

Summer Theater Guide: 40 essential shows for the 2015 season

By Kerry Reid

We get it. Between all the outdoor festivals and the sporting events and replenishing your supply of Vitamin D at the beach, it's tough to find time to go to the theater. But some of the best shows of the year happen between now and the end of August — which is also the only time theaters can produce outdoors.

BIG SPLASHES AND LONG RUNS

"Million Dollar Quartet": Get out of the sun and into Sun Records. This long-running jukebox musical by Floyd Mutrux and Colin Escott is based loosely on the true story of the night that Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins all played together at the House that Sam Phillips Built in Memphis. *Apollo Theater; open run*

[Cue summer: Here's what's coming to Chicago stages](#)

"Beaches": Get off the beach and into "Beaches," the new musical based on Iris Rainer Dart's female-bonding novel (also the source of the 1988 film starring Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey), featuring a book by Dart and Thom Thomas, with music by David Austin and lyrics by Dart. Shoshana Bean and Whitney Bashor star in this pre-Broadway engagement directed by Eric Schaeffer (who also helmed "Million Dollar Quartet"). *Drury Lane Theatre, Oakbrook Terrace; June 24-Aug. 16*



"On Your Feet!": Another pre-Broadway engagement, this time featuring the music and life story of Gloria and Emilio Estefan in a new show directed by Jerry Mitchell ("Kinky Boots"). *Oriental Theatre; June 2-July 5*

"Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike": Christopher Durang's 2013 Tony-winning comedy about a trio of squabbling siblings mashes up Chekhov and dysfunctional family farce — along with a dour cleaning woman prone to dire pronouncements who is of course named Cassandra. Steve Scott directs the local premiere. *Goodman Theatre; June 20-July 26*

"All Our Tragic": The return of Sean Graney's epic and engrossing 12-hour marathon reimagining of all the Greek tragedies. *Den Theater; June 20-Aug. 9*

"Pippin": The Big Top makes a pit stop. The touring version of Diana Paulus' acclaimed Tony-winning revival of Roger O. Hirson and Stephen Schwartz's picaresque musical about the son of Charlemagne brings the high-flying circus staging to town for a short run. *Cadillac Palace Theatre; July 29-Aug. 9*

"Kurios — Cabinet of Curiosities": Or if you prefer your circus acts on a much bigger scale, Cirque du Soleil unveils its newest touring show, which promises a retro steampunk aesthetic along with the usual acrobatic thrills. *United Center; Aug. 6-30*

Chicago Shakespeare in the Parks announces summer schedule

"The Improvised Shakespeare Co.": Summer school was never as much fun as this long-running show, in which a highly accomplished troupe of improvisers prove the play's the thing by creating a two-act Elizabethan-style comedy. *iO Theater; open run*



"The Magic Cabaret": David Parr and Joe Diamond's long-running celebration of classic Chicago-style "up close" chamber magic and illusions offers a midweek mind-bending diversion. *Greenhouse Theater Center; Wednesdays, open run*

"The Kiss Kiss Cabaret": Or, if you prefer a naughtier take on hidden secrets, this late-night long-running burlesque show, which relocated to the Uptown Underground earlier this year, should fill the, um, bill. *Uptown Underground; open run*

FAMILY FARE

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"The Pied Piper": Forks & Hope Ensemble, which presented "The Hunting of the Snark" last year, returns with this adaptation of the Robert Browning poem "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Director Josh Sobel describes it as family-oriented, though "darkly whimsical and imaginative." *Strawdog Theatre; May 31-June 30*

"The Little Mermaid": Ariel isn't just for "The Tempest." Alan Menken and Howard Ashman's musical, based on the Disney film (and Hans Christian Andersen, of course) takes over Chicago Shakespeare's main theater in a 75-minute version under Rachel Rockwell's direction. *Chicago Shakespeare Theater; July 3-Aug. 16*

"Fancy Nancy": A budding ballerina learns that kindness also keeps you on your toes in this musical adaptation of Jane O'Connor's book series, created by Susan DiLallo and Danny Abosch. Ernie Nolan directs for Emerald City Theatre. *Broadway Playhouse; July 11-Aug. 23*

"That's Weird, Grandma: Summer Block Party": This long-running show from Barrel of Monkeys offers a brand-new line-up of stories created by Chicago public school students and performed by adult actors under Joseph Schupbach's direction. In the style of their Neo-Futurist hosts, no two shows are ever the same. *Neo-Futurist Theater; June 8-Aug. 10*

