

Chapter 15

Applauding the Cultural Scene

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding out what's going on in town when you're here
 - ▶ Getting tickets to concerts, theater, and other events
 - ▶ Enjoying the major opera, ballet, theater, and classical music scenes
 - ▶ Broadening your horizons with experimental theater and dance
 - ▶ Dining before or after the show
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Whether you're up for world-class classical music or experimental theater, and pretty much everything in between, you can find it on stage in San Francisco. In this chapter, I'll give you the overall picture and then detail how to find out what's going on and score tickets.

Getting the Inside Scoop

Performing-arts fans can find plenty of interesting offerings in San Francisco. For drama, there's a bit of the tried and true when Broadway road companies drop into town, and our own **American Conservatory Theatre (ACT)** regularly produces works that are visually inspired and well acted. Opera is just as vibrant. Although the great Enrico Caruso never returned to San Francisco after the shock of the 1906 earthquake, plenty of other stars have aria'd their way through town, raising the local opera company to world-class heights. The **SF Symphony** is in a similar league, and while I'm bragging, I'd better mention the ballet. It, too, is as fine a company as you'll see anywhere. But don't let the big brands sway you from trying stages outside the Civic Center, including Yerba Buena Gardens, and smaller venues south of Market where experimental theater abounds.

Finding Out What's Playing and Getting Tickets

On the Web you can search sites such as **Citysearch** (www.sanfrancisco.citysearch.com) and the **San Francisco Chronicle** (www.sfgate.com/listings) for reviews and synopses; otherwise, follow your instincts (and local recommendations) when you get here. You may stumble onto something wonderful. If you're looking for something outside the mainstream (and this is a fine place to find that), a month or so before your trip sign up for the e-mail list Flavorpill SF (sf.flavorpill.net). This free, weekly e-mail highlights the more-elusive cultural events gracing the town, including films, concerts, and theater.

Here are a few other Web sites to check out for what's happening now:

- ✓ www.sfbg.com: You can find *The Bay Guardian's* complete entertainment listings online. Try this one first.
- ✓ www.sanfran.com: *San Francisco*, our very own monthly magazine, is chock-full of arts and entertainment information.
- ✓ www.sfweekly.com: This is the Web site for *SF Weekly*, another great lefty weekly with provocative features, lots of local info, and reviews.

For tickets to any theater, dance, symphony, or concert performance, you can call the appropriate box office directly or head online and order with a credit card (charges are nonrefundable if, for some reason, you don't show up). Around Civic Center, **City Box Office**, 180 Redwood St., Suite 100 (☎ **415-392-4400**; www.cityboxoffice.com), sells tickets to shows playing at the Nob Hill Masonic Center, Project Artaud Theater, Herbst Theatre, and other lesser-known stages. If you arrive in town without plans, visit **TIX Bay Area** (☎ **415-433-7827**; www.theatrebayarea.org/tix) for half-price tickets for same-day performances (a \$1 to \$3 service charge is tacked on). TIX, which is also a **BASS Ticketmaster** outlet, is located on Union Square between Post and Geary streets. It's open Tuesday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 7 p.m., and Sunday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



Don't buy tickets from anyone outside TIX or a box office claiming to have discounted or scalper tickets, especially to sporting events. Folks get duped all the time, forking over real cash for counterfeit tickets. Another common scam is to sell tickets to an event that has already taken place.

The concierge at your hotel can be a source for hard-to-get tickets. The larger the hotel, the more likely it is that the concierge will be successful, but in any case, it's worth asking. If he does manage to come through, a \$5 to \$10 tip is appropriate thanks.

Surfing for performing-arts information

Check out the following sites for all your performing arts needs:

- ✔ American Conservatory Theater: www.act-sfbay.org
- ✔ Best of Broadway theater info: www.bestofbroadway-sf.com
- ✔ Lamplighters light opera company: www.lamplighters.org
- ✔ San Francisco Ballet: www.sfballet.org
- ✔ San Francisco Opera: www.sfopera.org
- ✔ San Francisco Performances: www.performances.org
- ✔ San Francisco Symphony: www.sfsymphony.org

If you're flexible about your plans for the evening, go to the box office of the theater you want to attend and stand in line for last-minute cancellations by season-ticket holders or the release of tickets held for media or VIPs. With luck, you can score seats in the orchestra. Without luck, you'll have wasted an hour or so.

Don't be late to the theater, symphony, or opera. Curtains rise on time, and if you're late, you won't be seated until there's a break in the action.



If you're attending a show at the Geary Theater, avoid the boxes on either side. They're positioned to obscure half the stage, generally the half where the action takes place.

