



# Small but mighty — Under the radar, these stage companies are super troupers

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Pub Theater Company's "Bye Bye Liver: The Chicago Drinking Play"

In a town with hundreds of theater companies ranging in size from miniscule to massive, it's not surprising that many tinier outfits consistently fly under the radar — especially compared to their much bigger and far better-funded brethren. But just because these smaller troupes lack instant name recognition and big bucks doesn't mean they're unworthy of your attention. On the contrary, you might be pleasantly surprised that an offering from, say, the House Theatre of Chicago suits your sensibilities more than a heavily marketed, expensively ticketed Loop extravaganza.

## ARTICLE EXTRAS

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While House Theatre company member Dennis Watkins acknowledges the stiff competition, and the fact that many donors have reduced their financial support to nonprofits like his in this continually turbulent economy, his one-man "weird, quirky" magic show at the Chopin is hanging in there and even expanding. Audiences have been growing every week since last September, with patrons aged 21 to around 45. And it's largely word-of-mouth that draws the tourists, young professionals and Wicker Park residents

each Friday night to a 70-seat venue that's often sold out.

Barrel of Monkeys artistic director Luke Hatton says his education-centric ensemble benefited greatly from starting in Chicago public schools before expanding to public performances. Since its founding in 1997, the group has performed in a variety of theaters but always maintained a home base at the 140-seat Neo-Futurarium on North Ashland Avenue. Most nights they fill just over a third of the space, but that's slowly improving. And the gradual pace, Hatton says, is actually a blessing of sorts. "If we had some major thing happen, I sort of worry that everybody would come all at once and then nobody would come anymore."

In business since 2006, the Pub Theater Company — which stages original plays and produces them for other companies — works out of a non-traditional venue on the second floor of Fizz Bar & Grill on North Lincoln Avenue. The space often is filled to capacity Fridays and Saturdays, with 120 patrons between the ages of 21 and 35 cramming in for some thespianic imbibing.

"At the very beginning it was kind of touch and go," says Mike Barton, a founding member and associate producer who writes for the popular interactive drinking show "Bye Bye Liver: The Chicago Drinking Play." "There were times when we weren't getting the audiences that we really wanted to. But it was one of those things where we really enjoyed what we were doing and we just kept pushing through."

He's not alone. Here's a small sampling of some lesser-known theater companies and their respective offerings. Tickets are relatively cheap and good seats are plentiful. Oh, and talent — there's lots of that, too.

Hubris Productions, Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln, (773) 404-7336; [hubrisproductions.com](http://hubrisproductions.com).

A socially minded theater company, Hubris encourages artistic and human diversity while giving back to the community. Formed in early 2005, it donates a portion of its ticket sales to charity and invites audiences to contribute to various causes and organizations.

Now playing: "Agnes of God," John Pielmeier's drama about a Mother Superior determined to silence the tormented young nun who killed her own infant. Directed by Jacob Christopher Green. To April 16.

The Pub Theater Company, Fizz Bar & Grill, 3220 N. Lincoln, (773) 904-8777; [thepubtheater.com](http://thepubtheater.com).

Now in its third year, PTC was formed by musicians and Second City-trained funny folks who initially hooked up during college in Murfreesboro, Tenn. Now playing: "Bye Bye Liver: The Chicago Drinking Play" on Fridays and Saturdays (21+over). Pub also produces "A West (and North) Side Story," a Jeff Strickland and Byron Hatfield musical comedy that sends up the classic "West Side Story." Hatfield directs. To April 14 at Chemically Imbalanced Theater, 1420 W. Irving Park.

Curious Theatre Branch, Prop Theatre, 3502 N. Elston, (773) 508-0666; [curioustheatrebranch.com](http://curioustheatrebranch.com). (Tickets also online at [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com).)

Founded in 1988 as an offshoot of alt-rock cabaret act Maestro Subgum and the Whole, Curious has produced more than 100 plays exploring "collaboration as a social force." Now playing: "The Buzz That Is the Buzz," Beau O'Reilly's Shakespeare-infused tragic-comic tale of curiosity and betrayal. Directed by O'Reilly. To April 10.

Polarity Ensemble Theatre, Josephinum Academy, 1500 N. Bell, (800) 838-3006; [petheatre.com](http://petheatre.com).

Since 2005, Polarity has brought "new life to the classics and new work to life" through a mix of live performances, workshops and publishing. Now playing: "Ephemera," Bryce Wissel's comedy about the inhabitants of a space station who learn they may be the last defense of planet Earth. Directed by Laura Sturm. To May 1.

