



SIGNS OF TROUBLE: Can our storefront theaters survive the Broadway blitz?

Bright lights? Big deal.

With the city's attention fixated on glitzy Loop theaters, we ask if there's still room for a theater of our own.

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In March 2005, officials at Broadway in Chicago made an announcement that would change the course of our city's theater scene: Due to booming ticket sales for the Chicago leg of the national *Wicked* tour, a permanent, open-run production would be mounted here.



SIGNS OF THE TIMES The light-bulb budget at the Viaduct Theatre (left) can't hold a candle to the Oriental's..
Photos: Thomas Chadwick

Two and a half years later, *Wicked* is still a runaway success. The open run played right into Mayor Daley's initiative to refurbish the downtown theater district, and it's already paying dividends for the city. *Wicked*'s prolonged presence is also a boon for Broadway in Chicago, the sole organization responsible for booking and marketing downtown tours of Broadway shows. Since its creation in 2000, BIC has presented productions that have become the city's fifth-biggest tourist attraction, pumping a reported \$635 million annually into local cash registers, according to a study conducted by economic consulting firm Fishkind & Associates.

But even as out-of-towners flock to Chicago to catch New York-created attractions—next week the musicals *Jersey Boys* and *Altar Boyz* settle in for long runs—this shift to mass-marketed theater seems more dismaying than positive, and echoes New York's unfortunate shift from theater district to theme park in the 1980s. (For more on Broadway's Disneyfication, see "[Fat Cats](#),")

A prime witness to Broadway's change was Frank Rich, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* and that paper's chief drama critic from 1980 to 1993. "When I arrived as drama critic [in New York] in the '80s, the audience was one third tourists and two thirds from the tristate area," Rich says, quoting statistics from the League of American Theaters. "It's now flipped. A lot of these big shows, which are corporate brands, they are primarily for tourists."

With downtown's renewal, the same thing seems to be happening here.

Chicago theater is currently facing two unrelated dilemmas that may well collide to bleach out its personality. The rise of the digital age means that the media ink once lavished on the city's grassroots theater scene—a scene that has given the city a unique flavor and reputation—is now running dry. Meanwhile, globally branded and marketed theater has become a priority for city officials who want a functioning entertainment-industrial complex downtown.

If the city of Chicago is to retain its identity as an American center for original live arts—something it's in danger of losing as *Wicked* ads dot the horizon—it must now fight the image of an outpost for franchises. For instance, consider the ominous enticement of Blue Man Group ads: “If you haven't seen Blue Man Group, you haven't seen Chicago.” It's a strange ultimatum, given that in this country alone you can also currently see the show in New York, Boston, Las Vegas and Orlando.

Bringing tourists to the city for Broadway in Chicago shows has been a manifold triumph, but in a changing world that's particularly unkind to small businesses like storefront theaters, the city and its residents ought to now turn their attention to another matter: theater for Chicagoans.

New York state of mind

Reviving the Loop as a theater destination has been a pet project for Mayor Daley; the reported \$60 million the city has poured into the downtown theater district since the late '90s has included funds for the Goodman's new facility and the swanky restorations of Broadway in Chicago's Cadillac Palace, Ford Center for the Performing Arts/Oriental and LaSalle Bank theaters. With the high-profile offerings of the Goodman, Lookingglass and Chicago Shakespeare all in city-subsidized spaces, coupled with the bustling crowds along the Randolph Street corridor, the mayor's gamble could be viewed as a massive success. But the biggest winner in the Loop is one that, though it didn't start here, may become the new identity of Chicago theater. You can see it every night at the Oriental: “Chicago—Midwestern Home of *Wicked*.”



GILDED AGE Broadway in Chicago's Lou Raizin shows off the restored Oriental Theater lobby.

The megashow's remarkable run wouldn't have been possible without the birth of BIC seven years ago. As company president Lou Raizin tells it, BIC was a marriage of convenience between two New York-based companies, Live Nation (then the theatrical arm of Clear Channel), which had control of the Oriental Theatre, and the Nederlander Producing Company, which owned the LaSalle Bank Theatre (then called the Shubert). Live Nation and the Nederlander brought their theaters together, then picked up a third, the Cadillac Palace, from Fox Theatricals.

With the added muscle of being the only Broadway touring presenter in town and the flexibility of having multiple spaces (which allows it to accommodate long runs), BIC set about to change the way New York producers view Chicago theater. "Prior to Broadway in Chicago, anything west of Manhattan was considered 'the road.' That's not the case today," Raizin says. "Today it's New York, Chicago and then the road. Chicago stands second only to New York in terms of where it is in the [commercial] industry."

