

## Top 10 performances of 2015 in Chicago theater

Chris Jones [Contact Reporter](#)

The Chicago actor — dedicated, trained, poorly compensated, ensemble-minded, unconcerned with celebrity — is one of this city's most overlooked assets. Here, in an end-of-year celebration of practitioners of the art, are 10 great performances (in alphabetical order) of 2015.



**Austin Cook, "Sondheim on Sondheim":** It wasn't so much that Cook played Stephen Sondheim in this revue at the Porchlight Music Theatre Chicago. The director, Nick Bowling, was too subtle for that. But Cook — whose skills at the keyboard truly are unmatched in Chicago theater — certainly captured the essence of the young and unruly Mr. S a ragged revolutionary in every way, even as he accompanied his fellow cast members. There was wildness to this performance — killing off any dangerous notions that "Sondheim on Sondheim" merely was some anodyne revue. Not with Cook in the cast.

### ADVERTISING

**Nicholas Dantes, "Billy Elliot":** Chicago is full of astonishingly talented child actors. But the role of Billy Elliot in the London-and-Broadway musical of the same name puts demands on a child that surely have never been exceeded. Dantes triumphed in this role in director Rachel Rockwell's production for the Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace, never making the flashy or superficial choice, even though his legs and skills seemed to go on for days. His Billy was charming, honest, warm-centered, credibly working class, more prodigiously talented than pre-trained and accomplished and, above all else, comfortingly real in every last way.

**Christopher Donahue, "Moby Dick":** Donahue has decades of history as a Chicago actor, but he has taken some long breaks from work here. He roared back as Captain Ahab in the Lookingglass Theatre's "Moby-Dick," ranting and railing against the pile of annoying blubber stealing his days and robbing him of sleep. This was a performance with enough of a swashbuckling quality to match the Herman Melville sensibility and generate gales of excitement for a nautical adventure, but also a creation of great humanity and vulnerability. In Donahue's Ahab, we could see ourselves.

**Kenn E. Head, "The Project(s)":** When PJ Paparelli researched this brilliant original work at American Theater Company about the history of public housing in Chicago, he talked to the aged civil rights activist Timuel Black, the man who brought Martin Luther King Jr. to the University of Chicago in 1956 for King's first major Chicago address. Encapsulating such a man took an extraordinary Chicago actor — and Paparelli found one in Head, whose work captured not only Black's determination but the poetry in his soul. As Head spoke, it felt like we all were driving around the South Side of Chicago with Black as our incomparable guide.



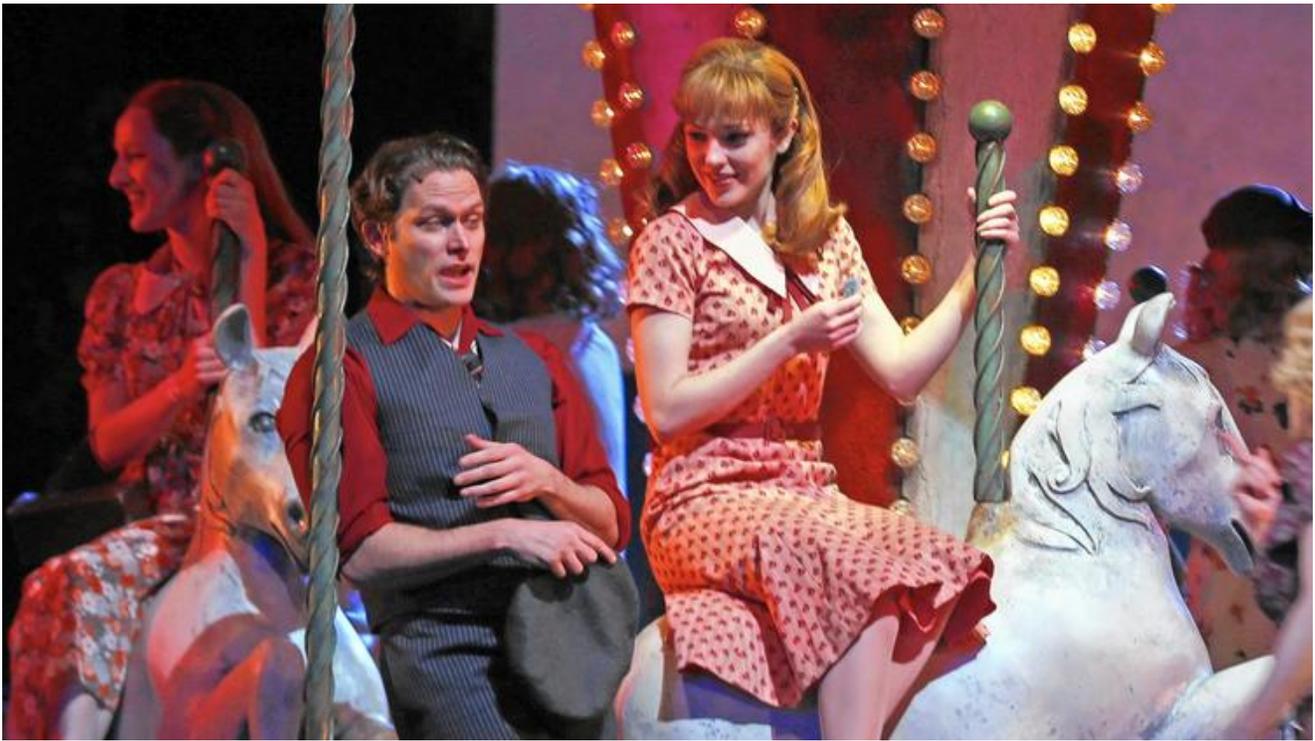
Caption A duet from 'Carousel' featuring Laura Osnes and Steven Pasquale

