

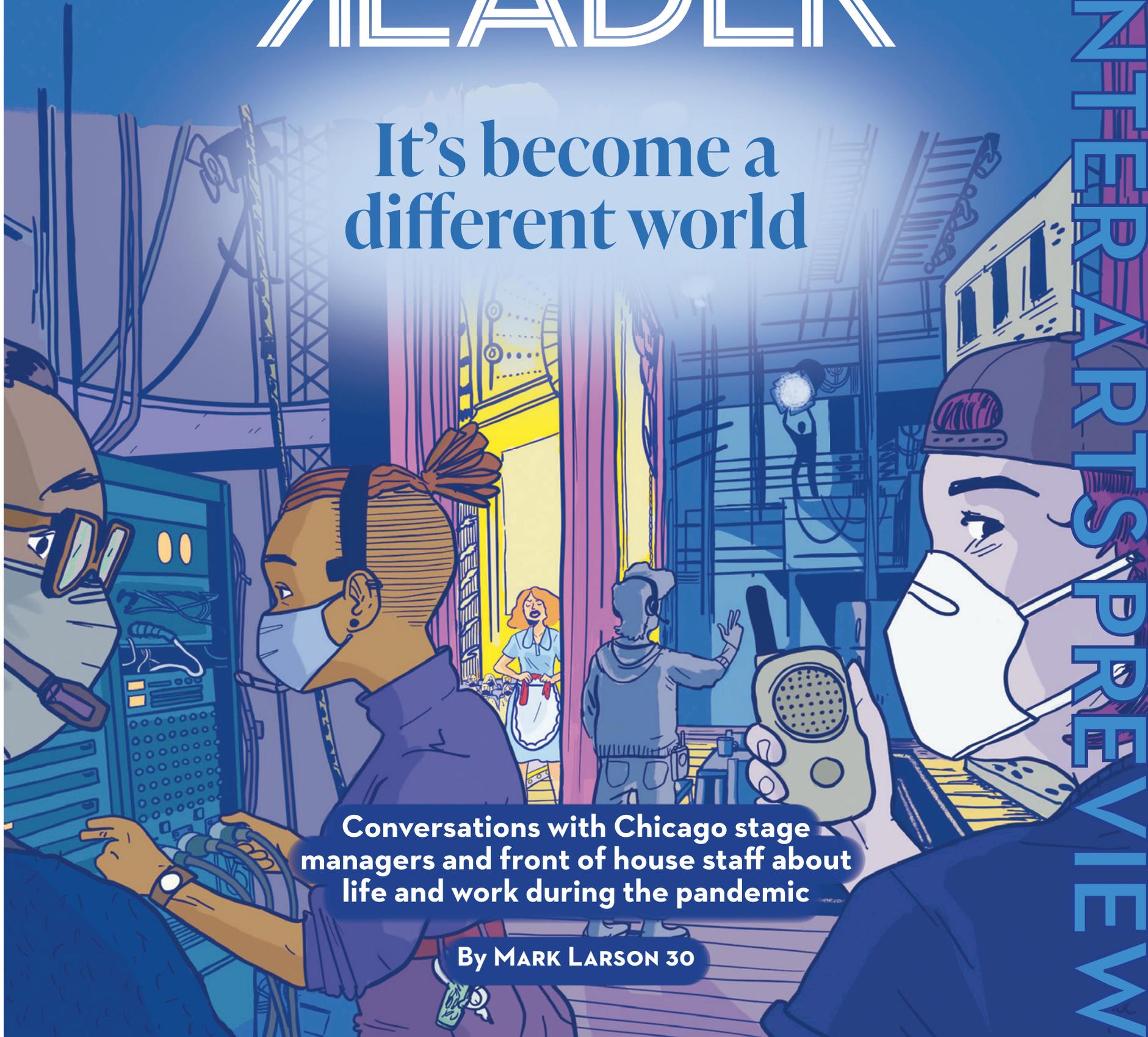
READER

It's become a
different world

Conversations with Chicago stage
managers and front of house staff about
life and work during the pandemic

By MARK LARSON 30

WINTER PARTS PREVIEW



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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

WHEN WE FIRST STARTED PLANNING THIS SPECIAL WINTER ARTS ISSUE, there was reason for cautious optimism about live performances. But as December turned to January and the Omicron surge hit, several companies did what they've been doing for almost two years: they made new plans. Bridgette M. Redman profiles playwright Cat McKay, whose show *Plaid as Hell* has been postponed by Babes with Blades, and Catey Sullivan catches up with Honey West (who knows about surviving pandemics), the diva in charge at Mercury Theater's newly reimagined Venus Cabaret space.

What's it like being an essential worker in the arts and elsewhere now? Mark Larson centers several stage managers and front of house workers

in our cover story to find out what shutting down and coming back has meant for them. In short: business as usual isn't happening, and a lot of arts workers (rightly!) want to see changes. Annette LePique shows us how Blue Tin Production and 63rd House offer a model of economic justice and community empowerment in Chicago Lawn, while Dmitry Samarov finds a connection to the late Ray Johnson's work at the Art Institute, "like having a talk with an old friend I've never met."

Friends old and new: welcome to the new normal. Whatever happens, we're going to be here to talk about it. —**KERRY REID, THEATER AND DANCE EDITOR**



TO CONTACT ANY READER EMPLOYEE, E-MAIL: (FIRST INITIAL)(LAST NAME)@CHICAGOREADER.COM

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SHOP LOCAL

Come winter, come market

Year-round farmers markets and other ways to support local food makers

By SALEM COLLO-JULIN

The cold outside might make you think that farmers market season is over, but there are plenty of ways to purchase locally grown and regionally created food year round. Here are a few upcoming possibilities.

Plant Chicago in Back of the Yards offers year-round indoor markets, usually scheduled biweekly, with a limited number of vendors inside their building (which was originally a Chicago firehouse). The next event features local makers Bee-utiful Honey and Soap Junkii, among others. Sat 1/29, 11 AM-3 PM, 4459 S. Marshfield, plantchicago.org.

The **61st Street Farmers Market** takes a chance on our midwestern winds each month through the winter with a hybrid indoor and outdoor market (using the interior of Experimental Station) to allow for a slightly larger combination of vendors. Regular visitors include Mick Klug Farm, Stamper Cheese, Ellis Family Farms, and more, plus the market accepts Link (and matches the value of Link purchases up to \$25 per cardholder per market day, giving you a potential of double produce). The next market is Sat 2/12, 9 AM-noon, 6100 S. Blackstone, experimentalstation.org.

Logan Square Farmers Market offers an indoor option and limits attendance in the 9 AM hour to visitors who consider them-

selves high-risk. There are usually about 30 vendors in attendance, including Star Farm and others, and the organizers try to keep traffic flowing to limit the amount of people inside the building together at the same time. You can check it out each Sunday from 10 AM-2 PM (through 4/3) at 2537 N. Pulaski, logansquarefarmersmarket.org/sunday.

Green City Market Lincoln Park usually has a home inside the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum during the winter months, but they've decided to forgo the indoor markets this year in light of COVID-19 concerns. But fear not—many of the regular vendors at Green City offer home delivery or curbside pickup of their goods via the WhatsGood app. Deliveries are made on Wednesdays and Saturdays between the hours of 11 AM-7 PM, and while WhatsGood's delivery map doesn't yet include the entire city, they hit much of the north and northwest sides as well as downtown and several suburbs including Evanston. Link card users can also order through WhatsGood and take advantage of a curbside pickup program centered at Swedish Hospital (5140 N. California). Information about the Green City Market and WhatsGood partnership is available at greencitymarket.org/visit-our-markets/gcm-delivered. 

 [hollo](https://twitter.com/hollo)

Sprouts and microgreens at Logan Square Farmers Market  JOSELITO TAGARAO VIA FLICKR (CC BY-NC 2.0)



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The Dill Pickle Food Co-op is pioneering a new grocery future.

Since 2009, the Dill Pickle Food Co-op has offered locally owned products, healthy food options, and specialty items that can't be found in any other grocery store. This full-service independent grocery co-op builds a dynamic and evolving local community with a more sustainable world. The Dill Pickle meets community needs and strengthens area diversity through products, services, and education. We are also a member-owned and financed grocery cooperative located in the

Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago. Everyone is welcome to shop. Our cooperative principles are **based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity.**

The co-op focuses on being community-owned and offers locally-grown products within a 300-mile radius of its Logan Square location in the neighboring states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa. Currently the only retail food co-op in Chicago, the Dill Pickle is a pio-

neer for an expansion of future food co-op organizations forming in Chicago and the suburbs including the Chicago Market, Prairie Food Co-op, and Wild Onion Food Co-op. For more information about The Dill Pickle Food Co-op, please visit our website at www.dillpickle.coop. Also, please check out our recent feature with WGN.