Earlier this year, BIC released the results of an economic impact study it had commissioned. Among the findings: BIC shows have an annual attendance of 1.5 million, and 42 percent of its audience comes from

outside of Illinois; 85 percent of those out-of-town patrons say the show they're seeing is the primary reason they're in town.

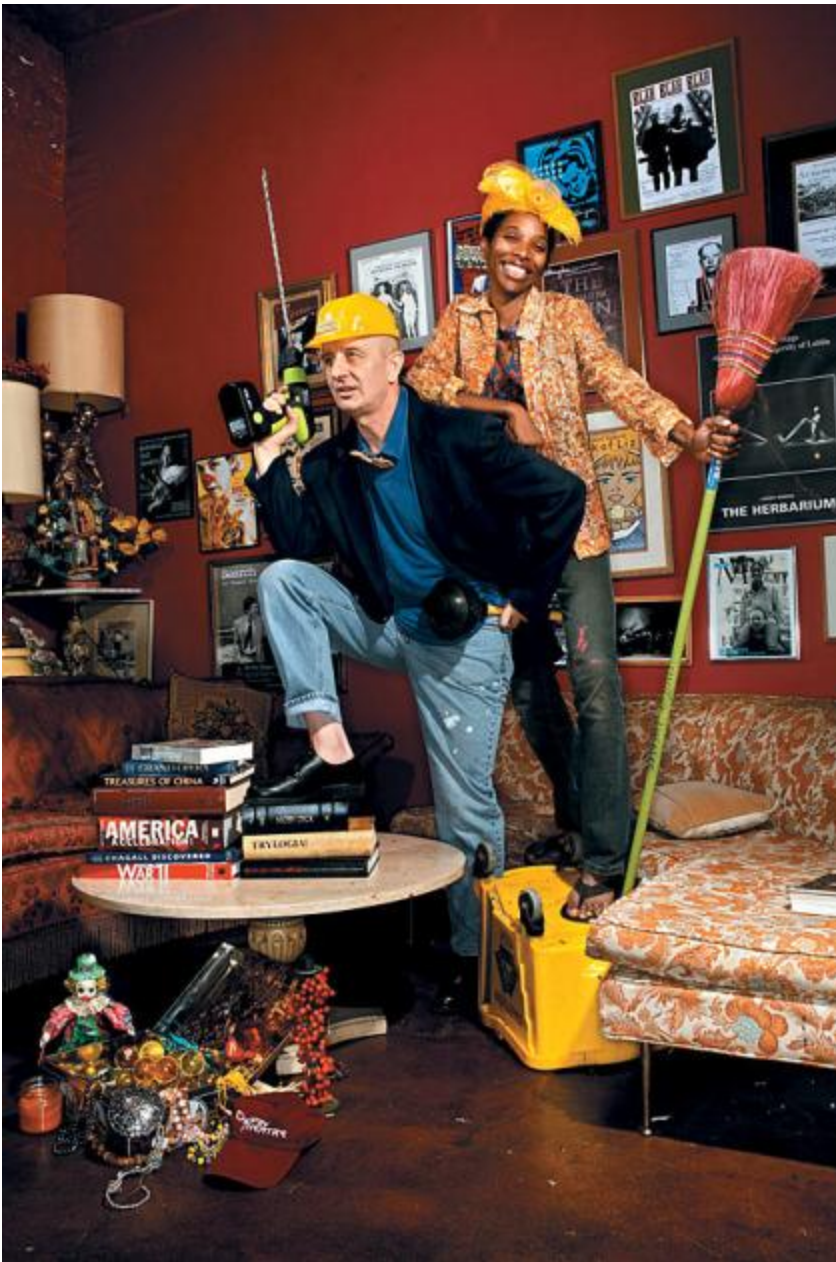
It would be interesting to find out if those theater-minded patrons saw any local shows while they were here, but Raizin doesn't have that data. Neither does Lyle Allen, managing director of industry trade group the League of Chicago Theatres. Allen's unenviable job is to serve the promotional needs of 200-plus member theaters, from powerful institutions like the Goodman and Drury Lane Oakbrook to the tiniest North Side shoestringers, a task he mildly terms "a challenge." Allen admits many of the League's promotions are aimed more at tourists than local audiences.

Despite BIC's impressive tourist numbers, Raizin insists Chicagoans, particularly the company's subscription base, are still the focus. He cites BIC's commitment to pre-New York engagements as both the reason for Chicago's enhanced status among commercial producers and a boon to Chicago audiences. Chicagoans who got first dibs on megahits like *The Producers* and *Spamalot* no doubt enjoy their bragging rights (while those who sat through *The Pirate Queen* might disagree), and we're extremely grateful for the opportunity to see history-making post-Broadway performances like Cherry Jones in *Doubt* or Bill Irwin and Kathleen Turner in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (If pressed, we might even admit we'd see *Rent* again.)

