

# Berkeley Rep a big success on Broadway

by Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic  
Friday, October 16, 2009

Berkeley Repertory Theatre is fast emerging as one of Broadway's most important "farm teams," and that's good news not only for the East Bay theater, but perhaps for Bay Area theater in general.

In the past couple of weeks alone: The Rep's production of Carrie Fisher's *Wishful Drinking* opened in New York to rave reviews. *The New York Times* added its voice to the chorus of positive reviews for the Rep's current production of the Green Day musical, *American Idiot*. And Associate Artistic Director Les Waters flew to New York to ready the Rep's *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)* for its Nov. 19 opening.

"It's an amazing collection of things all launching Berkeley Rep-wise," says *Idiot* co-producer Tom Hulce, who also co-produced the Broadway hit *Spring Awakening*.

While Chicago's Goodman and Steppenwolf theater companies have long track records of sending shows to New York, Hulce says he couldn't think of a time when either of those theaters "had so many things happen at once: two shows on Broadway and a new film (Spike Lee's adaptation of the Rep's *Passing Strange*) and a first version of a high-profile new musical at home."

Hulce isn't saying yet whether *Idiot* will make its way to Broadway but confirms it's possible.

Although the two Chicago theaters are veterans in sending shows to New York, Berkeley Rep's emergence as a prime source for Manhattan stages is more abrupt and more unusual for a Bay Area not-for-profit theater.

## 7 Shows to Broadway

In the past few years, the Rep has sent seven shows to Broadway and off-Broadway, starting with Artistic Director Tony Taccone's Broadway debut, Sarah Jones' *Bridge & Tunnel*, followed soon by Waters' production of Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*. Taccone is back on Broadway as director of *Wishful Drinking*, which was launched in Los Angeles but fine-tuned for New York during two Berkeley Rep runs, and Waters is making his Broadway debut restaging his Rep production of Ruhl's *Next Room* for Lincoln Center.

"Their profile in New York is very much rising, and deservedly so," says Lincoln Center Artistic Director An-

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### BAY AREA THEATER Berkeley Rep a big success on Broadway

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CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

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Berkeley Rep continues on A14



Les Waters / The Chronicle  
"American Idiot," "Wishful Drinking," and "In the Next Room" may go from Berkeley Rep to Broadway.

### HOME SALES

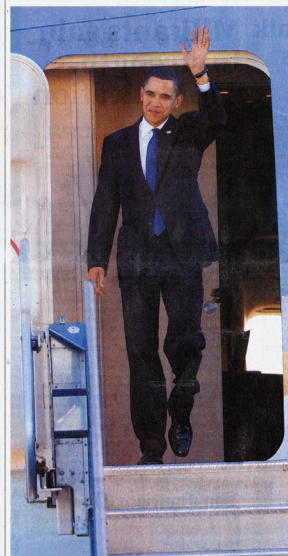
## Tax credit, low interest rates lead to increase

By Carolyn Said  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A home-buyer tax credit and low interest rates helped spur a modest increase in Bay Area home sales in September, according to a real estate report released Thursday.

At the same time, the median price edged up, with fewer bargain-priced foreclosures to drag it down and more high-end home sales to buoy it. A total of 270 new and resale houses and condos changed hands in the nine-county Bay Area last month, up 0.4 percent from September 2008, according to MIA DataQuest, a San Diego real estate research firm. Existing home sales stood at 5,706, up 4.7 percent from last year. The median price paid for an existing single-

## President visits city — lucky few see him



President Obama waves as he exits Air Force One after touching down at SFO. Obama was in town to attend a Democratic Party fundraiser.

Supporters, protesters voice views, while Obama assures Dems he's up for challenges



Raggle and Novs Ortega watch as President Obama arrives at SFO.

By Carla Marinucci  
CHRONICLE POLITICAL WRITER

President Obama was met with cheers and jeers Thursday in his first visit to San Francisco as commander in chief, telling a friendly crowd at a sold-out Democratic Party fundraiser that while "some of our opponents think they can wear us out, I'm not tired — I'm refreshed."

America is "closer than we have ever been" on health care reform, he said, and promised to follow through with efforts to develop green technology and tackle difficult problems around the globe.

"Iraq was hard. Afghanistan is harder," Obama told supporters. "Iran, seeking to develop nuclear weapons, is hard. The Middle East peace process, that's hard. These are not problems that are going to be solved overnight. They're not going to be solved in nine months. They're not going to be solved in 18 months" and "maybe not in 36 months," he said.

"We're just getting started." Obama's appearance at the fundraiser presented him a friendlier reception than one earlier in the day in New Orleans, where he took criticism from

Obama continues on A16

Protesters: The president succeeds in singing the left and right together outside the Westin St. Francis Hotel — to complain about his policies. A16

### BALLOON BOY

## Captivating story was mostly hot air



America was transfixed as it watched a silver helium balloon — said to be carrying frightened 6-year-old boy — sail through the Colorado sky Thursday morning.