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Pig & Fire chef Roel Estanilla and roasted porchetta-like rolled pork belly

BY JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Roel Estanilla makes a very presentable pig

The couple behind Filipino lechón specialists Pig & Fire go whole hoglet.

By MIKE SULA

A lion's purr revving to a roar. The sound of a crack racing across the bald face of a mountain. Thunder ripping across the sky. All arresting sounds for sure, but the phenomenon of Roel Estanilla breaking into the crispy, copper skin of a roasted cochinito lechón could drown them all out.

That sound is a Pavlovian promise of lip-sticky pigskin armoring a lush, lemon-grass-perfumed anatomy of milk-fed pork

flesh. The instrument is a whole suckling pig that Estanilla roasts for six hours and then splays across banana leaves bedecked with edible flowers.

The chef caters traditional and modern Filipino food and mounts pop-ups out of the Hatchery under the name Pig & Fire. He understands the aural and visual gravitas of a whole roasted pig, and the specs he asks of his regular purveyor, Slagel Family Farm, are exacting.

"We're like, 'Please don't cut off any part of the pig,'" says Jen Estanilla, Roel's wife, who handles marketing when she's not working as a physician at Rush University's Neonatal-Perinatal Fellowship Program. "We want the whole thing. We want a very, very presentable pig."

Roel, who's 43, was born in Dagupan in the northwestern Ilocos region of the Philippines. That's a fishing town, but the primacy

of the pig in the Filipino diet was impressed upon him at an early age, with each visit to his grandfather's farm, when his Lolo would select a choice suckling from his stock, skewer, and slowly turn it over coals until its skin would bronze and shatter like glass. "It was so fatty and juicy," he says. "It was the drip in the charcoal. You could see the smoke and smell the aromatics that he used inside the pig. You could smell it around the neighborhood. The skin was so crisp you just wanted to peel and eat it while it was turning on the bamboo."

When Estanilla was ten his family settled in San Francisco, where his mother supplemented her regular income with a home catering operation cooking traditional foods like lumpia, pancit, menudo, and Filipino spaghetti for baptisms, birthdays, weddings, and other parties. Roel got his hands into the business too, which was good preparation for when he moved to Las Vegas in his early 20s and worked his way through the varied kitchens of the Mandalay Bay and ARIA resort casinos.

Still, he hadn't cooked Filipino food professionally until after Jen accepted a residency at Loyola's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and the couple settled in Oak Park in 2017. With Jen clocking 80 hours in the hospital each week he needed something flexible so he could help care for their young son. It started out small, bringing lumpia or pancit to block parties, which led to invitations to cater events like the one his mother used to cook for. Requests piled up until the couple started seeing it as a viable business.

Among the heaping aluminum pans of bistek, noodles, and purple ube chocolate chip cookies, Roel's output began to lean heavily toward the porcine, which inspired the name of the business.

Roasted, stewed, cured, or fried pig parts vary widely across the Philippines, from blistered, deep-fried belly lechón kawali and crispy pata; to shoulder stuffed into sweet longanisa sausages or cured into tocino; along with all the foods that arise as byproducts of the whole pig, like the sizzling minced pig face sisig, and thick, sweet lechón sauce boosted with liver.

In the months before the pandemic the Estanillas were supplementing catering lulls with increasingly performative pop-ups at Oak Park bars, featuring the elaborate banana leaf

GROWING FOR GOOD with Green Thumb

NDICA: a national nonprofit creating an ethical and equitable cannabis industry

Featuring Bonita "Bo" Money, founder of NDICA

Q: What in NDICA? Why is it needed?

Bonita "Bo" Money: NDICA, the National Diversity and Inclusion Cannabis Alliance, is a social equity and social justice national nonprofit organization whose mission is to create an ethical and equitable industry to reduce barriers contributing to the lack of representation of those most impacted by the war on drugs. We work towards creating equitable employment and ownership opportunities in the hemp and cannabis space.

NDICA is the only cannabis nonprofit to be funded by two governors' offices, in California and Illinois, to serve folks from marginalized communities in the areas of workforce development, cannabis education and training, technical assistance, cannabis licensing, youth programming, reentry, mentorship, and expungement services. All these areas are crucial to lower recidivism rates; reduce community violence; remove legal barriers to employment, housing, and student loans; and promote overall wellness, education, and prosperity in our communities of color.

Q: What initiatives have you created to support people in neighborhoods that have been disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs?

BBM: Our current initiatives and programs include expanding our cannabis training, workforce development training, and youth mentorship programs; hosting free monthly expungement clinics; and assisting in access to capital for social equity entrepreneurs. We've also recently launched new corporate mentorship programs with community partners like Humble+Fume and Dip Devices to support and empower Black and Brown entrepreneurs in the cannabis and hemp space.

Q: Tell me about the youth programs you offer. How did you go from cannabis to gaming?

BBM: NDICA provides a variety of community services, ranging from weekly food and clothing distributions to youth mentoring programs. We strive to provide a variety of programs to our communities. Our youth program options include both a technology and an arts program. The technology NextGen: STEAM Mentorship Program focuses on youth development and education in STEAM fields where both gaming and coding are discussed. The Youth Filmmaking Mentoring Program is an arts program led by actor Brian Hooks of Left of BANG Entertainment. Participants in the arts program learn the fundamentals of independent filmmaking, including preproduction, production, and postproduction.

The goal is to promote education and immerse the youth into career goal-oriented programs that they might not otherwise experience in their communities, as well as to deter youth violence and incarceration.

Q: You mentioned that your youth program is limited by the number of mentors you have. What type of help do you need? How can our readers volunteer?

BBM: Yes, we actually are in need of sponsors, employment vendors, volunteers, and attorneys who can assist us at our free monthly expungement clinics, and subject matter experts in STEAM fields with experience teaching youth ages ten to 18 within Chicago's south suburbs. We are continually looking for community employment partners that are willing to train, mentor, and/or hire our program participants; many are returning citizens ages 16 to 50, who are looking for a second chance and deservedly so. If someone is interested in learning more about these opportunities, please e-mail us at info@thendica.org with the subject line Employment Partnership, Expungement Clinic Volunteer, or Youth Program SME.

We encourage readers to get educated and get involved in their local community. You can become a member of NDICA and learn from organizations like ours and others in your area. It is pivotal that we educate our communities which have lost so much already. We must empower ourselves with knowledge and action.



Bonita Money is a longtime veteran of the TV and film industry and transitioned into the cannabis industry in 2014. She is the founder of NDICA—National Diversity and Inclusion Cannabis Alliance—the only cannabis organization to be funded by the state of California's governor's office and contracted by the city of LA's Social Equity program. She is also a well-known speaker at cannabis-related and mainstream events and conferences with a focus on social equity, social justice, economic empowerment, diversity in cannabis, and how to enter into the cannabis industry.



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continued from 6

smorgasbords known as kamayan, along with modern takes on Filipino classics such as sisig tacos and longanisa sliders.

“We have two kinds of customers,” says Jen. “The ones that are like, ‘Don’t mess with my Filipino food. I want it the way my grandma makes it,’ and then the ones that want to see new things. Some dishes we don’t touch. Pancit, lumpia you don’t mess with. But then we have fun with things like the longa burger.”

In 2019 they debuted braised and roasted porchetta-like rolled pork bellies, as if anticipating the smaller gatherings COVID would soon force. Then last July they got a request to roast a whole suckling pig for a wedding. In an Instagram video, Roel demonstrates its tenderness in the Castilian style by breaking down the finished piglet into its bronzed primal parts with a dinner plate (though he refrains from smashing it against the wall). Cochinillo is the Spanish term for suckling pig. Jen says these smaller pigs, along with the European name, came into demand during the pandemic, not just here but in the Philippines.