[Theater Loop Showcase: Michael Shannon and Kirsten Fitzgerald](#)

Caption Theater Loop Showcase: Michael Shannon and Kirsten Fitzgerald

**Mariann Mayberry, "Grand Concourse":** This was a towering performance from the longtime Steppenwolf Theatre Company ensemble member who found herself at the center of the drama by Heidi Schreck. Mayberry, who grew up in Chicago theater, played an urban nun who runs a soup kitchen with a mix of deep compassion and real-world cynicism that comes from being on the front line of poverty and inequality in a huge American city. Suffused with equal parts of sadness and strength, Mayberry's work felt indelibly human and understandable. We were given the most vivid portrait of an idealist who hesitates to trust because she has come to know so well the dangers of disappointment.

**Mike Nussbaum, "Sorry":** What's a 10-best list without Nussbaum, America's oldest working Equity actor and a Chicago artist of formidable power, range and compassion? Nussbaum appeared at the center of the TimeLine Theatre production of one of Richard Nelson's justly acclaimed Apple Family plays, as an older man struggling with dementia. This was beautiful, deeply authentic nonagenarian acting of the like never seen at this theater — especially when Nussbaum's sleep-loving character, in the last 10 minutes of the play, came roaring back to life.



Steven Pasquale and Laura Osnes starred in "Carousel" at the Civic Opera House. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

**Laura Osnes, "Carousel":** Previously associated with a Disney princess (she was in 2013's "Cinderella"), this Broadway star revealed a remarkable new range and depth when she took on Julie Jordan, the young mill girl in love with a guy who is beautiful but tragic in his propensity for error. Forging a rich and complex relationship with Steven Pasquale's Billy Bigelow, Osnes offered a vocal performance filled with thrilling crescendos and without any sense of victimhood, a common trap in this role. Osnes created a Julie who was part of a strong community of women, and who offered a powerful counterweight to the show's plethora of self-indulgent men. Whether or not this production is reborn, Broadway would do well to cast Osnes in this role in the future.

**Michael Shannon, "Pilgrim's Progress":** A Hollywood name determined to preserve his connection to Chicago storefront theater, Shannon was simply enormous fun to watch at the center of Brett Neveu's dark comedy about a college professor who you really would not want as your dad. Terrifyingly energetic, wholly bizarre and yet weirdly familiar, this performance was both today's movie star at the peak of his power and also a throwback to the scrappy actor for whom A Red Orchid Theater was the place where he found his home and his art. May he never stay gone for long.

**Linda Reiter, "Marvin's Room":** Reiter has been at the center of many productions at Shattered Globe Theatre for years, but there was something about her work in Scott McPherson's beautiful "Marvin's Room" that seemed to be on a whole other level. Playing Bessie, a woman squeezed by the needs of others on all sides, Reiter evoked those times in life when you can feel every wall closing in and yet you understand that the moment you lose your sense of humor is when you cannot continue. It was a truly lovely piece of acting, filled with compassion and humanity.

**Namir Smallwood, "Charm":** In the new Philip Dawkins drama about LGBTQ young people learning manners from an enigmatic transgender woman at the Center on Halsted, Smallwood played the toughest of the crowd that Mama Gloria was trying to reach. Smallwood's Beta was angry, self-obscuring, slouched down in shame. Smallwood did not stint when it came to showing us the suffering of this young Chicagoan, but, in a play very much about hope for the city's future, this fine young actor also gave us a picture of a person who needed nothing so much as compassion and truth. The highlight of a formidable ensemble, Smallwood is a big name to watch.

