

Steppenwolf's *The Flick*, BoHo Theatre's *Fugitive Songs*, and 13 more new stage shows



Travis Turner in Annie Baker's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Flick* at Steppenwolf

[Michael Brosilow](#)

- UrbanTheater Company's *Adoration of the Old Woman*
- Anthony Acardi

 **Adoration of the Old Woman** As with his mentor Gabriel García Márquez, the best of work José Rivera (see also the Goodman's *Another Word for Beauty*) is at once realistic and magical, intensely political and deeply personal. Rivera doesn't quite achieve this perfect balance in *Adoration of the Old Woman*; here the political issue at stake, Puerto Rican independence, is considerably more compelling than the various half-developed stories of love and loss that fill out the play. Still, the work has power and lots of heart, as do the performances in director Juan Castañeda's sometimes ragged revival for UrbanTheater Company. The best—most notably, Andrew Neftalí Perez and Melissa DuPrey, playing respectively a nationalist and a very opinionated ghost—transcend the limitations of this low-budget production and bring a transcendent life to Rivera's rich material. —**Jack Helbig**





- First Floor Theater's psychological thriller *The Awake*
- Lauren Nigri

The Awake Playwright Ken Urban's *The Awake* is a cutthroat psychological thriller that crams an action-movie's worth of torture cells, helicopter rescues, and tearful hospital scenes into a play less than two hours long. How does it manage to muster such excitement, and how does First Floor Theater pull it off in a tiny black-box theater on a shoestring budget? By having the actors narrate everything that happens to them rather than trying to show it happening. Granted, this solution put a third of the audience to sleep—theater, especially small theater, is a “show don't tell” kind of art form. But while talk is cheap, pyrotechnics are expensive. By far the best scenes come in the show's last half hour, when people—exciting, living people—start to emerge from their intricate webs of association and actually do something, even if it's just talking to each other. —**Max Maller**

Beautiful Autistic Like *Interrogation* (see below), Scott Woldman's other new play running in town, this unfortunately titled dramedy, currently at Chicago Dramatists, has pithy dialogue, intriguing characters, and no structure. Thus the well-spoken, intriguing characters mostly wander and dither. Woldman focuses on autistic 26-year-old Jimmy, who carries a backpack overstuffed with esoteric scientific articles and longs to have a “normal friend.” His only prospect is womanizing putz Eric, with whom he spends every evening in a Wrigleyville bar. For the bulk of two discursive acts, Jimmy does little but demonstrate typical manifestations of autism—in present and flashback scenes—while others struggle to understand and tolerate him. Most everything is dramatically inconsequential until late in the play, when the pileup of crises turns things melodramatic. Several stirring performances can't provide the missing drama. —**Justin Hayford**



- Tympanic Theatre Company's *Blueberry Toast*
- Sergio Saltero

Blueberry Toast Tympanic Theatre Company's tagline is "the best kind of weird," and Mary Laws's absurdist domestic drama certainly delivers on part of that. A seemingly benign misunderstanding at the breakfast table—that was *pancakes*, not toast!—snowballs into Sarah Kane-level depravity and pandemonium. Seventy minutes of watching a man psychologically and physically abuse his wife (and sometimes vice versa) might sound provocative, but Laws's contrived script is such a laundry list of incident and perversity—gunshots, doublespeak, simulated sex, creepy singing twins, diatribes about oil—that despite looking and sounding like a statement it never has much of anything to say. In case there was any subtlety to the domestic theme, though, a curtain call to Arcade Fire's "The Suburbs" drives the point home. —**Dan Jakes**



- Randy Harrison as the Emcee in Roundabout Theatre's touring *Cabaret*
- Joan Marcus

R **Cabaret** “Outside it is windy,” says the Emcee at the Kit Kat Club, a racy nightspot in Weimar-era Berlin, “but inside it is so hot, every night we have a battle to keep the girls from taking off all their clothing. So don’t go away, who knows? Tonight we may lose the battle!” Nobody actually takes it all off in the 2014 Roundabout Theatre revival of Kander and Ebb’s famous musical, offered here in a touring production. But the teasing playfulness suggested by the emcee’s come-on is certainly stripped away. Sexual preferences are more nakedly presented than they were in the show’s previous iterations. Would-be chanteuse Sally Bowles is more starkly desperate. Decadence is more tawdry. And the consequences of being on the wrong side of Nazism are made far more explicit. Everything’s telegraphed. Everything’s heavy-handed. And the effect is powerful. —**Tony Adler**



