

## THE ARTS

# top picks

- Southbank Centre (p306)
- Wigmore Hall (p306)
- Shakespeare's Globe (p311)
- Sadler's Wells (p307)
- Electric Cinema (p309)
- BFI Southbank (p309)
- Royal Opera House (p310)
- Royal Court Theatre (p311)
- National Theatre (p311)
- Southwark Cathedral (p308)

# THE ARTS

London's cultural life is the richest and most varied in the English-speaking world. Its theatre has the longest history and is the most diverse in the world, from Shakespeare's classics performed in the traditional manner, to innovative productions that involve Harlem transvestites and gangstas. There's a wealth of new writing and acting talent and, after many decades, politically provocative plays are making headlines again; Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* performed at the Royal Court in early 2009 is a stunning example. In fact, theatre in London is taken so seriously that many deem performing in the West End to be the only way to earn respect among their peers. Even Hollywood stars are abandoning their pampered lives for a season treading the boards in London.

But it's not all high drama. In fact, one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the capital is the American-style musical. The 1980s revival put *Dirty Dancing* into musical form, making it one of the most successful shows around. Today you can catch everything from *Grease* and *Hairspray* to *The Lion King* and *La Cage aux Folles*. Dance is another much-loved art form here, with performances ranging from classical ballet to modern dance, many of which are held in wonderful venues such as the renovated Sadler's Wells and Laban.

The Royal Opera House stages classical opera and ballet in a grandiose building in the heart of Covent Garden, while the English National Opera takes more risks (and always in English). Classical music aficionados won't know where to start, from high-profile BBC Proms to fantastic lunchtime concerts at Wigmore Hall.

London's a fantastic place for catching up on film and cinema seasons that celebrate the independents and the classics, though if you like a blockbuster, fret not, as there are many (overpriced) cinemas offering Hollywood flicks. Huge multiplexes give you endless screens and mega-sound systems, and smaller, independent cinemas offer the delight of a sofa for two, with a glass of wine at your side. The refurbished and expanded British Film Institute (BFI) is a temple to film.

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

London is a major classical-music capital, with four world-class symphony orchestras, two opera companies, various smaller ensembles, brilliant venues, reasonable prices and high standards of performance. On any night of the year the choice will range from traditional crowd-pleasers to new music and 'difficult' composers.

### BARBICAN Map p100

☎ information 7638 4141, bookings 7638 8891; [www.barbican.org.uk](http://www.barbican.org.uk); Silk St EC2; admission £8-45; ☎ Moorgate or Barbican

The Barbican is home to the wonderful London Symphony Orchestra, but scores of leading international musicians also perform here every year. The lesser-known BBC Symphony Orchestra and English Chamber Orchestra are also regulars and the City of London Symphonia plays occasionally.

### KENWOOD HOUSE Map p166

☎ information 0845 658 6960, bookings 0870 154 4040; [www.picnicconcerts.com](http://www.picnicconcerts.com); Hampstead Lane

NW3; admission £23.50-39; ☎ Archway or Golders Green, then ☎ 210

Attending an outdoor concert in the grounds of Hampstead's Kenwood House has been a highlight of any good summer in London for years. These days the so-called Picnic Concerts sponsored by English Heritage focus as much on jazz (Ray Davies, Gypsy Kings, Jools Holland) and pop (Simply Red) as they do classical music and opera but the Summer Prom here does at least one of each. Concerts take place on Saturday evenings from late June to late August; the last concert concludes with a massive fireworks display.

### ROYAL ALBERT HALL Map pp136-7

☎ information 7589 3203, bookings 7589 8212, [www.royalalberthall.com](http://www.royalalberthall.com); Kensington Gore SW7; admission £5-150, Proms admission £5-75; ☎ South Kensington

This splendid Victorian concert hall hosts many classical-music, rock and other performances, but it is most famous as the venue for the BBC-sponsored Proms – one of the world's biggest classical-music