You'll be able to get your own helping of delectable lechón when Pig & Fire visits Monday Night Foodball on April 25 at the Kedzie Inn. 📍 JEFF MARINI FOR CHICAGO READER

Estanilla brines and then marinates whole pigs with green onions, lemongrass, garlic, salt, pepper, cayenne, smoked paprika, and more for 24 hours, followed by six to seven hours roasting in a Blodgett pizza oven at the Hatchery. They've prepared close to 30 whole

lechón since that first wedding. And they'll frequently offer whole pigs to order by the piece. That's how I ended up with a whole suckling pig head for New Year's Eve, loaded with more silky cheek and shoulder meat than my small gathering could ingest before the New Year.

In the days to come, the leftovers found their way into fried rice and ramen, which just goes to show how far leftover lechón can go. Jen says customers have reported leftover lechón making its way into the sautéed mixed vegetable and shrimp paste dish pinakbet, or more commonly, simmered in vinegar a la paksiw.

Right now, the Estanillas are working on a line of packaged precooked and frozen things like lumpia and barbecue skewers—easy to prepare before barbecue season comes around again. And they're experimenting with novel ways to serve lechón—say, in sliders, bao, or tacos. And they're taking orders for delivery or curbside pickup for a lechón rice bowl pop-up on Saturday, January 29.

It's too soon to say what's on the menu on April 25, when Pig & Fire appears at Monday Night Foodball, the *Reader's* weekly chef pop-up series at the Kedzie Inn. But it's safe to say there will be a very presentable pig. “We'll break down a whole lechón and have some fun with it,” says Jen. 📺

🐼 @MikeSula

When seasonal depression hits hard

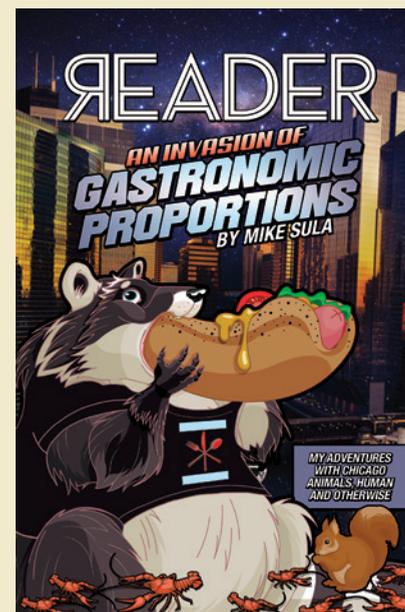
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Seasonal depression begins to kick in for many people after the holiday season is over and the cold weather stays. On top of going through a pandemic, reduced sunlight and change in season can mess with your body's balance. All of these factors can cause a drop in serotonin levels and unwanted depression kicks in. Sometimes, this overwhelming wave of sadness is too much to battle on your own but not enough to commit to a daily antidepressant that may take weeks to kick in. Ketamine infusion therapy is the newest opioid-free, most innovative treatment for depression.

Glutamate regulates large regions of the nervous systems and is the most prominent neurotransmitter in the brain. When glutamate receptors are over-activated, a person may experience depression. Ketamine works by blocking glutamate receptors in the brain and increasing synaptic connectivity in brain circuitry, providing relief from depression symptoms. Patients with seasonal depression typically require six infusions over the course of two weeks, and begin to feel immense relief by their second or third infusion. If you or a loved one is struggling with seasonal depression this year, you do not have to suffer. Visit NeuroMedici.com or call our office at (773) 227-2687 to learn more.



NeuroMedici
BY DR. CONSALTER



Don't miss the newest *Chicago Reader* "Best of" book, a collection of pieces from more than two decades of work by senior writer Mike Sula.

I've written for the *Chicago Reader* for over two decades on animals and food. My favorite stories were about the people on the edges of the city's food system; the oddballs, the uncelebrated, the immigrants cooking for their own—and especially the people willing to break the law to put food on the table. There was Shirley the Muffin Lady, making the rounds of the bars with baskets full of weed-spiked treats. There were the househusbands running an outdoor charcuterie operation out of a Skokie home kitchen. And then there was Chef Albert D'Angelo, the insufferable, arrogant prick, who'd opened a secret restaurant out in the lake, two miles off Oak Street Beach. But in going over the quarter century of pieces I've written for the paper I noticed another pattern: there have been lots of tales of human animals doing strange things with other species—not just eating them either. There was the distasteful catnapping orchestrated by a stay-at-home man; the colony of cemetery-dwelling, hot dog-gorging raccoons and their human enablers; the farmer who cloned his prize-winning dairy cow; and the obsessive fossil collectors scouring slag piles filled with 300-million-year-old invertebrates. I don't know what it means that I gravitate to that sort of story, but it's that sort of story that inspired the title for this collection. It's about an invasion of Louisiana crawfish in the surging Chicago River, and the neighbors that waded in after them for dinner. You'll find all of those stories and more within, each starting one or more extraordinary animals, edible or otherwise.

—MIKE SULA

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\$4 TALLBOY BEERS (BUSCH LIGHT, PBR, HAMM'S)



SCAN FOR FULL MENU

MON: \$4 WHISKEY, RYE & BOURBON
\$3 MILLER LITE DRAFTS
\$5 BIG ASS LONG ISLANDS

TUE: \$4 PREMIUM WELL COCKTAILS
\$4 TALLBOYS

WED: \$3 HOUSE SHOTS
\$4 TITO'S COCKTAILS 
\$6 BIG MILLER LITE DRAFTS

THU: \$4 PREMIUM WELL COCKTAILS
\$4 TALLBOYS

FRI: \$7 BIG MILLER LITE DRAFTS
\$3 HOUSE SHOTS

SAT: \$4 LOST COAST TANGERINE WHEAT
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NEWS & POLITICS



POLITICS

Listen to Olin

As bad and as cheap as the Bears may be, some city—probably Arlington Heights—will pay for their new stadium.

By **BEN JORAVSKY**

With another disappointing Bears season having finally, mercifully, come to an end, the time has once again come for me to ask the burning question . . .

No, not who the McCaskeys will hire as coach now that they've fired Matt Nagy, about a year after it was obvious he was the wrong person to hire in the first place.

And no, not who they will hire to replace general manager Ryan Pace, almost five years after he proved he knew nothing about selecting talent—I mean, Mitch Trubisky over Patrick Mahomes? Oh lord, I don't think I'll ever get over that.

No, the question is the one I posed last October when the topic first arose: Which collection of suckers will pay for the new Bears stadium—taxpayers in Arlington Heights or Chicago?

Then, as now, one thing is certain: the Bears won't pay for it. That's for sure—even if they're the prime beneficiaries.

As I told you last October, the one thing you need to know about the Bears is that they're cheap. As in cheap, cheap, cheap, and cheap!

And as long as there's someone somewhere foolish enough to pick up the tab for their new

stadium, well, the Bears will happily let them pick it up.

In that regard, they're like that friend—and we all have one—who always manages to be conveniently in the bathroom when the waiter brings the bill to your table.

Before I continue, I must confess . . .

I failed. Miserably so.

That is, in last October's column I tried to teach everyone—especially political writers who have to write about the stadium—that the Bears are cheap. Yet the message failed to sink in.

Consider the case of the Internet writer who wrote a story in November, citing an unnamed source, that the Bears would fire Nagy after their Thanksgiving Day game against Detroit.

Even though there were still six games left to play after the Detroit game.

The regular Bears beat writers wasted hours of their lives checking to see if that story was true. Which it wasn't.

Of course it wasn't true. Anybody who knew anything about the Bears knew it couldn't be true because . . .

Nagy had a guaranteed contract. The Bears would have had to pay him, even if they fired

Say it with me and Olin: The Bears are cheap!

📷 JAUERBACK

him. And there's no way the Bears would pay a coach who wasn't actually coaching.

Because . . .

The Bears are cheap! As I tried to tell you in October!

Don't believe me? Ask any ex-Bear who's not on the payroll, and he'll tell you. It's about the only thing that Mike Ditka—a raging MAGA man—and I agree on.

I once spent a delightful evening having dinner with the late, great Doug Buffone, who regaled us with hilarious stories about the Bears' cheapness back in the 60s and 70s when he was playing linebacker.

Apparently, not much has changed. As we learned thanks to Olin Kreutz, the former All-Pro center who played 13 seasons for the Bears.

A few years ago, the Bears offered to pay Kreutz to come to training camp and help coach the offensive linemen for—get ready for this—\$15 an hour, Kreutz recently revealed.

When asked about this monumental display of cheapness, George McCaskey—chairman of the Bears board—didn't deny it. Nor did he apologize to Kreutz, who sacrificed life and limb for the team.