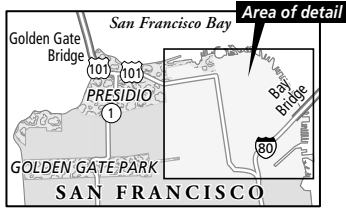
As for what to wear, you'll see a little of everything, from tailored evening clothes to jeans. People seem to dress up a bit more Friday and Saturday nights, especially in the orchestra seats, but your Sunday best isn't necessary.

Raising the Curtain on the Performing Arts

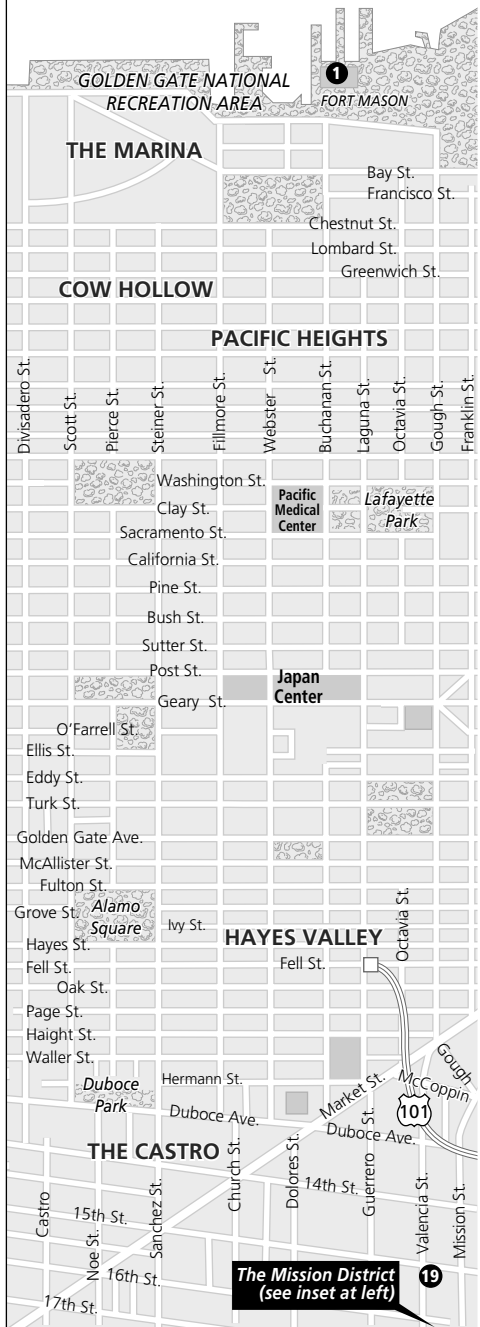
Cable cars will get you to Union Square theaters if you're coming from North Beach; from the Marina or Union Street, take a 30-Stockton or 45-Union/Stockton bus. If you prefer to take a cab to your lodgings afterward, walk to a big hotel to catch one. You can find a number of parking garages near Union Square with fees beginning at \$10 for the evening.

You can reach the **Civic Center**, where the opera, ballet, and symphony are located, by any Muni Metro streetcar or any bus along Van Ness Avenue. I wouldn't walk around this area unescorted after dark to get back to the Muni station, and taxis aren't always immediately available. If you feel stuck, walk to one of the many nearby restaurants and ask the

San Francisco Performing Arts



- American Conservatory Theater (Geary Theater) **11**
- Beach Blanket Babylon (Club Fugazi) **2**
- Curran Theater **10**
- 42nd St. Moon (Eureka Theatre) **3**
- Golden Gate Theater **14**
- Intersection for the Arts **19**
- Lorraine Hansberry Theatre **6**
- The Magic Theater **1**
- Marines Memorial Theatre **6**
- New Conservatory Theater **17**
- New Langton Arts **18**
- Noontime Concerts (St. Patrick's Church) **12**
- Old First Presbyterian Church **4**
- Orpheum **15**
- The Plush Room **5**
- Poor Street Theater **7**
- Project Artaud Theater **20**
- San Francisco Ballet **16**
- San Francisco Opera **16**
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- Smuin Ballets/SF (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts) **13**
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host to call a taxi for you. Relax, and prepare to wait a while at the bar. If you're driving, you can park in the garage on Grove Street between Franklin and Gough streets.