- Northlight Theatre's *Far From Heaven*
- Brandon Dahlquist

Far From Heaven Todd Haynes's 2002 movie *Far From Heaven* was a cunning exercise in style, cannibalizing Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* to tell a story that Sirk couldn't have told back in Eisenhower-era Hollywood, about a suburban housewife who falls for her black gardener even as she learns that her husband is gay. In adapting Haynes's tale for the stage, Richard Greenberg, Michael Korie, and Scott Frankel take us a step away from Sirk—which means taking us a step away from what Haynes achieved. All that was subversive about the movie is merely imitative here, and the show flattens out into a conventionally liberal, less than believable tearjerker with a retro score. Summer Naomi Smart is quite literally too perfect as the housewife in this Porchlight Music Theatre staging. Worse, Evan Tyrone Martin's gardener is utterly nonsensical: a grown man who seems clueless about race. —**Tony Adler**



- *The Flick*
- Michael Brosilow

📖 **The Flick** The best thing about Annie Baker’s hyperrealistic 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama—how effectively she conveys the sheer drudgery of working a low-rung job at a rundown movie theater—is also the worst thing about it: the play is more than three hours long, and much of that time is spent watching actors sweep up stale popcorn or mop up soda spills. Along the way we get to know the stunted souls who do this work. Baker’s dialogue is virtuosic, and she’s a strong storyteller even if her stories unfold at a glacial pace. Director Dexter Bullard’s production re-creates the look and feel of a movie house and highlights the quiet drama that unfolds within it with the attention to detail of a Chuck Close painting. Likewise, his superb four-person ensemble succeeds in imbuing the most mundane tasks with meaning. And believe me, this play is packed with mundane tasks. —**Jack Helbig**



- The Ruckus's *Romeo and Juliet* redo *From These Fatal Loins*
- Austin D. Oie

From These Fatal Loins There are two plays within this pitch-black *Romeo and Juliet* redo by the Ruckus that imagines what might happen if, instead of committing suicide, Shakespeare's most famous couple had faked their deaths. One is a sexy bedroom drama in which playwright Dan Caffrey translates the teenagers' operatic flameout to the real-world, slower-burn challenges of staying in love after the early lust fades. The other is a madcap, mostly inexplicable metacomedie in which the two go on a *Natural Born Killers*-style murder spree in modern-day Las Vegas. Derek Van Barham capitalizes on vulnerable and quirky performances by Christopher Waldron as Romeo and Jillian Rea as Juliet, but the show's two halves feel inefficiently stitched together, and whatever point is being made gets drowned in blood. —**Dan Jakes**



- The cast of BoHo Theatre's *Fugitive Songs*
- Amy Boyle

F **Fugitive Songs** BoHo Theatre delivers an exquisite rendition of Chris Miller and Nathan Tysen's 2008 concept revue—a cycle of songs about restless young people running (or wishing they could run) from bad relationships, dead-end jobs, dysfunctional families, and the like. Despite the downbeat-sounding premise, the show is constantly exhilarating and sometimes surprisingly funny, thanks to Tysen's intelligent, candid lyrics and, especially, Miller's beautifully textured, complex yet melodic music, which reflects influences ranging from singer-songwriters Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell to musical-theater composers Adam Guettel and Jason Robert Brown. The material's main shortcoming is its lack of specificity—this is a show about a theme, not a story. But director-choreographer Zachary L. Gray and his superb six-person cast—Justin Adair (who also plays guitar), Greg Foster, Charlotte Morris (who also plays violin), Elissa Newcomer, Julian Terrell Otis, and Demi Zaino—solve the problem with imaginative staging and nuanced, believable, emotionally intimate characterizations as well as beautiful singing. Keyboardist Jeffrey Poindexter's musical direction of the intricate, driving acoustic-rock/jazz score is crisp and sensitive. —**Albert Williams**



- The Artistic Home's *Interrogation*
- Tim Knight

Interrogation Set in the small town of Rising Sun, Indiana, Scott Woldman's new play follows unassuming Deputy Griggs (Eric Leonard) as he investigates the murder of local teenager Ellie. Or rather, it follows a roving, all-flashback recap of his investigation as he tries to convince his superior to reopen the cold case. Structurally, it's a semipoetic police procedural, except it hardly proceeds. Rather it ricochets for two hours among telling moments from Griggs's interviews with members of the preternaturally vitriolic Harper family—each of whom has a motive for killing Ellie, especially her boyfriend, squirrely high-schooler Kevin—without escalating the stakes or tension. And in director Scott Westerman's disjointed production for the Artistic Home Theatre, the Harpers are less a family than splenetic strangers. Woldman's admirable dialogue far outshines his plotting. —**Justin Hayford**



