

## Theater Top 10 for 2015: The best on Chicago stages

Chris Jones

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"Mr. Burns" offered an intellectual thrill inspired by Bart Simpson. A Tupperware musical could not contain itself. A "Godot" arrived. No question there was a "Doubt." "Twisted Melodies" played all year. I think I caught a "Big Fish." And I seem to recall some show about graffiti ...



But with 2015 nearly cooked — and about 200 reviews of Chicago-area theatrical productions in the can — it's time for the best of the year in Chicago theater. You want rankings? We got 'em, along with plenty of the very best of the Midwest, friends.

### ADVERTISING

- 1. "The Project(s)," American Theater Company** : The creation of the late PJ Paparelli, "The Project(s)" was staged before Chicago erupted in autumnal protest and tumult. But here was a searing, prescient theatrical piece that reminded us of the death of 5-year-old Eric Morse, the 53rd child under the age of 14 to be killed in the Chicago of 1994. A history of public housing in Chicago, "The Project(s)" was too local a show to easily move to New York or beyond, but its arguments were far more complex than the typical level of debate that swells in this city and, most importantly, it gave eloquent and soaring voice to the people who really know what they are talking about — those who grew up in Chicago's public housing and both survived and thrived.
- 2. "Moby Dick," Lookingglass Theatre Company** : We all have our Moby-Dick and he's not usually a whale. That truth echoed throughout David Catlin's superb adaptation of the much-messed-with Herman Melville masterpiece, a vividly theatrical staging made in collaboration with the Actors Gymnasium, but most notable for the richness and depth of its rendition of the complex central Melville thesis about how our own personal "hated fish" can destroy and motivate our entire lives. Here was a show that avoided all those myriad "Moby-Dick" cliches, rendering the notorious whale in a plethora of different forms, all threatening to sink us at every moment.
- 3. "Ride the Cyclone," Chicago Shakespeare Theater** : The sleeper hit of the year, "Ride the Cyclone" arrived from Canada with a weird and pulpy premise — a bunch of teens are killed in a freak roller-coaster accident and must compete to be brought back to life. But the show, which could well have a Broadway future, turned out to be a smart, funny satire of teen culture, replete with one of the bounciest scores ever heard on Navy Pier. Quirky, bizarre and creepy, and yet with striking emotional heft, this show — part "Glee," part "Survivor," part "Shockheaded Peter," directed by Rachel Rockwell — was the funniest ride of the year. No wonder the lines were long.



Caption A duet from 'Carousel' featuring Laura Osnes and Steven Pasquale

['What the World Needs is People Like Me' from 'Ride the Cyclone'](#)

Caption 'What the World Needs is People Like Me' from 'Ride the Cyclone'

4. **"Billy Elliot," Drury Lane Theatre:** Most regional stagings of Broadway hits struggle to compare to the original. And Chicago enjoyed its own, stellar Broadway touring company of this lefty British musical about a tap-dancing kid trying to escape a future down the mines. But director Rachel Rockwell actually improved on the first production in several key ways — most notably, with an understanding that the titular kid was not necessarily a great dancer, as was the case in London and on Broadway, but a kid with a bit of promise and a whole lot of heart. That was the key to this totally fresh, hugely inventive staging.

5. **"Dunsinane," National Theatre of Scotland:** The best touring show of the year was not a Broadway in Chicago booking, but a Chicago Shakespeare Theater presentation of another masterful work by the company that created "Black Watch." As penned by David Greig, "Dunsinane" was in conversation with "Macbeth," but also a searingly potent political work staged in Chicago just as the people of Scotland had seriously considered a future independent of the United Kingdom. Under the cloak of metaphor, this show probed hundreds of year of co-operation, mutual manipulation and enmity. And it was also abundantly clear that Greig was also using Scotland to critique the centuries of Anglo-American misadventure in the Middle East.

6. **"Carousel," Lyric Opera of Chicago:** The Lyric Opera's epic production of "Carousel" was extraordinarily well cast by its director, Rob Ashford, with a radical but highly potent design by the Italian artist Paolo Ventura. Aside from the gorgeous, anthemic singing, what worked best of all was the rich melancholy brought to Julie Jordan by the actress Laura Osnes, who had never had such an opportunity, and the deep longing for something better that you could discern in Steven Pasquale's Billy Bigelow, a catastrophe of a beautiful man who knew himself hardly at all.

7. **"Good for Otto," Gift Theatre:** Gift snagged the world premiere of a new play by the David Rabe, poet emeritus of the Vietnam War and one of the great American writers of the 20th century. For their patience and perspicacity in staging a three-hour opus about mental health, Gift and its audiences were rewarded with a beautiful drama exploring not the usual truisms of mental health policy (or the lack thereof), but a work written in tribute to the

courage it takes to get help when you are in pain. In a year of horrific gun violence in Chicago, Rabe's play had a lot to say about stress, trauma and guts.

**8. "Sondheim on Sondheim," Porchlight Music Theatre:** In this first local production of the biographical musical about the great one, the director Nick Bowling came up with the idea of using the gifted musical director and pianist Austin Cook to explore the complexity of the Stephen Sondheim persona in a way that would have intimidated folks in New York. And thus Sondheim could be seen not just on video, but playing the piano and interacting with the kind of talented, creative people without whom he would have achieved little or nothing. In the realm of off-Loop musical revues, this show was a revelation and a huge step forward for Porchlight.

**9. "The Herd," Steppenwolf Theatre:** This was a first play written by the British actor Rory Kinnear that enjoyed its premiere North American staging in Chicago. It turned out to be the highlight of the Steppenwolf season — a rich, honest, unsentimental account of what happens when a much-loved family member has an overwhelming number of special needs. The two senior actors in the cast, Lois Smith and John Mahoney, turned in blistering performances, explicating a play that understood the perils of parenting as much as the joys, and courageously forced parents to wonder if they really wanted their ungrateful children to take over their lives.

**10. "Last Train to Nibroc," Haven Theatre Company:** A diminutive but charming two-hander, Arlene Hutton's "Last Train to Nibroc" could not have been simpler. It was a show set in wartime and charting the relationship of a couple who meet on a train and chase happiness in a world in turmoil. The acting, from Amanda Drinkall and Mike Tepeli, was among the best of the year and Jason Gerace's direction was exquisite. Everyone lucky enough to see this summer charmer understood that Hutton was writing about individuals, but also the way change was sweeping across America. Change, of course is a constant which we always hope art can explain.

We'll try that again next year.

Last, 10 more worthy shows, in alphabetical order:

"Charm," Northlight Theatre; "Gem of the Ocean," Court Theatre; "Les Miserables," [Paramount Theatre](#); "Marjorie Prime," Writers Theatre; "Mr. Burns," Theater Wit; "Oklahoma," Paramount Theatre; "Outside Mullingar," Northlight Theatre; "Pocatello," Griffin Theatre; "The Royale," American Theater Company; "Sorry," TimeLine Theatre.

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