FRESH-AIR FEASTS

"To Kill a Mockingbird": You may not hear an actual mockingbird, but this outdoor presentation by Oak Park Festival Theatre of the Harper Lee classic, adapted by Christopher Sergel, will probably offer a suitably sultry atmosphere. *Austin Gardens, Oak Park; June 11-July 18*

"The Man in the Iron Mask": Another tale of a quest for justice, courtesy of Theatre-Hikes. Spenser Davis adapts the Alexandre Dumas novel for this ambulatory production. *Horner Park, June 27-28; Morton Arboretum, Lisle, July 5-26*

"The Winter's Tale": We can't go on together, with suspicious minds: Shakespeare's romance about jealousy and its effects on two generations of a royal family warms up outdoors under Alison C. Vesely's direction. *Mayslake Peabody Estate, Oak Brook; July 8-Aug. 9*

"Shakespeare's Greatest Hits": Everyone's attention gets a little shorter when it's too darn hot, but this touring production of some of the best-loved scenes and characters from the Shakespearean canon, adapted and directed by

Dominic Missimi for Chicago Shakespeare, provides a dash of culture under the stars at 17 different parks this season. *Various locations; July 19-Aug. 16*

"Macbeth": Midsommer Flight's production of "The Scottish Play" uses several outdoor settings, which ought to make Birnam Wood feel pretty close at hand. *Touhy Park, July 11-19; Schreiber Park, July 25-Aug. 2; Gross Park, Aug. 8-16; Lincoln Park, Aug. 22-30*

"Clue the Musical": More murderous ambition abounds in this musical based on the board game, presented by Theatre-Hikes. ("I'd like to see Professor Plum, by the weeping willow, with the beverage koozie.") *North Park Village Nature Center, July 18-19; Pullman State Historic Site, July 25-26; Morton Arboretum, Lisle, Aug. 1-30*

"The Two Gentlemen of Verona": If you've seen "Shakespeare in Love," you might agree that this play boasts the best part Shakespeare ever wrote for a dog. Lavina Jadhvani directs this early comedy for Oak Park Festival Theatre. *Austin Gardens, Oak Park; July 23-Aug. 22*

TUNEFUL TREATS

"The Secret Garden": Frances Hodgson Burnett's childhood classic about an orphan girl who rediscovers hope for herself and her melancholy uncle, as adapted by Marsha Norman and musicalized by Lucy Simon. Charles Newell directs. *Court Theatre; through June 21*

"Soon I Will Be Invincible": You don't need to line up at the multiplex for super-hero stories. Austin Grossman's novel about the New Champions and their quest to recover a comrade and stop an arch-villain before his doomsday device does what those contraptions do best gets a world-premiere musical adaptation from Christopher M. Walsh and composer/lyricist Christopher Kriz. Paul S. Holmquist directs. *Lifeline Theatre; May 29-July 19*

"A Marvin Hamlisch Songbook": Theo Ubique Cabaret Theatre celebrates the late composer behind "A Chorus Line," "They're Playing Our Song" and "The Sweet Smell of Success" in this new revue, directed by Courtney Crouse and arranged by musical director Aaron Benham. *No Exit Cafe; June 4-July 12*

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"The Fantasticks": You can try to remember the kind of September when life was slow, and oh so mellow — or you can put it off for a few months and just savor Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt's musical in a rare production with a full orchestra in Light Opera Works' staging by Rudy Hogenmiller. *Cahn Auditorium, Evanston; June 6-14*

"[title of show]": A little meta-musical for midsummer: Jeff Bowen and Hunter Bell's piece about the creation of a musical by two guys named Jeff and Hunter gets its local small-theater premiere with Brown Paper Box Co. M. William Panek directs. *Rivendell Theatre; July 17-Aug. 16*

"Loving Repeating": A rose is a rose is a rose, and the summer's theatrical bouquet includes this musical based on the work and life of Gertrude Stein and her longtime companion, Alice B. Toklas. Frank Galati and Stephen Flaherty originally developed this piece under the title "A Long Gay Book" at Northwestern University in 2003. It returns with Kokandy Productions under the direction of Allison Hendrix. *Theater Wit; July 18-Aug. 30*

"Stanley in the Name of Love": Mr. Margaret Svetlove (that's the name on the press release, though it's rumored he's actually Sean Kelly) is credited as author and director of this world-premiere pop musical comedy for the New Colony. A "trailer park fairy" decides that a career in porn is the way to find true love. The original score is by The Delicious Moons. *Den Theatre; July 30-Aug. 29*