In short, when Broadway is good, Broadway in Chicago is good. But judging our city on when and for how long we get New York shows is still an awfully New York-centric way of viewing ourselves. "Clearly, in terms of a show that's Broadway bound, they're ultimately heading to mecca. Chicago's not their final destination," Raizin says. We're pretty sure that a first look at Christina Applegate's *Sweet Charity* isn't what led *The Guardian's* Michael Billington to name us "the current theatre capital of America" in 2004. Chicago theater's street cred didn't come from Randolph Street. The companies that gave Chicago its stellar reputation over the last three decades were famously born in old classrooms, church basements and empty storefronts (check out "[Cheap shots](#)," for some recent examples)—exactly the kind of companies that now have to compete with Loop programming for attention.

Storefront frontlines

On Division Street, at Ashland and Milwaukee Avenues, the Chopin Theatre overlooks the "Polish Triangle," where neighborhood residents and *elote* vendors gather around the Nelson Algren fountain. Behind the theater's shabbily impressive terra cotta facade, Chopin owners Zygmunt Dyrkacz and Lela Headd have played host to some of the most thrilling theater the city's had to offer during the last 17 years: performances by such essential storefront companies as the Hypocrites, Collaboraction, Backstage and Signal Ensemble, among others, not to mention the European troupes the husband-and-wife team has imported and produced on its own dime. The two also have seen the demise of several respected storefront companies; Roadworks, Defiant and Uma Productions each put up their final shows under the Chopin's roof in the past few years.



ESPRIT DE CHORES Zygy Dyrkacz and Lela Headd display their DIY ethic in the Chopin's basement lounge.

Photo: Anna Knott

Headd rattles off a list of Chopin-based shows that have played to rave reviews and sold-out houses—and still couldn't cover their production costs. Dyrkacz recalls how he offered to put up half the cost of an extended run so more audiences could see Collaboraction's well-received *Guinea Pig Solo* in 2005. Though the houses were full, Collaboraction couldn't find a matching donor and the show closed; it was \$5,000 short.

Faced with the changing Ukrainian Village neighborhood, Dyrkacz and Headd have occasionally considered closing up shop themselves. The Wicker Park gentrification to the north and west is moving their way—Mr. Algren is now surrounded by three large bank branches—and property taxes are on the rise. “We’re one of the few remaining arts and cultural organizations here,” Headd says. “When Zyg started I think there were at least 15, maybe even double that many theaters and 100 galleries; now it’s incredibly different.”

For small theater companies struggling to pay their bills, Gov. Rod Blagojevich's August budget cuts were a crippling blow. Among the governor's changes was a \$3.3 million slash of the Illinois Arts Council's funding—

nearly half of the state agency's budget for grants to artists and arts organizations—which “will have a devastating impact on theater groups in Chicago and throughout the state,” according to executive director Ra Joy of the Illinois Arts Alliance. “The cuts will result in fewer IAC grants to artists and arts organizations, and those that are awarded funding may receive a much smaller percentage of their requests.” Emerging companies that depend on state grants could easily fold.

To put things in perspective: Good, in-demand shows go unseen for lack of a few thousand bucks. A \$3.3 million drop in state funds could threaten the very existence of dozens of storefront companies. The \$60 million the city sunk into the downtown district's nine theaters suddenly feels a little more...lopsided. Sure, downtown is the face of Chicago's theater scene. But what good's a face without a heart? Chicago loves to describe itself as a city of neighborhoods, but the city's determination to create a central theater district comes, Headd says, “at the expense of our neighborhoods.”

Half-court press

“With the advent of Broadway in Chicago,” says Carrie Kaufman, editor of Chicago's entertainment industry trade paper *Performink*, “downtown tends to get a lot of press coverage.”

That's putting it mildly. As high-profile New York shows continue to find homes downtown, journalists are obligated to write about them. But now, as independent artists are forced to compete with marquee shows for the ink and column inches of arts journalists, these same reporters have less ink and column inches than ever to spare, something almost everyone interviewed for this story lamented.

- Advertisement



● SLINGS AND SPARROWS The House Theatre's Nathan Allen takes outrageous fortune in stride.
Photo: Anna Knott

“It’s happening to arts coverage almost everywhere,” Rich says. “You have more theaters competing for less space and the ones with the biggest money, i.e., the biggest advertisers and biggest hype, get more of that space.”

Gone is the heyday of Richard Christiansen, the distinguished former chief drama critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, who retired in 2002. Famed for his willingness to visit unheard-of companies in makeshift spaces, Christiansen drew attention to the storefront movement and set the standard for the city’s theater journalists. (You won’t find a Chicago theater artist who doesn’t speak reverently of him.)