Hell, no. He tried to defend it, castigating Kreutz by saying he hadn't told the full story. Which, apparently, is that the Bears pay all their training-camp assistant coaches \$15 an hour. So it was nothing personal against Kreutz.

You call that an explanation? Quite the contrary—McCaskey merely underscored the very point Kreutz was making. And that is . . . you're cheap!

Say what you will about George Steinbrenner, who used to own the New York Yankees—and I thought he was a tyrant and bully. But at least he wasn't cheap. Why, Steinbrenner paid former stars like Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle good money to come to spring training and hang around so that fans could look at them just being Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle.

Now, I've had Bears fans tell me: Ben, the

Bears need a new stadium because Soldier Field is too small. And they need to sell more tickets to raise the money to bring in top talent.

First of all, the NFL is basically a socialistic cartel for billionaires whose incomes are guaranteed by billions of dollars in TV revenues. So they already have money pouring in.

Secondly, there's a salary cap that limits how much they can pay their players.

And finally, all the money in the world won't substitute for lack of judgment. To give you just one example . . .

In the 2000 draft, the Bears selected Paul Edinger, a so-so placekicker, over Tom Brady, the greatest quarterback of all time.

Edinger's career with the Bears lasted five seasons. Brady, who's won seven Super Bowls, is still going strong.

Hey, Bears fans, do you think a stadium had anything to do with taking Edinger over Brady? You could build them the Taj Mahal of stadiums and the Bears would still take Edinger over Brady.

'Cause on top of being cheap, they don't know football.

Alas, all my ranting and raving will not stop any municipality from forking over billions to build the Bears a new stadium, no matter how unworthy they may be of such generosity.

So, my prediction remains the same from October . . .

I predict the new stadium will be built in Arlington Heights. And the taxpayers of Arlington Heights will pay for it with a TIF. Which the leaders of Arlington Heights will pretend doesn't raise property taxes, even though, of course, it does.

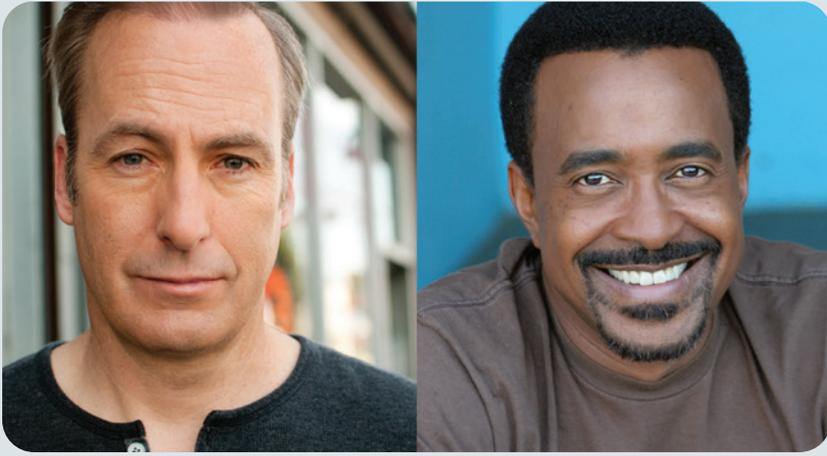
On the bright side, the Bears will be flush with so much extra money, they might give their training-camp assistant coaches a raise.

Though, on second thought, I doubt it. 'Cause as every Bear from Mike Ditka to Doug Buffone to Olin Kreutz can tell you . . .

The Bears are cheap! 📷

🐦 @bennyjshow

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POETRY CORNER

Thin

By Suman Chhabra

Today for some reason, I thought I could call my mother
to feel my tongue unloading
crates of what I need to tell
you now that she is ether

Moonstone teeth mash together
I speak but oversized flowers
fall from mouth
I am of no harm to anyone
though lately I have tried
to enunciate anger

but jaw—
a yoga teacher said that the muscles of one's jaw
should be no thicker than a credit card

and mine are layer over layer
so each morning I stretch and knead face
as if preparing it for oven
even sleeping a form of aggression

right hand a fist
pushed into mattress

Are you looking for wounds?
check my mouth
teeth moving as glaciers
through the night
slicing ridges into both cheeks

Release a satellite
into the canyon
transmit the words
I do not speak

Suman Chhabra is the author of *Demons Off* (Meekling Press, 2015). She is a Kundiman fellow and her work has been supported by journals and anthologies including *Asian American Literature*, *Rethinking the Canon* (*The Massachusetts Review* x the Smithsonian) and *New Poetry from the Midwest* (New American Press). She attended the University of Michigan and received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Chhabra teaches courses on Asian American literature at SAIC.

Poem curated by Natasha Mijares: Natasha is an artist, writer, curator, and educator. Her debut collection of poetry, *violent wave*, is forthcoming from PANK Books. She received her MFA in Writing from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has exhibited at various international and national galleries. Her work has appeared in *Gravity of the Thing*, *Hypertext Review*, *Calamity*, *Vinyl Poetry*, and more.

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Exhibition space for “The Journey Back” at the Illinois Holocaust Museum  EMILY MOHNEY

CULTURE

A survivor’s tour of Auschwitz

VR comes to the Illinois Holocaust Museum.

By DEANNA ISAACS

She didn’t want to talk about it. Fritzie Fritzshall survived Auschwitz, came to Chicago, and built what most of us are lucky enough to think of as a normal life, with work and marriage, a child and a home.

She did it by putting her Auschwitz experience in a mental box and shutting it away. Not denying it, but denying it continued presence in her life. She didn’t want it to define her.

Until she did.

Fritzshall was born in Czechoslovakia in 1931, and was 13 years old when Nazi occupiers forced her and her family first to a ghetto and then to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where her mother and two brothers were murdered. She became the youngest worker in a slave labor factory, survived a death march in 1945, came to America the following year, and tried not to talk about any of that for nearly four decades.

In the early 1980s, when the Holocaust Memorial Foundation was beginning to collect videotaped testimony from survivors, Fritzshall’s son, Steve, who had learned not to ask her about it, urged her to participate. Make a tape and bring a copy home for me, he said. When she did, the floodgates opened. The starving women who worked in that slave labor factory had shared their tiny allotment of bread with her so that she, as the youngest, might survive. In the video made that day, she said she’d neglected her duty to tell their story.

And from then on, she did. In the hope that teaching about the Holocaust might keep anything like it from happening again, she never stopped talking about it.

Fritzshall died June 19, 2021, but that isn’t stopping her either.

At the time of her death, she’d been pres-

ident of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center for more than a decade, and you can still see and hear her telling her story there. She’s one of the rotating witnesses in the museum’s interactive “Survivor Stories” hologram exhibit (where viewers really do talk with the dead). She’s also featured in the museum’s newest high-tech offering, “The Journey Back”—a virtual reality trip to Auschwitz that opens to the public January 27.

The new VR experience consists of two 15-minute films. *A Promise Kept* follows Fritzshall from the idyllic Czechoslovak/Hungarian countryside of her childhood to the Auschwitz compound in Poland. *Don’t Forget Me* traces the parallel story of George Brent, also barely a teenager when he was taken from his Czechoslovakian home to Auschwitz where his mother and brother were killed, and then to two brutal labor and starvation camps in Austria—Mauthausen and Ebensee.

A chance to preview the two films brought me to the museum last week, and reminded me that, after numerous visits, I still haven’t mastered its two-building layout. That’s no accident: the permanent exhibit, which moves chronologically through the Holocaust, from pre-WWII life in Europe through the war years to liberation, is a deliberately disorienting maze that propels the viewer on a one-way

trip from darkness to light. As its architect Stanley Tigerman explains in a video available on the museum website, it’s a building in which every detail—from the columns outside to the number of windows in the Hall of Reflection and the shape of the theater space—has meaning.

Kelley Szany, the museum’s vice president of education and exhibitions, traveled to Europe with Fritzshall for the VR filming. She says the concept emerged after Fritzshall’s hologram had been made, from the realization that, like the survivors, these sites might not be permanently available.

“This is the first time survivors’ stories are merged with the sites of these atrocities in virtual reality,” Szany told me; the idea is to “archive and preserve” them, in order to help educate about what can happen “when people remain indifferent and allow hatred to grow.”

Auschwitz (like other Nazi concentration and death camps) has largely been swept clean; what you see of it in this film, beyond the infamous gate and railroad tracks, is mostly bare ground, fencing, and antiseptically empty buildings. In part because of that, the VR technology, with its 360-degree views and clunky goggles (remember 3D?), is arguably less efficacious for this museum’s storytelling than the amazingly effective interactive holograms. But that’s a high bar.