"The Boy from Oz": Peter Allen, the Aussie songwriter/performer — and onetime spouse of Liza Minnelli — is the subject of this bio-musical, featuring songs mostly by Allen and a book by Martin Sherman ("Bent") and Nick Enright. David Zak directs the local premiere for Pride Films and Plays of a show that earned Hugh Jackman a Tony Award as Allen. *Stage 773; Aug. 5-30*

"October Sky": Based on the 1999 film about coalminer's son Homer Hickam, Jr., whose youthful enthusiasms for rocketry turned into a NASA career, this musical by Michael Mahler and Aaron Thielen (who also collaborated on "Hero" in 2012 at the Marriott) blasts off in a world premiere. *Marriott Theatre, Lincolnshire; Aug. 19-Oct. 11*

NEW AND OFFBEAT

"The Birds": No, it's not Aristophanes. (Or Hell in a Handbag.) Acclaimed Irish playwright Conor McPherson ("The Night Alive," "The Seafarer") crafted this adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's short story, which inspired the Hitchcock avian nightmare. Kevin Kingston directs for Griffin Theatre. *Theater Wit; June 6-July 19*

"The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez": Peter Handke's play, which is slated for cinematic release in 2017 in a collaboration with Wim Wenders, offers an enigmatic prose-poem about a "summer dialogue" between a man and a woman that takes on shadings of memory, nature and eroticism. Zeljko Djukic of TUTA directs this U.S. and English-language premiere (translated by Michael Roloff with Scott Abbott) for Theatre Y. *Theatre Y; June 9- July 19*

"Moby Dick": Herman Melville's big-fish story gets a brand-new adaptation courtesy of Lookingglass ensemble member David Catlin, who also directs the production (presented in association with the Actors Gymnasium). *Lookingglass Theatre; June 10-Aug. 9*

"A Work of Art": Elaine Romero's play about a woman haunted by memories of a brother who died in Vietnam is the second in her trilogy entitled "The U.S. at War." (The first, "Graveyard of Empires," was just produced at Berwyn's 16th Street Theater.) Henry Godinez directs. *Chicago Dramatists; June 11-July 19*

"Body & Blood": Gift Theatre co-founder William Nedved's newest play traces what happens as Dan finds his calling in life — only to disrupt the spiritual underpinnings of everyone around him. Marti Lyons directs. *Gift Theatre; June 11-Aug. 9*

"The Who and the What": Ayad Akhtar, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Disgraced," wrote this comedy about a woman in a traditional Muslim family in Atlanta who pens a controversial book about women in Islam. Ron OJ Parson directs the local premiere. *Victory Gardens Theater; June 12-July 12*

"Black River Falls": Bryn Magnus, one of the founding members of Curious Theatre Branch who has been based in New York for the past several years, comes home with this piece about the titular Wisconsin town, whose grim 19th-century history of madness, murder and suicide was traced in the book and film "Wisconsin Death Trip." Magnus' tale is set on Thanksgiving weekend of 1978, when both the Jonestown massacre and the death of Keith Moon of The Who disrupt the lives of a brother and sister. Magnus' own sister, Jenny Magnus, directs. *Prop Thtr; June 19-July 26*

"Bette, Live at the Continental Baths": If Drury Lane's "Beaches" gave you a thirst for all things Bette Midler, join Caitlin Jackson as she channels the Divine Miss M. Set in the 1970s bathhouse where her accompanist was the not-yet-out-of-the-closet Barry Manilow, this Hell in a Handbag production re-creates and sends up one of Midler's legendary raunchy sets. *Mary's Attic; July 17-Aug. 21*

"The Last Train to Nibroc": Haven Theatre presents the Chicago premiere of Arlene Hutton's play that starts out on a 1940 cross-country train trip. The bodies of writers Nathanael West and F. Scott Fitzgerald are aboard — as well as the very-much-alive duo of May and Raleigh, a discharged flyer, whose lives continue to cross paths over the years. *Theater Wit; July 24-Sept. 6*

"Don Chipotle": Juan Villa continues the exploration of his upbringing in a family of Colombian drug-cartel enforcers that he first undertook in "Empanada for a Dream." In this incarnation, magic realism and multiple actors supplant the solo autobiography of the earlier piece as two boys undergo a quest for chivalry and justice, a la "Don Quixote." *Storefront Theater; Aug. 25-Sept. 27*

