

Best of 2016: On Stage in Chicago

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By Nancy Bishop

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As usual, Chicago's more than 200 theaters—both Equity and non-Equity—provided a magical wealth of productions for theatergoers and theater critics alike. Third Coast Review's Stages writers reviewed more than 200 productions in 2016, including a good assortment of dramas, comedies, musicals, circus, dance, opera, and comedy sketch and improv. Scroll through our [Stages pages](#) to get an overview of what we think about Chicago theater.

Here are the selections for the Best of 2016 on Chicago Stages by some of Third Coast Review's theater writers.



Nancy Bishop, Stages editor and theater critic

On my personal blog, I wrote "[A Few Things About 2016 That Didn't Suck](#)." In addition to books, movies, art exhibits, the Cubs, and our live-lit series, Kill Your Darlings, I listed 10 plays that I considered outstanding. Here for our Best of 2016, I'll cut them down to four with two special mentions. These are some of my "four-star" reviews, unranked.

The Flick at Steppenwolf Theatre. I was mesmerized when I first saw *The Flick* at the Barrow Street Theatre in New York and loved it even more when [I saw it twice](#) at Steppenwolf. Annie Baker's play is a naturalistic look at the lives and loves of minimum-wage workers in a shabby movie theater. I wrote, "The conversations seem to be aimless but they slowly brew into dramatic scenes of unrequited love, friendship and betrayal." The Steppenwolf cast was terrific.

2666 at Goodman Theatre. This was an experimental theater adventure (from a massive novel by Chilean poet and novelist Roberto Bolaño), adapted by Robert Falls and Seth Bockley. The production was a six-hour marathon with multiple intermissions so that Bolaño's multipart story could be told more or less in its original form. [My review](#) comments, "The structure they chose has a sense of madness and tragedy that builds through the five acts. *2666* is a play for those who are mad—mad about theater, storytelling and the magic of live performance." Kudos to the Goodman for finding the funding to bring this off.

Direct from Death Row: The Scottsboro Boys at Raven Theatre. The [2016 remount](#) of this production was a tour de force combination of vaudeville and tragedy. It's the 1930s story of nine young black men imprisoned for years for a crime they didn't commit. The vaudeville techniques—using white-and brown-face masks plus song and dance—brilliantly dramatized the actions of the friends and enemies in the boys' story.

Man in the Ring at Court Theatre. This is the beautifully poetic story of a prizefighter whose life and career were shattered by his knockout that resulted in another fighter's death. The production is marked by the outstanding performances of Allen Gilmore as the older fighter, Emile Griffith, and Kamal Angelo Bolden as the young fighter. The inventive staging symbolized the power of the boxing ring without any actual pugilism. My [review](#) noted this had to be on any list of top productions of 2016.

Finally, two outstanding productions from storefront theaters that closed this year. I'm saddened by the loss of these two amazing theater companies. They are both a huge loss to our theater community.

American Buffalo at Mary-Arrchie Theatre. The opening of my [review](#) says it all:

If you want to see classic Shakespeare without flying to London, you can drive up to [Stratford, Ontario](#), to see a production of *Macbeth* or *As You Like It* this summer. But if you want to experience classic Chicago theater, get over to the corner of Broadway and Sheridan this month and climb the stairs to the scruffy home of [Mary-Arrchie Theatre](#). There you can see their outstanding and final production of a Chicago classic, David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, set in a junk shop on the north side of Chicago. You can see it the way a storefront production should be seen: sitting five feet from the stage, possibly endangered by flying spittle or stray props.

Yes, this excellent production was the swan song for Mary-Arrchie Theatre. RIP.

***The Hairy Ape* at Oracle Productions.** Another inventive staging by Oracle in its tiny space on Broadway, this early Eugene O'Neill play is a dated class story given new life by Oracle. The Oracle production starred an all-African-American cast of men playing both male and female parts. Tragically, Oracle Productions announced last month it would cease operations at the end of 2016. Read our [review](#).

Brent Eickhoff, theater critic

***The SpongeBob Musical*, Broadway in Chicago**

Aside from Goodman's *2666*, perhaps no other production in Chicago this year boasted as much theatricality as Tina Landau's *The SpongeBob Musical*. A joyous shot of musical adrenaline, this musical, anchored by a strong leading performance by Ethan Slater, brought Nickelodeon's nautical cartoon to the stage in a big way. Full of charming songs from a dizzying array of talented musicians, *The SpongeBob Musical* combined dazzling staging with inventive design to champion its core messages of optimism and friendship. In a 2016 full of division and negativity, *The SpongeBob Musical* was a necessary and welcome addition to Chicago's Loop theater scene. Read my [review](#).

Kim Campbell, theater critic and circus writer

***Marnie & Phil*, A Circus Love Story by Actors Gymnasium**

Chicago has no shortage of great circus. From training up your toddler in the ways of wire walking, to fitness, to circus tents that travel from park to park, to professional training programs, you can find it all here at one of the circus institutions in town. Famous circus companies blow in to town at the first whiff of spring and stay until the snows come, but this year a local company stuck around for the winter as usual and put on a show to get us through the long dark month of February. The [Actors Gymnasium](#) wins Third Coast Review's best circus award for its production of *Marnie & Phil*, *A Circus Love Story*.

Marnie & Phil incorporated advanced students (the teen ensemble of the Actors Gymnasium) and professionals, including company founder Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and her longtime friend David Caitlin. The show demonstrated the age range that circus can reach, from youth up to seasoned performers. It also demonstrated how nimbly the art form can incorporate many performing arts including music, dance and most notably theater. All of those elements blended to produce a witty, intelligent, exciting family show.

The main characters may have borrowed the old plot device of the aerialist/clown romance, but it soon departed from there to explore deeper themes about aging and friendship as well as the itinerant and sometimes challenging life of the circus performer.

"A circus performer has three enemies!" the ringmaster tells his terrified troupe early in the story, and they dutifully recite the list; gravity, time and inertia. The same three enemies that haunt us all. Bravo *Marnie & Phil* for making us laugh and reflect in 2016. You can read my original Third Coast Review review [here](#) or watch the trailer below.

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