at intermission, the brief and inexplicable bus tour of Downtown, a naked actress in the finale, and the \$150 tickets.

■ **The Secret Is Out:** The area's new residential community gained an element of identity with the April launch of Out in Downtown L.A., a social club geared toward local gay, lesbian and gay-friendly folk. Already there are more than 350 members and a party schedule that rivals P. Diddy's, including gatherings at lofts, a fete in a Pegasus penthouse, a potluck in Echo Park and more than a few happy hour mixers. With each event, the group's support system grows—not just in membership, but with local players who offer services and space for the activities. Leasing managers, bar owners, liquor companies, developers, furniture purveyors, artists and more are lining up to support their new neighbors.

■ **Gopher It:** When the sun goes down, there's the Standard rooftop and a Bukowskian array of dive bars, but what Downtown needed was something in the middle—accessible and low-key, but still hip. In June, the Golden Gopher heeded the call and opened inside a formerly run-down storefront on Eighth Street. Transformed by Hollywood nightlife moguls Cedi Moses and Marc Smith, it's now a low-lit watering hole with mammoth couches, retro video games, an outdoor patio for smokers and lamps decorated by the bar's glided rodent namesake. The Gopher can turn on a dime from lightly populated to jam-packed, but the jukebox always rocks and the Pabst is cheap, making it a destination for both locals and

itinerant Angeleno barhoppers looking for a change of pace.

■ **Tall MOCA, Extra Hot:** The whole of MOCA's Grand Avenue facility housed *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968* in March. Curator Ann Goldstein's show included major players like Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, as well as artists who flirted with the movement but were never earmarked by it. Though the works looked simple enough—big pieces, bright colors, clean lines—the ideas behind them weren't. Minimalist artists were trying to re-conceive art traditions. So was MOCA: Its show was the first large-scale exhibit on the subject.

MOCA countered its serious *Minimal Future* with March's mischievous *Dead House Ur* at the Geffen Contemporary. The huge replica of German artist Gregor Schneider's childhood home was full of confusions and fake-outs, dead ends and trap doors. Visitors entered from a nondescript door in the back of the museum and had to navigate the house themselves—whether that meant using cell phones for light or cajoling guards to reveal tips about which walls were fake and which windows opened. In the fall, the hilarious *Rodney Graham: A Little Thought* arrived. The show included the film "Phonokinetoscope," in which the artist drops a tab of acid and rides his bike around a park.



■ **New Energy at Exposition Park:** The California Science Center and the Natural History Museum (NHM) countered their reputation as just field trip magnets for kids with a slate of inventive exhibits. March held NHM's *L.A.: Light/motion/dreams*. The show, created in-house by a team of museum curators, designers, artists and videographers, pops with flashy



Clockwise from top left: Natural History Museum insect zoo coordinator Brent Karner helped bring the Bug Fair to the museum in May; Alma unpacked in the Los Angeles Theater this fall; Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change* came to the Ahmanson Theatre, ushered in by (below) Center Theatre Group Artistic Director Gordon Davidson, who takes his final bow at the end of the year; Brian Wilson played Disney Hall in November.

# LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

Volume 33, Number 52 December 27, 2004

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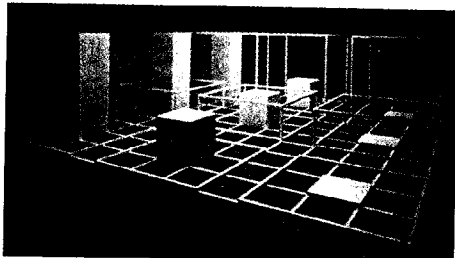
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visuals and sound. Though it doesn't always convey its supposed theme — the ways in which man has impacted the nature of the L.A. Basin — it's a bold move away from the inactive and dusty displays of old. In runs through January.

In July, the Science Center opened the year's most controversial and discussed museum exhibit in the entire city. *Body Worlds*, which draws Disneyland-sized lines, contains more than 200 skinless human specimens, splayed open to show what's underneath — dried organs, tendons, bones and musculature. Mastermind Dr. Gunther von Hagens invented "plastination," the process that replaces the

body's water and fat with fluid plastic, in the '70s at the University of Heidelberg. Perhaps more shocking was Von Hagens' September announcement that 30 American "pioneers" have signed up to donate their bodies to the exhibit. The show also continues through January.

The NHM also thrilled (and occasionally grossed out) crowds at May's Bug Fair. Families, science geeks, hipsters and fetishists crowded the halls to get a look at the many-legged creatures on display — dead, mounted, alive and edible. Vendors sold "pet" insects, books, entomological equipment and supplies, artwork, toys and clothing. The 11,507 people at the creep show set a two-day attendance record.

■ **Opening the Fine Art Floodgates:** The Downtown art scene received a major boost this year with the establishment of Galley Row, a pedestrian-friendly art space cluster, with both formal galleries and eye candy hanging in vacant storefronts. The 26-block area on Spring and Main between Second and Ninth streets was designated and approved by City Council.

After the Row and its blue way-finding signs were unveiled this spring, its organizers branched off from the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) committee they started from, and began the process of forming a non-profit. The next

step was the creation of an art walk, held every other Thursday.

For the public, the Gallery Row Organization provides maps and information. Additionally Bert Green, owner of the eponymous art gallery on Fifth Street, and Brady Westwater, president of DLANC, show prospective gallerists around the neighborhood and provide them with information about business incentives. The seduction works: At the first art walk in September, there were 10 participants; now there are 19.

■ **Davidson's Curtain Call:** In a discussion of Downtown resources, four-decade theater director, producer and administrator Gordon Davidson can't be left out. The head of the Center Theatre Group (CTG) — which includes the Mark Taper Forum, the Ahmanson and the new Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City — ends his tenure at the close of 2004.

A New York stage manager turned director, Davidson got a job running the just-opened Taper in 1967, shepherding shows that were daring (*The Trial of the Catonsville Nine*, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*), ethnocentric (*Zoot Suit*) and Broadway and big-screen bound (*Children of a Lesser God*, *Angels in America*). This year, he got back to his roots a bit, directing *Like Jazz* and *The Talking Cure*, and ushering his old friend Tony Kushner's work back to CTG by way of *Caroline*, or

*Change* at the Ahmanson. To his successor Michael Ritchie, the former Williamstown Theatre Festival artistic director, he leaves an era and an empire.

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Clockwise from top left: A Minimal Future opened at MOCA, Grand Avenue in March; Kjell Hagen and Nic Cha Kim helped organize Gallery Row, which was unveiled in May; revelers at Out in Downtown L.A.'s penthouse party in July; Stephen Dillane in a one-man Macbeth and baritone Thomas Quasthoff (left) in a night of American standards, both at REDCAT.