And when Fritzshall arrives at Auschwitz, we see that the place comes alive for her—the sights, sounds, deathly chill, filth, and stench of it rushing back. She recalls, in the film, that the mass latrine, a single room filled with long open benches studded with one hole after another, was both an example of Nazi strategies to degrade and dehumanize the prisoners, and, ironically, a place of value to them. Because it was the only place where the guards did not follow them in, she says, it became a kind of hellish haven—the one spot in the camp where they were able to connect, embrace, communicate freely (even praying together), and affirm their humanity. 

“The Journey Back” is free with museum admission, but accommodates just eight viewers at a time; advance ticket reservations, available at ilholocaustmuseum.org, are required for it and for the hologram.

 @Deannaisaacs

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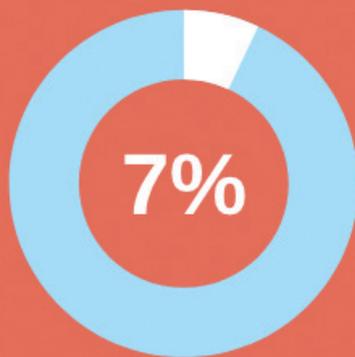
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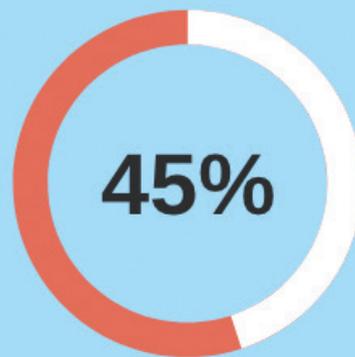
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ADAM M. RHODES



IDOC prison staff
Only 7% of all IDOC prison staffers have received a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine booster.



People in IDOC custody
About 45% of people incarcerated in Illinois prisons have gotten the booster.

CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

Most Illinois prison staff haven't gotten COVID boosters

Fewer than one in ten prison staffers have received a booster, even as cases spike in correctional facilities across the state.

By **ADAM M. RHODES**

An overwhelming majority of Illinois prison staff have not received a COVID-19 vaccine booster, and only about two-thirds of staff have gotten both of the initial vaccine doses amid the latest wave of infections—which has also impacted those already vaccinated against the virus.

About 7 percent of Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) staff had received a COVID-19 booster as of December 17, 2021, according to department data obtained by the Illinois Prison Project through a public records request and shared exclusively with the *Reader*. Forty-five percent of people incarcerated in IDOC prisons have received the booster. At only two correctional facilities, Peoria and North Lawndale, did staff have the booster at higher rates than people in

custody.

Booster rates differ considerably from one IDOC facility to another. For staffers, booster rates at Illinois correctional facilities range from less than 1 percent at Centralia Correctional Center to as much as 30 percent at Elgin Mental Health Center. Rates for people incarcerated in IDOC facilities range from 2 percent at Peoria Adult Transition Center to nearly 65 percent at Kewanee, a juvenile detention center.

The Illinois Department of Public Health reports that more than 3.27 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine booster have been administered in the state, roughly 25 percent of the entire Illinois population.

IDOC did not respond to inquiries before press time. Internal IDOC e-mails indicate

that the agency administered booster doses to staff at prisons over a three-day period in early December 2021.

“It’s appalling that a mere fraction of prison staff have received COVID-19 booster shots while the virus continues to ravage Illinois’s prisons,” Illinois Prison Project’s executive director Jennifer Soble said in a statement to the *Reader*.

The data, current as of December 17, 2021, also reports that 66 percent of IDOC prison staffers are fully vaccinated (i.e., have gotten both doses) against COVID, compared to 75 percent of people in custody. As WBEZ previously reported, that’s a significant increase from the 44 percent of staffers who were vaccinated in August.

Advocates have long pushed for vaccine

requirements for prison workers to overcome low vaccination rates, and Governor J.B. Pritzker answered those calls with a mandate in August. Although the workers’ union—the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees—began arbitration proceedings over the mandate in October, an arbitrator recently sided with the state and upheld the mandate. The arbitrator’s decision states that staffers covered by the mandate have until the end of January to get a first dose of the vaccine.

“The recent surge of cases brought on by the Omicron variant has brought a serious threat to our state, and I’m glad that this ruling will protect nearly 10,000 state workers and all of the people at these facilities,” Pritzker said in a late December statement.

According to a statement by the union, its representative on the arbitration panel has filed a formal dissent from the decision at the Illinois Labor Relations Board.

“AFSCME Council 31 dissents because we do not believe that a mandatory vaccination policy without a testing option will result in a level of protection against infection by transmission of COVID-19 that is superior to the protection that can be provided by a ‘vaccine or test’ mandate,” the dissent stated. COVID-19 can still impact vaccinated people even though studies overwhelmingly show vaccines decrease the severity of COVID-19 in infected individuals.

AFSCME also expressed concerns in the dissent that staffers would quit over the mandate, but similar concerns in police departments across the country have failed to bear fruit.

Dr. Seth Prins, an assistant professor of epidemiology and sociomedical sciences at Columbia University in New York City, says that prison staffers refusing or delaying getting the vaccine and booster has myriad consequences, both for people they guard and control as well as surrounding communities.

Prins says guards without booster doses also pose a potentially fatal risk for those in state custody amid the latest COVID-19 wave, particularly within spaces that make social distancing and other mitigation efforts nearly impossible. According to IDOC’s COVID-19 dashboard, staff make up a little more than one-third of all COVID cases in state prisons.

NEWS & POLITICS

“We already know that congregate settings like jails and prisons allow for the rapid spread of infectious diseases that are transmitted person to person, especially those that are airborne,” Prins says. “It’s very difficult to socially distance and engage in the practices that we know can make us safer, such as distancing, handwashing, and masking.”

Prins also adds that unlike incarcerated people, guards and staffers come and go, bringing the virus with them as they enter and leave prisons.

“Allowing conditions in jails and prisons to kind of go unchecked and out of control like this will actually make things worse for everyone else as well,” Prins says.

Advocates have repeatedly called for the state to significantly reduce its prison population since the start of the pandemic, an effort Prins says is the most significant way to stop the spread of COVID in prisons.

After about 3,400 people in Illinois prisons were released at the start of the pandemic, between March and June 2020, Injustice

Watch reported that white inmates were granted freedom more so than their Black counterparts. As part of a lawsuit settlement, IDOC agreed in March 2021 to more COVID-related releases, which attorneys at the time estimated could impact as many as 1,000 people behind bars. The deal specifically impacted people deemed low- to medium-risk who are within nine months of their release date and are eligible for certain good-time credits.

“Every infection, every death is a direct result of workers’ refusal to follow even basic public health precautions,” Soble, of the Illinois Prison Project, says. Soble helped represent the plaintiffs in the suit against IDOC. “Governor Pritzker and the Department of Corrections have a choice: heed the repeated calls of experts and advocates and immediately commit to widespread decarceration, or allow a dangerous virus to jeopardize the lives and well-being of imprisoned people in their care.”

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Greg reads his poem, “Thoughts of a Lonely Man,” aloud from his notebook. The cat he shares with his girlfriend, Stacey, perches on his knee. © SARAH GELBARD

HOUSING

Homeless in a pandemic-stricken Chicago

Even with advocates pushing for better access to housing and health care, hundreds of public housing units have sat empty while homeless Chicagoans try to survive COVID-19.

By SARAH GELBARD

Underneath the city streets on Lower Wacker, many people have set up encampments along a stretch of concrete and iron rust. It can smell like gasoline, cat urine, pigeon droppings, rat decay, mold, and rotted fruit, depending on where you’re standing. At night the light is harsh and artificial, and the hum of cars, buses, and trucks never stops. Those who live here call it the Underworld. Some struggle with PTSD and substance use disorder. It’s late December 2020, and they are all trying to survive.

Robert is soft-spoken, very thin with earnest brown eyes. He once worked in construction. He’s been holding a sign to make money, but he doesn’t make enough. He lives in a tent.

“Everyone’s still working from home, but we’re all out here. It was hard for us before. It’s even harder now,” he told me last winter. “I have to provide for my son and myself . . . I have bigger things to worry about on a daily basis than a virus I may or may not get, that may or may not kill me. I may die anyway.”

