

28 views | Nov 21, 2018, 12:31pm

How Chicago Is Doing Something New With 'Immersive' Theater



Darryn King Contributor

Coverage and contemplation of art, design and pop culture.



Sarah Grant and Michael McKeough in 'Southern Gothic' at Chicago's Windy City Playhouse MICHAEL BROSILOW

Anyone paying attention to theater in the last decade will have noticed the explosion in “immersive” productions. Punchdrunk’s “Sleep No More”—which I’ll always describe as “Macbeth: The Video Game, IRL”—paved the way and set the template. On the whole, Punchdrunk’s immersive brethren (and imitators) favor dance, scenic design and other dazzlements over dialogue, dramaturgy and nuanced acting.

“[Southern Gothic](#),” a production by Chicago’s [Windy City Playhouse](#), offers something different. It invites 30 audience members to roam from room to room, spying on the hosts and guests of a singularly eventful birthday celebration as it gets steadily less civilized. The word “set” doesn’t quite do justice to the work of scenic designer Scott Davis, and the way you’ll feel like an intruder in someone’s actual home. (Snacks and drinks are served, too.)

The audience member is still free to direct and determine her own experience, but the overall effect is less theme park and more theater. It’s as if a “straight” play magically acquired a new physical dimension—which is sort of what happened to Leslie Liautaud’s original script. It was Amy Rubenstein, artistic director and co-founder of the Windy City Playhouse, who recognized, in “Southern Gothic,” the opportunity to do something truly new and refreshing.

The inventiveness of “Southern Gothic” (at [Windy City Playhouse](#) until Dec 9; at [Windy City Playhouse South](#) from Jan 2) speaks to the sophistication and dynamism of theater in Chicago, as does the entire ethos of Windy City Playhouse. (A production of “[Noises Off](#)” that places the audience in the middle of the madness is also in store for January.) Ahead of the official “[Year of Chicago Theater](#),” Rubenstein shared her thoughts on her city’s theater scene, her company, and the fascinating process behind the making of this remarkable show.

Amy, for those more familiar with New York or the West End, how would you describe what's different or unique about the theater scene, community and audience in Chicago?

We are so incredibly lucky to live in such an amazing theater city! Chicago is the home of brilliant talent and the most intimate of theaters. I couldn't be happier that 2019 is the year of Chicago Theater! Chicagoans may know about our hidden gems but the rest of the country has been a little left out. We're sitting here, right smack dab in the middle of the country, convenient to just about everyone, with some of the best art in the world and somehow people seem to skip out on the theater when they get here. That's crazy! There is so much to see! Every traveler to Chicago should be lucky enough to venture out and experience the enchantment of Chicago Theater. The Playhouse is oh so ready to entertain!