- Manny Buckley in American Blues Theater's *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*
- Johnny Knight

1 **Looking Over the President's Shoulder** Alonzo Fields has been awfully busy for someone who died in 1994. A black would-be opera star who ended up spending 21 years as a White House butler, serving and studying four presidents, Fields was the inspiration for lead character Cecil Gaines in Lee Daniels's *The Butler*. Before that, playwright James Still gave him this solo show, in which he's depicted under his own name, telling stories as he waits for the bus that will take him home and into retirement. As embodied by Manny Buckley under Timothy Douglas's impeccable direction for American Blues Theater, Fields seems the classic Dignified Negro of so many period works. You'd expect his pent-up rage to break through at some point. Instead, we get something subtler: a pensive longing, epitomized by Fields's memory of playing music in his head as he stood at attention, waiting on Herbert Hoover. This Fields isn't a political construct. He's a man who made the choices he made under the circumstances he found. We have a fine visit with him. But then, he'd permit nothing less. —**Tony Adler**



- Mentalist Marc Salem and brave volunteers
- Johnny Knight

📖 Marc Salem's Mind Over Chicago Renowned mentalist Marc Salem promises his audience members that no part of his show involves the supernatural, but it's hard to be sure. Over the course of 90 minutes, he deftly employs the subtle science of kinesics, the study of nonverbal communication, to effectively read volunteers' minds on a wide variety of topics. It's not just guessing you're thinking of the color blue. On the night I attended, he predicted all the key components of a farcical Chicago crime story dreamed up by the audience and successfully shared details of a host of people's past vacations. While it's a show that involves reading, writing and thinking, the key ingredient is a healthy and subsequently satiated sense of wonder. Salem even keeps it topical, comparing volunteers' lying tells to those of Presidents Clinton and Bush. —**Marissa Oberlander**

📖 Marnie & Phil: A Circus Love Letter Taking a cue from Beckett, this show written and directed by House Theatre of Chicago member Chris Mathews opens with a playful if grumpy pair bemoaning their present state: "I was handsome once," "I was pretty," "[Age] happens to the best of us." Soon the story moves back in time, and we meet aspiring clown Marnie and aerialist-in-training Phil as 13-year-olds in circus school together. Jeremy Sonkin plays a hard-core trainer who reminds his troupe of the three enemies of the circus arts: "gravity, time, and inertia." We next see the couple in their 30s, when we follow them as they travel across the world, maintaining their long-distance love affair with touching letters. The show features beautiful musical numbers written by Kevin O'Donnell, and asks big questions about what it means to be an aging performer forced to bear up despite dwindling opportunities and "the crushing, ubiquitous weight of it all." —**Suzanne Scanlon**



- Malic White in *Pop Waits* at the Neo-Futurarium
- Joe Mazza

Pop Waits The “Pop” refers to Iggy, the “Waits” to Tom, and the two names together suggest the dynamic between Malic White’s Stooge energy and Molly Brennan’s Waitsian brooding. But this 90-minute performance piece is about more than musical preferences. White and Brennan use the title personas as a way of exploring their own, very complicated identities. It’s all fun, games, and a sharp three-piece backup band for a while. Brennan and White are both fine physical artists with great comic timing and an uncommon sweetness. The energy dissipates, though, when the pair turn confessional. As canny as they are about the nature of artifice, as brave as they are in attempting to dispense with it, they come up against a basic fact: suffering without art is just suffering. —**Tony Adler**



- Royal Shakespeare Company actor Paterson Joseph in *Sancho: An Act of Remembrance*
- Courtesy Chicago Shakespeare Theater

Sancho: An Act of Remembrance Born on a slave ship to a mother who died in childbirth and a father who committed suicide, raised by the Second Duke of Montagu (and eventually hired as valet to the First), accomplished man of letters, and the first black African to vote in Britain, Charles Ignatius Sancho surely has an amazing story. Unfortunately Royal Shakespeare Company member Paterson Joseph doesn't tell it in his lively one-man show, appearing at Chicago Shakes in a limited run as part of the yearlong Shakespeare 400 Chicago. Instead he sprints through biographical highlights—pausing to sing one of Sancho's original songs or recite a monologue from a play Sancho performed—creating a sketchy portrait of the man and his virulently racist times. Joseph's an engaging if overly mannered performer prone to making sure his audience knows how they should feel about every moment in the show. —**Justin Hayford**