But Christiansen, notoriously humble about his contribution, is quick to share credit with other publications who helped shoulder the burden of coverage. “The only attention these impoverished theaters could count on was from publications like the *Reader*,” Christiansen says.

House calls

Anyone with an eye for blurred entertainment journalism knows that's been an especially big problem for the six-year-old House Theatre of Chicago. The young troupe's meteoric rise has come at the hand of journalists determined to use the House as a kind of branded Chicago export. As Kaufman says, "Everybody jumped on the House bandwagon." *The Chicago Tribune*, for example, in January of this year publicly urged that the company transfer its storefront hit, *The Sparrow*, to New York City. "The House mustn't end here," the *Tribune* insisted in its advocacy. "Not if it wants to live here. And prosper."



CENTER OF CONTENTION All eyes are on the House's new run of *The Sparrow* (with Carolyn Deffin, foreground).

A New York production isn't happening, and according to company artistic director Nathan Allen, the chances weren't that strong, despite the buzz. "I don't feel like we've ever been represented well by the press," Allen says of the hype surrounding his own company. "We've never been as gung ho about moving to New York as the press has made it sound."

The *Reader's* once-liberal editorial policy of reviewing every play that opened in town, no matter how below the radar, is no longer something any publication can accommodate (including this one). But at its height in the '90s, the free press nurtured the city's storefront community by creating a media-theater feedback loop; the more plays received reviews, the more butts there were in seats, the more plays got produced, and back again.

But Craigslist changed all that. Because the service site is free, the classified-ad sales that helped finance the *Reader* have dwindled, and major cuts in length and number of reviews followed, as has been extensively chronicled by that paper's own ace media analyst Michael Miner. Meanwhile, as the arts continue to sag as a national priority, the *Tribune* has slimmed down from two on-staff writers to one (and a handful of freelancers) to cover theater. The same goes for the *Sun-Times*, which has only one full-time theater writer on its masthead (who is also required to cover dance). Consequently, arts writers are asked to pull treacherous double duty—acting as both reporters and critics.

But while the theater community definitely feels the pinch of reduced coverage, the average reader isn't likely to notice the problem. "Nowhere in this country has the distinction between journalism and publicity," Rich says, "been blurred more than the entertainment industry."

Instead, this week the production is currently in previews to reopen in a commercial engagement at Chicago's Apollo Theater. The big surprise is that the run is being presented and marketed by Broadway in Chicago. It's an unprecedented move—engineered after the House won BIC's first-ever Emerging Company Award, which included a marketing package that subsequently blossomed into a deal—and one that has garnered even more subsequent coverage. Questions like, Is it merely a test to see if the show will fly in New York? (according to Allen, it's not); What does it cost to make a nonprofit storefront show transfer to a commercial run? (nobody's disclosing figures); and, Will Broadway in Chicago now take an interest in presenting other storefront endeavors? (Raizin has no comment on the issue) have dominated column inches and have generated plenty of heat in the blogosphere.

The tempest in a teapot surrounding *The Sparrow* (which is tepid in content compared to some of the House's more daring shows) is perhaps the best example of how monoculture-minded journalists view the city. As countless other local companies continue to create newsworthy events, local arts coverage is instead often fixated on matters of theatrical colonization: either how Chicago shows deemed exportable might fare elsewhere or what's going on with New York shows that are currently planted here. Consequently, plays with no agenda other than entertaining Chicagoans get edged out.

Berth of a salesman

As far as *The Sparrow* is concerned, the House will now see its product marketed above and beyond the heads of its first grassroots audiences; \$49.50 is a far cry from the original top price of \$22 for what will essentially be the same show in a comfier theater. It will be seen by thousands, but in circumstances far from what first made audiences love it. With BIC handling the marketing, out-of-town ticket buyers will get a taste of “storefront” theater without the mussy inconvenience of visiting an actual storefront.

But the step that gets removed in the process makes all the difference. The reason theater lovers and theater practitioners live in Chicago is the same: Affordable, immediate, original theater is as readily available in residential neighborhoods as mom-and-pop Thai restaurants and used bookstores. But as long as the local media attempt to pimp out our artists for fast recognition or the city steamrolls them by mandating the import of mega entertainment, we're all unwittingly participating in the culture of McCity.

Christiansen's book, pointedly titled *A Theater of Our Own*, is a testament to an arts scene created by and for Chicagoans. Yet if the primary concern of the city is a product that can look or feel the same way in any town, Chicagoans may find themselves with a theater scene filled with massive shows that are created elsewhere and for someone else.