Stacey lives with her boyfriend Greg Smith and their cat Simba in the tent next to Robert. Her face, framed by light brown hair, looks pale as she pulls a dark ski hat down over her forehead to stay warm. Weeks before I met her, she had recovered from a swollen black eye after getting punched when trying to protect another woman from an aggressor. Like Stacey, Greg is caring and hospitable. When we meet, he rushes to find his folding chair so I’ll have a comfortable place to sit.

He’s on a long waiting list for housing. Often, unmarried couples on housing waiting lists are not allowed placement together. His belongings rest in a heap outside his tent: blankets, clothes, cardboard boxes, a pair of sandals, a cane, Simba’s crate and cat food, a backpack, a small suitcase, nine notebooks,

and a novel about Che Guevara. Greg, Stacey, and Robert share chocolate that I had picked up at a drugstore.

At the other end of the street, Michael doesn’t have a tent. He’s white and looks younger than 31, boyish, with messy brown hair and a scruffy beard. He’s curled up inside of a sleeping bag, surrounded by a pile of bottled water, dirty blankets, junk food, and a cardboard sign that asks for help. When I call his name, he peeks his head out and blinks, adjusting a faded disposable mask over his face. He gently closes the Terry Pratchett novel he was reading.

“Once you become homeless it’s so hard to get out of that hole,” Michael says. “If you don’t have a working phone, if you don’t have an ID, if you don’t have a place to take a shower, if you don’t have a place you can sleep every night—what, you just walk into a restaurant and you’re like, ‘I haven’t showered in a couple of weeks and I have no address, no way to get ahold of me, but I’m looking for work! Hire me?’ When people shout at you, ‘Get a job!’ you have to slow them down and be like, ‘Let’s talk about this sensibly.’ But they’re not going to want to listen.”

Tonight, he’s grateful—a woman gave him a \$20 gift card to Walgreens and a \$20 gift card to McDonald’s. These he can actually use. Sometimes people leave heaps of food at his feet. He has no place to store it. It just attracts more rats. “I feel so bad,” he says. “I don’t want to turn down food, but I can’t eat 45 turkey dinners.” He too is on a waiting list for housing. “There’s, like, [housing info] sheets that say, ‘could take ten to 25 years,’” he says.

In the summer of 2020, advocates from the Chicago Housing Initiative raised questions about the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA). The agency failed to fill 1,250

empty units, according to documents obtained through a FOIA request. A CHA representative declined to be interviewed for this story, but e-mailed a brief statement on the agency's commitment to "supporting permanent affordable housing solutions" for homeless Chicagoans. Documentation obtained in January 2021 showed that a similar number of vacant units remained. In his e-mail, the representative says there are always empty units "for a number of reasons, including scheduled redevelopment."

"I don't care about the pandemic. All I care about is having a roof over my head that I can call my own."

—Bonnie

Right now the agency takes an average of 480 days to prepare one unit for lease. Cathleen O'Brien, a housing advocate at Access Living, an organization dedicated to disability rights, is working on the Public Health and Housing Ordinance. Under this ordinance, landlords would have to prepare units within 60 to 90 days and the CHA would have to ensure that 97 percent of its units are always filled.

O'Brien hopes to lift the ban on rent control, too. She says chronically unemployed and underemployed disabled people are often forced to leave when landlords raise rent prices for costly accessible properties. With a rent control ban in place and without debt

forgiveness, tenants may be eligible for emergency rental assistance, but landlords can sometimes turn away those funds in favor of new tenants who do not require assistance, O'Brien says. And many tenants owed months of rent when the eviction moratorium expired in October. "That is going to cause a housing crisis like we've never seen in this country and in this state," she says.

Data from 2020 pointed to roughly 5,390 homeless people in Chicago, and many more uncounted squatting in basements, sleeping on couches, or doubled up in overcrowded homes.

Thousands have survived one pandemic winter, only to now face another, still waiting for shelters to have spaces for them, to hear their names called for a public housing unit. Most could make a compelling case for prioritization in housing—citing disability, vision or mobility impairments, substance use disorders, and attempts to self-medicate that leave them susceptible to dopesickness and overdose.

Brittany King, who has used a wheelchair to get around after having a stroke in her second year of college, was added to a housing waiting list in 2009. Ten years later,

she got a unit.

Then, she had to leave it behind because she did not feel safe living with an ex-partner there. She returned to her family's house with a two-year-old in tow. It was crowded. She hopes to move out, live on her own, spend more time with her daughter, start a baking business, even date. She's tried to move out with vouchers from the CHA. She should be able to use a voucher to rent wheelchair-accessible housing, paying a small portion and letting the agency cover the rest. But her vouchers expired as she searched for a landlord who might accept her. Landlords discriminate against voucher holders, turning them down and demanding proof of income three times the rent. It's illegal in Cook County, but it still happens.

Across the city, Bonnie and her partner Phillippe have been waiting for housing for years, too. They are squatting in the basement of a friend's home in Avondale, at the bottom of a steep and narrow flight of stairs. A car accident left Bonnie with severe injuries years ago. She uses a wheelchair, and the stairs are like a trap. Still, this is the most comfortable place they've stayed in a while. There's a refrigerator, a small table, two chairs, an old couch, and a bare mattress on

the floor.

In December 2020, I descend the narrow flight of stairs, holding the railing tightly on my way down. I find Bonnie sitting in a chair pressed up against a dull green wall. She has bright, wistful eyes, freckles across her cheeks, and long hair that's braided and tied in a low ponytail. She speaks urgently about mental illness, homelessness, about knowing a homeless veteran who froze to death. She recounts her own painful history of facing violence and abuse as a Black woman. She misses her children, who live with relatives. They are all beautiful, she says.

She has moved from her sister's house to a women's shelter to sleeping at bus stops. From there she went to Pacific Garden Mission on the west side, one of the largest shelters in Chicago. Staff assigned her to a top bunk bed, but she couldn't climb onto it. Then she met Phillippe. Bonnie seems happiest when she talks about Phillippe. "He was the only one who looked at me beyond my disability," she says. "He shows me he loves me every day." He too had left a violent relationship. Two years ago, he invited her to join him at his encampment on Roosevelt and Des Plaines, known as Tent City. It's one of the city's largest encampments, with tents



Arthur lays on the sidewalk outside of Chicago's Cultural Center with a cardboard sign that reads: NEED GREYHOUND BUS TICKET. © SARAH GELBARD



A row of tents lining a narrow cement enclosure provide minimal shelter for some of Chicago's homeless individuals. © SARAH GELBARD

continued from 17

spread out over acres of land.

"There were so many rats," Bonnie says. She felt like she had to sleep with one eye open. They moved from their tent, to an overcrowded house for squatters, to their friend's basement. "I don't care about the pandemic. All I care about is having a roof over my head that I can call my own." She wants wheelchair-accessible housing, but she'll crawl up the stairs if she has to.

Over on the west side, Vicente, in his late 40s and blind, is also living on the lower level of a housing unit, often struggling to pay rent. Standing straight and tall, he grasps his cane and approaches the sidewalk. A blue cloth mask covers his nose and mouth. His eyes are closed. He needs to find food and do laundry, which is especially hard because he can't see where to place quarters into the machine slots. He moved to the states from Mexico two decades ago, hoping American doctors might restore his sight.

He slept on the Blue Line until transit officials told him he had to pay to ride the train. "They think we are garbage," Vicente says. He's been homeless for ten years. He volunteers with Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. He wants to take English classes. What he wants more than anything, though, is a house.

Overtis Houston Sr., Black and diabetic and in his early 70s, contracted coronavirus during an outbreak in a shelter. He uses a wheelchair. He was sent to a COVID-19

isolation facility on the west side, run by A Safe Haven and Rush University Medical Center. It's open to anyone who tests positive for coronavirus but has nowhere to isolate safely. Houston recovered, but he can't go back to the shelter, because it isn't wheelchair accessible. At a Franciscan Outreach shelter, he says his shower had no rails to hold onto. "I was in wet clothes for two or three days. I keep telling them I need something to put on," he says. "They just ignore me."

The three shelters that make up Franciscan Outreach host about 4,000 people every year, and 100 to 200 of those people are disabled. "There just hasn't been a lot of funding from the city," says Richard Ducatzenzeiler, the executive director, in 2020. "Or from anywhere, when it comes to helping with the infrastructure improvements that need to happen, especially around ADA, or making sure we're staying up to code in health, safety, and fire."