South of Market and Mission neighborhood venues (see “Broadway West: The theater scene” later in this chapter for venue listings) have troubles similar to **Civic Center**. You can usually get to the performance by public transportation, but returning late at night by bus is less interesting (or perhaps more interesting, depending on your perspective). Again, if you're attending a show in this area, don't expect to automatically hail a cab afterward. Instead, walk to a nearby restaurant or bar and call. These numbers for local cab companies can help:

- ✓ **Desoto Cab:** ☎ 415-673-1414
- ✓ **Luxor Cabs:** ☎ 415-282-4141
- ✓ **Pacific:** ☎ 415-986-7220
- ✓ **Veteran's Cab:** ☎ 415-552-1300
- ✓ **Yellow Cab:** ☎ 415-626-2345

I would never seriously compare our little theater district to the Great White Way in New York, but San Francisco has a fair number of professional stages. At least ten in varying sizes are housed around **Union Square**, and experimental theaters are scattered about the **South of Market** and **Mission** districts in converted warehouses and gallery spaces. Productions may include a musical or two, distinguished classics, and world-premiere comedies and dramas.

The **American Conservatory Theater (ACT)** is the preeminent company in town and produces a wide variety of plays during its season, which runs October to June. The acting is first-rate, and the costumes and sets are universally brilliant. The choice of material ranges from new works by playwrights such as Tom Stoppard, can't-lose American chestnuts, and Shakespeare, all the way to not-quite-ready-for-prime-time dramas that still receive a careful rendering. The lovely **Geary Theater** is home to ACT productions. You'll find it at 415 Geary St., at Mason Street (☎ 415-749-2228; www.act-sfbay.org). Ticket prices range from \$11 to \$55, and the box office is open every day from 10 a.m.

Broadway hits and road shows appear down the block at the **Curran Theater**, 445 Geary St., between Mason and Taylor streets (☎ 415-551-2000; www.bestofbroadway-sf.com); the **Golden Gate Theater**, 1 Golden Gate Ave., at Market Street; and the **Orpheum**, 1192 Market St., at Eighth Street. The phone number listed for the Curran Theater is shared by all three venues, and the recorded message explains what's playing, where to buy tickets, and how to get to the theaters.

You may like your theater a little more cutting-edge. If so, check out **The Magic Theater** at Fort Mason Center, Bldg. A (☎ 415-441-8822; www.magictheatre.org), where David Mamet recently premiered his

adaptation of *Dr. Faustus*. Tickets range from \$24 to \$53. Or try **Intersection for the Arts**, a 72-seat performance space in the Mission District at 446 Valencia St., between 15th and 16th streets (☎ **415-626-3311**; www.theintersection.org). You won't find anything traditional here in their exhibits, literary series, music, or interdisciplinary works of art. Ticket prices run between \$9 and \$15.



The Magic Theater sets aside a limited number of tickets for “Pay What You Can” Tuesdays. Reservations aren't accepted; it's first-come, first-served at the box office (open Tues–Sat noon to 5 p.m.), cash only.

The **Lorraine Hansberry Theatre** in the Sheehan Hotel, 620 Sutter St. (☎ **415-474-8800**; www.lorrainehansberrytheatre.com), features dramas and musicals by black authors past and present such as Langston Hughes and August Wilson. Recent productions include *Eubie!* and Wilson's *King Hedley II*.

Another Union Square stage is tucked inside the building that houses the Kensington Park Hotel at 450 Post St. The **Post Street Theater**, formerly Theatre on the Square, opened with the rock 'n' roll musical *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. You can find out what's playing next on the Web site www.poststreettheatre.com or by contacting the box office at ☎ **415-321-2900**. **Marines' Memorial Theatre**, located on the second floor of the Marines' Memorial Club, 609 Sutter St. (☎ **415-771-6900**; www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com), similar in size and flavor to the Post Street Theater, presents small off-Broadway shows such as *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change*.

Close to Civic Center, in an impressive former Masonic Temple built in 1911, is the **New Conservatory Theater (NCT)** complex at 25 Van Ness Ave., a half block off Market Street (☎ **415-861-8972**). NCT, which consists

Pre- and post-theater dining

You have plenty of dining choices before attending any 8 p.m. performance. After the show, however, your dining choices are somewhat more limited. On Union Square, a branch of **The Cheesecake Factory** has arrived on the eighth floor of Macy's. It's open until 11 p.m. **The Grand Cafe** (reviewed in Chapter 10) also serves until 11 p.m. from a bar menu. If you're attending an event around Civic Center and want to eat before the show, be sure to make reservations. **The Hayes Street Grill** (reviewed in Chapter 10) originally opened to accommodate the culture crowd, and this restaurant has been joined by a great many more on and around Hayes Street. Down around Yerba Buena Center, **Bacar**, 448 Brannan, between Third and Fourth streets (☎ **415-904-4100**), has the most extensive wine list around and serves tempting dishes like wok-cooked Maine lobster. **XYZ** at the W Hotel, 181 Third St., at Howard (☎ **415-817-7836**), has a cafe as well as a restaurant, so you can go casual or upscale, depending on how quickly you need to eat.

of three small theaters, presents a variety of productions throughout the year. From April through August is “**Pride Season**,” during which a series of six plays with gay themes is presented. NTC also produces children’s theater programming all year long.