Gorilla Tango Theatre, 1919 N. Milwaukee, (773) 598-4549; [gorillatango.com](http://gorillatango.com).

Shows are all over the map at GTT. From a smattering of more serious stuff, such as "Only Mom," to brain-gobbling zombies and Super Mario burlesque, there's something for everyone — or almost everyone — throughout the week. Now playing: "Boobs & Goombas: A Super Mario Burlesque" (Fridays and Saturdays) and "GLEEKs and FREAKs: A Glee Burlesque Musical" (Thursdays). Also, "Circus Cats of Chicago featuring the Amazing AcroCats" (two shows April 10).

The House Theatre of Chicago, Chopin Theatre (downstairs theater), 1543 W. Division, (773) 769-3832; [thehousetheatre.com](http://thehousetheatre.com).

With ten years, multiple awards and more than a dozen productions under its belt, the House Theatre continues to "explore the ideas of community and storytelling to create a unique theatrical experience." Now playing: "The Magic Parlour," veteran magician Dennis Watkins' one-man magic show. Fridays only. Open run. Performed Thursday through Sunday is "Star Witness," a world-premiere mystery by Chicago novelist Joe Meno. To May 7.

Pavement Group, Chicago Dramatists, 1105 W. Chicago; [pavementgroup.org](http://pavementgroup.org).

Committed to "immediate and immersive work that is thought provoking, not thought providing," the nearly five-year-old Pavement strives to cast emerging voices in fresh productions that will appeal to new audiences. Now playing: "MilkMilkLemonade," Joshua Conkel's comedy about an 11-year-old who dreams of being a singer and dancer. Directed by Cassy Sanders. To April 17.

National Pastime Theater, 4139 N. Broadway, (773) 327-7077; [npt2.com](http://npt2.com).

NPT strives to "change the jaded viewpoints of generations weaned on passive entertainment forms." The theater also is immersed in a youth outreach program called Elements. Now playing: "Naughty! The Musical World of Emmet Taylor Farkas," Leo Schwartz and Jeremy Kareken's musical comedy about four actors trying to bilk production funds out of a captive audience at a composer's funeral. Directed by Shifra Werch. (Fridays and Saturdays) To April 23.

Quest Theatre Ensemble, Blue Theater, 1609 W. Gregory, (312) 458-0895; [questensemble.org](http://questensemble.org).

Nearing its 10th anniversary and dubbed "the people's theater," Quest puts on free shows and started in the dining room of company member Jason Bowen. "We believe that theater is a necessity for everyone," Bowen says.

Now playing: "The People's Four Seasons," Andrew Park's musical exploring the journey of life. Directed by Park. (Friday and Saturday) To March 27.

Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, Storefront Theater, 66 E. Randolph, (312) 742-8497; [rivendelltheatre.org](http://rivendelltheatre.org) or [dcatheater.org](http://dcatheater.org).

Founded in 1995, Rivendell focuses on plays that illuminate the female experience. In that vein, it produces the work of female playwrights and also employs women in all facets of its operation. Now playing: "Precious Little," Madeleine George's drama about a linguistics professor who learns her unborn child may have a genetic abnormality that would prevent the child from ever learning language. Directed by Julieanne Ehre. To April 2.

Black Elephant Theatre, Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport, (773) 935-6860; [blackelephanttheatre.com](http://blackelephanttheatre.com).

Founded last spring, the troupe so far has focused on character-driven historical drama set against the background of current events. Now playing: "Terra Haute," Edmund White's drama based on correspondence between Gore Vidal and Timothy McVeigh as McVeigh awaited execution by lethal injection for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. Directed by Michael Rashid. To April 10.

Barrel of Monkeys, Neo-Futurarium, 5153 N. Ashland, (312) 409-1954; [barrelofmonkeys.org](http://barrelofmonkeys.org).

Now in their 14th year of broadening young minds, the Monkey folks are extra unique in that they teach creative writing in Chicago public schools, then adapt the resulting stories into sketches and songs that are later performed publicly. Now playing: "That's Weird, Grandma," a series of stories based on students' writing. Celebrating its 10th anniversary. Sunday, open run. Monday matinee to April 4.

Babes with Blades, Raven Theatre Complex West Stage, 6157 N. Clark, (773) 904-0391; [babeswithblades.org](http://babeswithblades.org).

The Babes' action-packed productions showcase strong, vital, combat-proficient women. They also aim to slay female stereotypes and expand the generally accepted canon of theatrically and gender-appropriate works. Now playing: The all-female "Romeo & Juliet," William Shakespeare's classic tale of star-crossed lovers. Previews March 25-27, opens March 28. To April 30.