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Second Chicago Theatre Week celebrates city, suburban productions

By **Barbara Vitello**

With Chicago's national and international reputation as a theater center, it hardly seems necessary that the city devote a week to celebrating theater.

Chicago regularly hosts pre-Broadway tryouts, and local productions have opened to acclaim in New York as well. On average, about 100 productions a week take place on city and suburban stages, according to Broadway in Chicago Vice President Eileen LaCario — meaning “every night in Chicago is a theater festival.”

And that, LaCario says, is all the more reason to commemorate the scene during the second annual Chicago Theatre Week. The event, which begins Tuesday, offers discounted admission to about 100 productions in the city and suburbs. And there's a production for every taste — from serious dramas to comic musicals, from splashy big-name productions to lesser-known works, from Chicago's biggest stages to tiny storefront theaters.

Co-sponsored by the League of Chicago Theaters and Choose Chicago, Chicago Theatre Week was LaCario's idea. Inspired by the success of the city's weeklong restaurant celebration, LaCario, a foundation board member and chair of the League of Chicago Theaters at the time, proposed a similar event for theater: a combination promotional effort to attract new patrons and an expression of gratitude for existing patrons.

Chicago Theatre Week, which debuted last year, exceeded expectations with more than 6,000 tickets sold for productions in the city and suburbs.

“I don't think anyone expected that,” said LaCario, who was convinced the event would succeed.

“I knew before we started I wanted to do it annually,” she said. “I knew that it was something that would build, that it would be something people looked forward to.”

Regardless of the size of the theater or whether the piece was avant-garde or mainstream, participating theaters saw ticket sales rise during the festival, which takes place during a time of year when attendance typically dips.

“People loved it,” said Deb Clapp, executive director for the League of Chicago Theaters. “Of course they were really happy to get the discount.”

At \$15 and \$30, tickets are accessible. Individual theaters determine the number of tickets offered and for which performances. Several performances are already sold out.

Organizers expect to exceed 2013 ticket sales this year. Last month, during the first week tickets were available, sales totaled 1,700, Clapp said. That “bodes well for the rest of the run,” she said.

More than 60 of the league's 237 member theaters are participating in Chicago Theatre Week. Suburban

productions include: "Rough Crossing" at First Folio in Oak Brook; "Greater Tuna" at The Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights; "Doubting Thomas" at Clockwise Theatre in Waukegan; "Hedda Gabler" and "Port Authority" at Writers Theatre in Glencoe; "Tom Jones" at Northlight Theatre in Skokie; "The Magical Exploding Boy and the Invisible Circus" at Actors Gymnasium in Evanston; "Luck of the Irish" at Next Theatre in Evanston; "Do-Gooder" at 16th Street Theater in Berwyn and "Hospitality Suite" at Citadel Theatre Company in Lake Forest.

Chicago ensembles taking part include Broadway in Chicago ("The Phantom of the Opera"), Goodman ("Luna Gale" and "Buzzer"), Steppenwolf ("Tribes" and "Russian Transport"), Court ("Seven Guitars"), Chicago Shakespeare ("Gypsy"), Lookingglass ("The Little Prince"), TimeLine ("The How and The Why") and many more. Also included are mainstays like The Second City, Blue Man Group and "Million Dollar Quartet" at the Apollo Theater.

"It's pretty amazing," said LaCario of the selection. "Where else in the country could you have that vital a group of theatrical performances you could attend?"

Variety isn't the only incentive.

"People will be amazed at the quality of theater they're going to see in some of these smaller storefront companies," said Clapp. "The quality of theater produced in Chicago at the smallest companies is extraordinary.

"You never know when you're looking at the next big thing."

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