"There's no elevator, obviously," he adds. Although Franciscan Outreach did just receive funding from the city for 2022, so there's hope for improvement.

At A Safe Haven's COVID-19 facility, Overtis takes his insulin and sees a mental health professional. "They have everything you need," he says. "You're not starving. They feed you. They even leave out snacks. I get along with everyone, especially the staff. I get along with them, and they get along with me. You get hot meals. Plus, it's clean."

He's friendly with nurses Terry Gallagher, Jaylen Perez, and Angela Moss, who is also an assistant dean at the Rush University Col-

lege of Nursing. They work in 12-hour shifts. When I visited the facility in late December 2020, Perez walked past rows and rows of cots separated by partitions, pointing out the medication room, private rooms, medical equipment, a cafeteria with a television. Residents gather there for meals and therapy.

"There are people who work nine-to-five jobs, and then after work go and sleep at a homeless shelter. There's a blame put upon the homeless that they do not deserve. There is no difference between the people I take care of here, and anyone else I have in my life," Gallagher says.

Moss says people with coronavirus have come to A Safe Haven's facility from hospitals and shelters throughout Chicago. "We have a high incidence of mental illness and substance use disorder," she says. "So while people are here we do intensive treatment and therapy."

At midnight on a Wednesday in December, dozens line up on the CTA platform at Forest Park, hunched and shivering, picking up sandwiches. Some have slept on the trains. A little boy darts from one line to another, and back again. Stephan Koruba, a nurse practitioner with the Night Ministry, helps to run a Department of Public Health-funded program that provides medical outreach, hats, gloves, meals, masks, and coronavirus, hepatitis C and HIV testing here. Over the background din of coughing and shuffling, Koruba tells me drug overdoses increased during the pandemic. The Night Ministry spends two

nights a week at the Forest Park Blue Line stop, and another two nights at the 95th Street Red Line stop.

"When people have no reliable housing, they are at risk for pretty much every chronic health condition," Dr. Steven Rothschild, the chair of family medicine at Rush Medical College, says. That includes diabetes, hypertension, frostbite, substance use disorder, and mental illness. "There is no single solution. Well, there is a single solution. It's called housing."

Ryan Spangler works with Heartland Alliance Health, helping homeless people connect with encampment communities, navigate housing waiting lists, and get stimulus checks and birth certificates. He too has heard grumbling about 1,250 vacant units. "What CHA is saying may be true: they're not ready, and folks have to go through a specific application process. It's an example of what's wrong with the system, and how inefficient it is."

Nicole Bahena is the vice president of community partnerships at All Chicago Making Homelessness History. She says the city has invested in All Chicago's Expedited Housing Initiative, which aims to house 2,550 people over 18 months. They draw from the Coordinated Entry System housing list, where disabled people or older individuals may be given priority. "It's like 10,000 people long and we don't have enough resources," Bahena says.

So far, the organization has found landlords hold units open when they get large

financial incentives. All Chicago provides select homeless people with apartments, up to two years of rental assistance, and case managers who will prepare them for independent living.

Matthew House is a nonprofit participating in the Expedited Housing Initiative, matching some of the people they serve with housing, furniture, and case management. The south-side building is inviting, with cheerful Christmas decorations, showers for guests, a kitchen, and a dining room where people gather around small circular tables to eat. For Christmas, founding CEO Sanja Rickette Stinson cooks 12 turkeys, 60 potato pies, four large hams, and a peach cobbler.

When I visit, Sherri Allen-Reeves, director of case management at Matthew House, is busy, rapidly placing 50 people into apartments. “I’ve seen grown men cry, because they got housing,” she tells me. “They don’t even have a key yet. They’ve just looked at where they could live, and they cry.”

Nat is 20, studying to be a sterile processing technician. We meet on a video chat and she sits squarely within her computer’s frame. A Mexican flag with an eagle in the center and rainbow stripes around the edges hangs on the wall behind her, celebrating her Hispanic heritage and LGBTQ+ pride. “This is a retractor for the arteries,” she tells me eagerly, describing what she studies in her college classes. “That one’s a retractor for the fallopian tubes.” Her classmates and coworkers don’t know she’s homeless. She doesn’t want anyone to worry.

Nat was 16 the first time her mom kicked her out of the house. She says her mom drove her to an adult shelter that couldn’t take her, and from there she walked for hours to a friend’s house. At the start of the pandemic, she found the STEPS Transitional Living Program at the Night Ministry. She has her own room and a case manager who will save 40 percent of her income for two years. By then she should have enough to move into her own apartment. She’s a cabin cleaner at the airport. For a few shifts each week while school is in session, from 8 PM to 4 AM, she cleans the seats, windows, bathrooms, and galleys in the planes.

She thinks about the future and smiles. “I just want to feel good about myself and happy,” she says. “I want to feel completed. When I have my own apartment, and I’m working, I want to feel satisfied, and happy, and great.”

Thomas Huggett is a family doctor with Lawndale Christian Health Center. He wears round, thin-framed glasses and a brown newsboy cap. A mask and a protective shield cover half his face, but as he greets his patients he is so clearly smiling at them; the wrinkles in his forehead and around his eyes deepen, and his voice rises with warmth. One woman enters the little room in the back of the Franciscan Outreach shelter where he has set up for the evening, steering her wheelchair through a narrow entryway. They both reach out their arms, six feet apart, and say together: “Hug, hug, hug!”

“You gave my chart a hug,” the patient says.

“I gave your chart a big old hug,” Huggett says.

He reaches into his travel case filled with common prescriptions, looking for what his patient needs. With Medicaid, patients are restricted to CVS pharmacy locations. The closest one is two and a half miles away from the Franciscan shelter. Many shelter residents can’t pick up prescriptions, even if they’re covered. They can’t afford transportation and it’s too far to walk. He has Naloxone to treat overdoses, too.

“Are you still hearing voices?” Huggett asks his next patient.

“They went away,” the patient says. Huggett reviews medications and helps him find a pair of glasses, which he also has in his bag.

“They fog up,” the patient says, trying on a pair.

“Yes,” Huggett says, “because of the mask! Try to pinch the mask over your nose—then it doesn’t fog up so much.”

Between patients, Huggett walks through the shelter, with its rows and rows of cots. He goes into the kitchen—a dark room where people crowd around a high, metal table. Guests eat in shifts, standing up.

Lawndale Christian Health Center began vaccinating shelter guests and staff in January 2021. Within the first couple of months, they administered over 2,010 doses. Chicago Heartland Alliance Health administered more than 5,600 doses in two months. Chicago was “far ahead of most cities in the country in prioritizing and immunizing people experiencing homelessness against coronavirus,” Huggett says.

Providers use an anti-racist approach to discuss the vaccine with shelter guests. Huggett says this means acknowledging guests’ experiences with racism and discrimination in health care, asking them for permission to

share scientific information and emphasizing the importance of finding vaccine providers who share the same racial background as recipients. It means helping guests develop a plan to get the vaccine, and making sure they know they are always welcome to return, if they show up to a vaccine appointment and decide they aren’t ready yet.

Huggett remembers administering the vaccine to a guest along with two other injections—one for opioid use disorder and another for a mental health condition. “He was happy to receive all three shots,” Huggett says. In 2022, as the Omicron variant surges, he worries about what happens when government funding to help the homeless during the pandemic runs out, what happens if people lose housing and return to the streets. Those in search of housing, who go back and forth between jails, hospitals, and shelters, may be stuck.

Arthur is burrowed into his sleeping bag, outside of the Cultural Center in downtown Chicago. He feels safer on the street than at the shelter that suffered outbreaks of coronavirus and bedbugs. He has a cardboard sign asking for money to help him get to Pensacola, Florida. “My sister said if I could make it out here, I got a place to stay.”

He’s tall and thin, his bones jutting out. He’s hungry and clutches half of a floppy peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “They don’t give out nothing!” he says. “A dollar here, a dollar there, nothing.”

Older individuals who have been homeless for many years are given priority on housing waiting lists, but it’s a long process. Almost seven miles away from Arthur’s spot on the sidewalk, Carlos Rivera, 55, has been homeless for five years. He signed up on the waiting list in December 2020. He lives in a small green tent in the Avondale encampment on the north side, but he spends much of his time in his friend Ricky’s small wooden shelter that he helped build. It’s cluttered and colorful, with a TV, extra masks on the floor, and multicolored cloth strewn up against the wall. Just two weeks after receiving housing, Ricky was shot and killed. Carlos is taking care of Ricky’s cats.