Admirers of musical theater should keep an eye out for productions by **42nd Street Moon**. This company presents long-forgotten American musicals in concert format and gives audiences an opportunity to hear delightfully clever tunes that somehow “disappeared.” Check the Web site (www.42ndstmoon.org) for shows and dates. Productions take place at the **Eureka Theatre**, 215 Jackson St., at Battery in the Financial District (☎ 415-978-2787).

Symphony and Opera

San Francisco has many venues for listening to classical music. Local papers and Web sites are your best source for event listings. You can see major groups such as the **San Francisco Symphony**, which performs in the **Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall**, 201 Van Ness Ave., at Grove Street (☎ 415-864-6000), in the Civic Center. The season runs from September through July, and tickets cost \$15 to \$78. Also at Civic Center is the **Herbst Theater**, 410 Van Ness Ave. (☎ 415-621-6600), home to **San Francisco Performances** (www.sfperformances.org) and other professional groups.

You can also enjoy piano and violin duos, chamber music ensembles, and singers at **Old First Presbyterian Church**, 1751 Sacramento St., at Van Ness Avenue (☎ 415-474-1608; www.oldfirstconcerts.org). These less-formal concerts are scheduled afternoons and evenings, and tickets are a mere \$12 to \$15. The California Street cable car takes you to within 2 blocks of the church. If you’re around **Yerba Buena Gardens** at luncheon on a Wednesday, head to **St. Patrick’s Church**, 756 Mission St., which is the site for half-hour concerts produced by **Noontime Concerts** (☎ 415-777-3211). These brief shows may be solo or full orchestral performances. Admission is \$5. Noontime Concerts also uses the **A.P. Giannini Auditorium** at the Bank of America headquarters, 555 California St., in the Financial District. Concerts are currently held there on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month, but call for an updated schedule.

The San Francisco Opera opens its season with a gala in September and ends quietly in early January. Performances are produced in the **War Memorial Opera House**, 301 Van Ness Ave., at Grove Street (☎ 415-864-3330), in the Civic Center. Tickets run from \$10 to \$140. **Pocket Opera** (☎ 415-972-8934) delivers opera to the masses in stripped-down, English-language versions that are quite entertaining and highly professional. The season begins in February and ends in June; productions are held at different locations, including the Palace of the Legion of Honor, so you’ll need to phone for a schedule or check the Web site (www.pocketopera.org).

The Civic Center



Dance

Plenty of classical and modern dance groups raise the barre in San Francisco, the **San Francisco Ballet** being the best-known company. Their season runs from February to June, and they perform in the **War Memorial Opera House**, 301 Van Ness Ave., at Grove Street. Call ☎ **415-865-2000** for tickets. Prices run from \$7 for standing room to \$100 for orchestra seats.

You'll discover an adventurous season of modern dance, performance art, and theater at the **Project Artaud Theater**, 450 Florida St., at 17th Street (☎ **415-626-4370**; www.artaud.org), in the Mission District. Ticket prices are \$20 or less, depending on the day and type of show.

Some of the most interesting dance companies, including **Smuin Ballets/SF**, appear on stage at the **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts**, 700 Howard St. (☎ **415-978-2787**). It's easy to reach, and there are many fine restaurants in the neighborhood for pre- or post-theater supper.

New Langton Arts, a nonprofit, artist-run performance space in SoMa, may have an art show, a theater performance, video pieces, or all three at the same time — it's experimental and won't be mistaken for *Beach Blanket Babylon* in any case. Check it out at 1246 Folsom St., between Eighth and Ninth streets (☎ 415-626-5416). Gallery and box office hours are Wednesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m.



You may not want to miss *Beach Blanket Babylon*, by now a San Francisco ritual. The 90-minute musical revue is known for wildly imaginative hats that seem to live lives of their own. The spectacle is so popular that even after celebrating 30 years of poking fun at stars, politicians, and San Francisco itself, seats for the constantly updated shows are always sold out. Purchase tickets (\$33 to \$75) through TIX or by mail at least three weeks in advance (especially if you want to attend a weekend performance). You must be 21 to attend evening performances; minors are only admitted for Sunday matinees, when no liquor is sold. You can enjoy this spectacle in North Beach at **Club Fugazi**, 678 Green St., between Powell Street and Columbus Avenue (☎ 415-421-4222; www.beachblanketbabylon.com). You've got to see it to believe it.