

Best of 2015 in Chicago's fringe theater — and what's up next

In a tumultuous year for Chicago politics and social issues, there was still plenty of drama (and comedy and music) happening in the small stalwart companies that give Chicago theater its soul and spice. We cover many of them every week for "On the Fringe." Below are our picks for the best of the year.

Nina Metz's Picks

"Song About Himself" (Theater Oobleck): Mickie Maher is a local treasure as far as I'm concerned, one who approaches playwriting with a sense of intellectual horseplay — deep thoughts, bonkers execution — that makes perfect sense once you wrap your head around it. His latest work (with Theater Oobleck) envisioned a digital abyss of emptiness and longing on a social media platform called YouSpake, performed with plaintive wit by Maher's regular players: Diana Slickman, Colm O'Reilly and Guy Massey, all heartbreaking and hilarious in equal measure. Satirizing the eventual breakdown of language (though he never states it outright, Maher is contemplating all those barely syntactical text messages and emojis we've become accustomed to), but at heart the play explored a deep longing for authentic human connection — the wistful, persistent desire for it, and the technology that we have come to rely on to make so much of it possible.

Up next: A remount of one of my favorite Maher plays, "An Apology for the Course and Outcome of Certain Events Delivered by Doctor John Faustus on This His Final Evening," a subversively funny monologue from Faustus himself, that great adventuring malcontent of literature and stage, who has come to say a few final words. In late February; theateroobleck.com

"Really Really" (Interrobang): Playwright Paul Downs Colaizzo's wry campus comedy about hookups and college keggers gradually pivoted and transformed into a spiky drama about the fallout of drunken sex and allegations of rape. Amid discarded red Solo cups and cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon, the play offered up a field guide of undergrad idiocy. Director James Yost put his excellent cast through their paces, shifting from easygoing bro banter to something far more sinister with a focus on suspect motives and sexual politics. The play narrowed its eyes at the millennial generation while simultaneously serving them up on a platter as if to say: "Here are the men and women of your future, America. This is what you have wrought."

Up next: "Recent Tragic Events" (by "Six Feet Under" writer Craig Wright), an absurdist jape about a blind date that takes place the day after 9/11. Starting March 11; interrobangtheatre.org

"[title of show]" (The Brown Paper Box Co.): A chronicle of sweat and ambition, this musical was the equivalent of the snake eating its tail: a show about the writing of the very show being performed. Sitting in the audience was like staring into the theatrical equivalent of one of those never-ending mirrors. It takes real skill to pull off such a premise this self-conscious. A mini-musical with major appeal, director M. William Panek's production (in a Chicago premiere; the original had a Broadway run in 2008) was smart, funny and catty, featuring a tight four-member cast that toggled easily between the revealingly personal and playfully absurd.

Up next: A production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" reinterpreted "through a gender-conscious lens." Starting March 4; brownpaperbox.org

Honorable mentions: "Christmas Dearest" (through Dec. 30, Hell in a Handbag); "The Power of Prom" ([Annoyance Theatre](http://AnnoyanceTheatre.com)), "Good People" (Redtwist Theatre Company), "Push Button Murder" (Side Project), "Here" (in an open run at [iO Theater](http://iOTheater.com)), "Guardians" (Mary-Arrchie Theatre Company), "House Party" (open run at [iO Theater](http://iOTheater.com)).

Kerry Reid's Picks

"Miracle!" (Hell in a Handbag): Before Chicago native Dan Savage was a noted sex columnist, he was a theater artist whose Seattle-based company Greek Active specialized in pulverizing classic plays into high-camp pulp. "Miracle!" is Savage's sweetly filthy take on "The Miracle Worker," which found its natural home with Hell in a Handbag. Steve Love's astounding take as Helen Stellar, the near-feral blind, deaf and mute child of a drag queen, was one of the standout performances of the year, closely matched by Elizabeth Lesinski's asexual Annie Sullivan. But everyone in Derek Van Barham's staging triumphed in this hilarious tale of finding your voice — even if you have to lip sync it.

Up next: Hell in a Handbag's "Christmas Dearest" (a riff on "A Christmas Carol" with Joan Crawford as Scrooge) continues through Jan. 2; handbagproductions.org

"Lawd, the CVS is Burning!" (MPAACT): Carla Stillwell's satire, which she also directed, hit the stage before the Laquan McDonald video ignited another firestorm. It delves into police brutality, official coverups and lapdog journalists who are eager to paint victims of police killings as "no angels." Raw around the edges, Stillwell's piece still hit with a combination of belly laugh/gut punch, painting a jaundiced portrait in acid of how our need to pathologize young black men and their communities infects the entire body politic.

Up next: "Upstate," adapted by Aaron Todd Douglas from Kalisha Buckhanon's novel, starting Jan. 14; mpaact.org

"Whatever" (The Side Project): Not for the fainthearted, Robert Tenges' beautifully crafted but sobering drama about two teenagers and the adults who are failing them left a disturbing aftertaste. Adam Webster's understated but precise staging made even the smallest moments resonate with pain and foreboding in the tiny Side Project space.

Up next: "Tail Eats Snake: Part De ux," an omnibus of 10-minute plays by 16 playwrights including Tenges starting Jan 6; thesideproject.net

Honorable mentions: "Circuscope" (Actors Gymnasium), "Another Kind of Love: A Punk Rock Play" (InFusion Theatre) and "Ibsen's 'Ghosts'" (Mary-Arrchie Theatre Company).

Kerry Reid is a freelance critic.

nmetz@tribpub.com

onthetown@tribpub.com