

Chicago Theatre Week offers bargain tickets to suburban, city shows

Barbara Vitello



- Hypochondriac comedy writer Ira (Kevin McKillip), left, arrives late to work once again with a new ailment as his colleagues Lucas (Andrew Behling), center, and Milt (Wayne Temple) look on in First Folio Theatre's production of Neil Simon's 1993 Broadway comedy "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," among the productions offering discounted theater tickets during Chicago Theatre Week.

Courtesy of First Folio Theatre

If Chicago Theatre Week organizers for a moment doubted the passion of theater patrons, their fears have long since dissipated.

Neither inclement weather nor post-holiday lethargy could keep fans from the festival, established by the League of Chicago Theatres and Choose Chicago in 2013 to showcase city and suburban theater. In fact, the event has been so successful, organizers extended it for 2015.

"There was so much demand for it, we expanded it to 10 days," said Deb Clapp, executive director of the League of Chicago Theatres. "It's a fantastic way to showcase what we've got."

And what they've got is quite a bit: a choice of shows from more than 75 theaters. Suburban options include "Laughter on the 23rd Floor" at Oak Brook's First Folio and "Private Lives" Metropolis Performing Arts Centre in Arlington Heights, while Chicago participants include the Goodman Theatre and Steppenwolf.

The call to extend the festival came not just from theatergoers who appreciate the discounted tickets, which are

priced at \$15 or \$30 depending on the venue. League members who welcome the influx of new patrons also favored adding days to the festival, Clapp said.

The decision has already paid off. As of Jan. 26, more than two weeks before the festival begins, participating ensembles reported 4,500 tickets sold, said Clapp. That's 1,000 more tickets than were sold by that same time last year, she said. That puts them on track to surpass the 8,000 total tickets sold during the entire 2014 event.

Some shows -- including "The Who's Tommy" at Aurora's Paramount Theatre -- are already sold out, but tickets to many others remain.

Of the more than 75 League members participating in the festival this year, those reaping the greatest benefits are smaller theaters, Clapp said. So much so that companies that had not put up shows in February in the past, now schedule productions to coincide with Theatre Week to take advantage of the exposure it affords.

"What we've learned from Theatre Week is that patrons really want to explore the storefront theaters," she said, including smaller companies outside the city limits.

"A lot of people don't know there are so many great suburban theaters," Clapp said.

In addition to First Folio, Metropolis and Paramount, suburban theaters participating in the festival include Waukegan's Clockwise Theatre, Citadel Theatre in Lake Forest, Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Piven Theatre and the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston and MadKap Productions at the Skokie Theatre, among others.

A midsize company in residence at Oak Brook's Mayslake Peabody Estate, First Folio has participated in every Chicago Theatre week.

"It's a great opportunity for theater to be exposed to new, potential customers and for customers to find new theaters to explore," said David Rice, First Folio co-founder and managing director.

Anything that introduces the company to new patrons is important, said Rice, who estimates that one out of every three people who purchase the discounted tickets is a first-time First Folio patron.

Some of them returned for subsequent productions.

"The nice thing is it makes it a little more financially feasible for folks to take a chance. They say 'I'll try this theater because I'm not paying full price,'" he said.

That's one of the week's goals.

"Try something new," urged Clapp. "Do it one time. If you hate it, you don't have to go back. If you like it, you've discovered something new."

Either way, she says, it's an adventure.