As the saucer-shaped balloon finally began settling toward earth, Dave Wyatt paused, his beer halfway to his lips, waiting for it to touch



Little Falcon (yes, that's his name) Howe may have been scared, but he wasn't soaring

dré Bishop, who flew out to see *Next Room* at Berkeley and snagged the play for his company.

"It puts a certain spring in your step," Taccone says of the Rep's new high profile. "For everyone at the company, in some unconscious way it's a validation for everything you've been doing. But it's certainly not what we planned."

The Rep's success may be raising the profile of Bay Area theater in general as well. *Memphis*, developed at Palo Alto's TheatreWorks, is in previews on Broadway, and Thick Description's *A Boy and His Soul* is off-Broadway. Shows from SF Playhouse, Shotgun

Players, Exit Theatre and others have played New York recently as well.

"I think it's good for all of us," Taccone says. "If something is great at A.C.T. or TheatreWorks or Marin, it raises people's expectations at all the other theaters. Is it good for Chicago when Steppenwolf does *August: Osage County*? It's good for the Goodman and everybody else. When people come out from New York and other places, they check out other companies while they're in town."

### Why the Success?

Asked how he explains the Rep's success, Taccone offers a qualification: "Whatever I say is going to sound irrationally coherent."

The reasons he comes up with range from the company's adventurous programming and the flexibility provided by its second, larger stage, the 8-year-old Roda Theatre, to experience, "the whimsy of fate" and being in Berkeley with "a unique audience and staff that's excited by new ideas and new work."

Others cite a factor Taccone omits. "Tony's increasing presence as a director on the national scene" is a big part of it, playwright Tony Kushner says.

"Between Tony and Les, you've got two highly respected, major artistic leaders tied to the same regional theater," says Oskar Eustis, artistic director of New York's Public Theater, which co-commissioned *Passing Strange*.

"I would be hard put to point to another company with that kind of artistic firepower, which makes for a really attractive place for people like me because I know I've got some really good eyes and real colleagues paying attention to the show out there," he says.

### Sharp audience

Eustis also cites the Rep's audience, which he says is unusually "analogous to New York. It's a pretty good barometer of how things will fly here."

Hulce, who has decades of experience with major regional theaters as an actor and director, says it was the Rep's reputation, previous relationships with Taccone and Managing Director Susie Medak, and seeing shows such as *Passing Strange* that drew Broadway producers to open discussions.

Seeing the Roda, when they were in San Francisco for *Spring Awakening* a year ago, sealed the deal. The fact that the Green Day members could check in on rehearsals from their East Bay homes was an added attraction.

"Building that proscenium house was a very smart move," Kushner says. The Roda, he explains, "is a fantastic space with an intimate house and a stage that can accommodate shows that might move to New York. That makes it possible to consider the Rep for that kind of developmental project."

### The downside

Taccone and Medak are quick to point out the potential pitfalls of becoming Broadway's farm team—"mission creep," exposing the budget to risk, spreading the staff too thin, neglecting the rest of the season or the local audience—"when your focus is 3,000 miles away," as Taccone puts it.

"You can get addicted to it," Medak says, "to the money, to the adrenaline rush. You have to do it very carefully."

The Rep tries to package each move from Berkeley to New York according to the needs of the show, she adds. *Eurydice* and Kushner's *Brundibar*, directed by Taccone, moved as co-productions with Yale Repertory Theatre and the Manhattan nonprofit theaters where they played. *Wishful Drinking* (co-produced with local commercial producer Jonathan Reinis) and *In the Next Room* have the advantage of moving to two Manhattan nonprofits—the Roundabout and Lincoln Center—with their own Broadway theaters.

In cases like *Next Room*, which is part of Lincoln Center's regular Broadway season, the Rep gets "a small royalty." With projects like *American Idiot*, with obvious commercial prospects, the potential financial rewards are higher.

"We could not possibly have undertaken a project that size under normal circumstances," Medak says, "and certainly not in this economy." Though it is a Rep production, built by its staff, it is partially being underwritten by Hulce and producer Ira Pittelman's partnership. That means that the Rep "spent no more on this production out of our general operating funds than on any other production in the season," she adds.

"I consider this the *American Idiot* stimulus package," she says. "In a year when we would have otherwise had a smaller staff and laid off people, there are many who are working who wouldn't be otherwise. And it's been a huge learning experience for everyone. Having Tom and Ira involved gave us access to people and resources—the videography, the sound and aerial technology—we couldn't have afforded."

### More projects

Meanwhile, Taccone is doing workshops with California Shakespeare Theater Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone on a new piece about the 1978 murder of Moscone's father, San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Waters, in New York directing *Next Room*, is also working with Eustis on future Rep-Public co-commissions, including a new play by playwright Rinne Groff that will probably be part of the Rep's next season, and a new musical by Stew, the author and composer of *Passing Strange*.

"So work goes on as usual," Waters says.