Before the pandemic, Carlos squatted in a building with the owner’s permission. The owner was afraid Carlos would contract coronavirus from others in the homeless community and spread it around the building, so he told Carlos to leave. He’s looking for work but “it’s ten times harder now than it was before

the pandemic. And I’m not a young cat anymore.” Homelessness, he says, “is so intense, so overwhelming that words cannot even describe it. It’s sadness, anger, it’s everything at once.”

Back on Lower Wacker, Robert is still there, still panhandling to get by. A volunteer who helps homeless pets paid one month’s rent for Stacey and Greg so they could shield their cat from the cold. They have long since returned to living outside in tents and panhandling too. Stacey writes in her spare time.

Greg hasn’t written in a while, but there is one poem he is most proud of. He reads it aloud to me, his voice deep and gravelly, echoing across concrete, rising above the rumbling of trucks and cars behind him. “‘Thoughts of a Lonely Man’ by the Venerable D.S. Gregory,” he says, and then he takes a breath and continues:

*Walking these crowded streets
Feeling like I’m always in court
Being judged constantly
It’s become a new sport
Mentally beaten down
Physically trampled
Kept pinned to the ground
A snail slithering around
To feel this pain
Couldn’t be grasped
My shoes you couldn’t fit
Or even want to be seen in public with
It’s amazing
To walk through society
Not a soul ever noticing
You’re just a haze
To be avoided like the plague
And to acknowledge my presence
Would mean you’re infected
Close to my shoes you would be stepping
And to think these people assume
I am a dead man walking
I laugh because in the end
Those who judge and look down
Are the ones in life
That are truly grasping
Fighting each other for a life
That’s not everlasting.*

Reporting for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

Some sources in this story requested that their last names not be shared, to protect their safety or privacy. 

 @GelbardSarah

WINTER ARTS PREVIEW



An aerial rendering of the proposed 63rd House site  COURTESY STUDIO GANG

COMMUNITY

Building 63rd House

Blue Tin Production works with Chicago Lawn community leaders to envision a hybrid community center and production studio.

By **ANNETTE LEPIQUE**

On August 5, 1966, near Marquette Park, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was attacked while leading a protest to demand housing desegregation. Several blocks away from this spot stands 3055 W. 63rd, a formerly abandoned post office that turned 100 years old in 2020. This is the location where Blue Tin Production (a worker-run apparel manufacturing cooperative) is now building 63rd House, a hybrid organization headquarters for Blue Tin and community center for the greater neighborhoods of Chicago Lawn.

63rd House is conceived of as an inherently

multipurpose space, centering the seemingly incongruous ideas of work and community. Blue Tin, working with community leaders of color from the Chicago Lawn area, and in partnership with Chicago's Studio Gang design firm, are envisioning a mode of economic organization that does not preclude community. Blue Tin initiated dialogue with their community partners to identify material needs of Chicago Lawn that should be addressed (among them, green spaces, computer access, and increased accessibility to mental health resources). Additionally, some of the workers at Blue Tin were already Chicago Lawn residents and engaged in the process—making

63rd House a tangible representation of a fundamental truth often denied under capitalism: that every person matters.

Blue Tin was founded by Chicago-based community organizer and writer Hoda Katebi in 2019, and remains an anomaly within the

 **63RD HOUSE**
Building plans and more
information available at
bluetinproduction.com/63rdhouse

fashion industry. The apparel production company stands apart from other garment manufacturers as workers at Blue Tin control

all aspects of production. Blue Tin's collective model dictates that the company only agrees to direct partnerships with designers, contractors, and clients (no subcontractors or any possibly unscrupulous supply chain links), shares profits between all workers, rotates lead workers on all production projects, and uses group consensus on decisions like accepting new designers to work with, salaries, work hours, and decisions related to Blue Tin's environmental impact.

I use the word "anomaly" with great deliberation here as the "fast fashion" evolution of the 1990s inextricably changed the fashion industry on a global scale. Trade agreements like NAFTA, APEC, and FTAA created new business streams for apparel manufacturers, and marketing, design, and manufacturing methods evolved to create and foster a new form of consumer demand based upon the desire for direct-to-consumer apparel; for iterations of designs previously made just for the runway to be immediately available for purchase at widely accessible price points, and in a range of sizes.

At the core of this industry-wide shift was a loosening of worker protections to meet the growing demand. And as the traditional two runway seasons per year transformed into 52, workdays became longer, violence against workers and environmental harm grew, and today only 2 percent of fashion workers make the U.S. minimum wage. These harms are nothing new, but with the recent acceleration of neoliberal policies they are sharpened, legitimized, and camouflaged within the system's total social, political, and economic saturation. Thus, the industry of fast fashion is built upon bodies: whose bodies matter, whose bodies have agency, and whose bodies have power under the colonial and carceral structures that create capitalism. Women predominantly compose the fashion industry's workforce—women of color, immigrant women, refugee women, and working-class women power fast fashion and are not coincidentally among the most vulnerable under capitalism's line of sight.

As the political, the economic, and the material needs have long been personal, Blue Tin Production's commitment to worker rights is not only confined to the workday. Work, life, and community are inextricably intertwined. Just as the Black, feminist, queer, and socialist

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CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT The Chicago History Museum gratefully acknowledges the support of the Chicago Park District on behalf of the people of Chicago.

WINTER ARTS PREVIEW



Interior plans for the building include space for co-working and sewing classes [COURTESY STUDIO GANG](#)



A worker at Blue Tin Production's north side location [COURTESY BLUE TIN PRODUCTION](#)

continued from 20

Combahee River Collective's seminal 1977 *Collective Statement*, in which the group asserts, "We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously," Blue Tin has long understood that

material opportunities and structural possibilities are what foster sustainable, concrete change for their members, constituencies, and community at large.

As Blue Tin's members and community constituencies predominantly live on the south and west sides, 63rd House as a site for their

new headquarters was a natural move from their current studio on the city's north side. In addition, their public-facing programming consists of community sewing classes taught by Blue Tin members, a commitment to increased access to and available resources for counseling services, access to computers for both members and community members, teach-ins, and other sorts of skill share classes of interest and tools of economic freedom. Blue Tin's programming speaks directly to a gendered experience as many of their community members are survivors of domestic violence, and immigrant and refugee women, a direct correlation to the fashion industry's widespread gender-based violence. Women of color, immigrant, refugee, and working-class women are those whose work and art are both routinely co-opted and centered by culture, but as stated above and in the Combahee River Collective's *Statement* they are also vulnerable to the intersecting oppressions of class, race, and gender.

With the unknowns of the Omicron surge in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the timeline for 63rd House may shift in the coming months, as all of life may once again need to change for the sake of collective safety and care. Currently, Blue Tin is fundraising through social media platforms and chooses not to answer to any politically or financially motivated donors, foundations, or investors. Blue Tin is also not interested in loans at this time apart from 63rd House's mortgage.

When I spoke with Hoda Katebi, she emphasized Blue Tin's commitment to financial independence as this provides the collective freedom to plan public programming and community support efforts in conversation with youth and community members without external interference. There is a two-phase building plan for 63rd House which both Blue Tin and Studio Gang have structured to take place over the next several years: the space's technical drawings are currently being completed and the aim is for construction to begin sometime this year. Depending upon supply chains and pandemic safety measures, the plan is structured with the goal of inaugural public events and teach-ins to take place in January 2024.

When I spoke to Katebi and representatives from Studio Gang, I gleaned that the story of the 63rd House partnership is of the sort that can only occur within the support networks and community organizing that Chicago, and more broadly the midwest, provides. However, this collaboration is not the only thing that

makes 63rd House possible. What must be centered in any conversation concerning workers' rights and systemic change are the years of work that community, youth organizations, and Black and Brown community organizers have undertaken throughout Chicago's south side. The scope and scale of community-led efforts in relation to what 63rd House could be for the Chicago Lawn neighborhoods is what makes such a site possible. Change happens together; we are stronger, together.

Blue Tin and Chicago Lawn community leaders have long been in conversation regarding what 63rd House can and should be, and what it should mean for the Chicago Lawn community. Jasmine Serrano, a 63rd House advisory board member, told me of their connection to the neighborhood having themselves been a member of the community for over 15 years. Serrano talked about how the neighborhood has changed over that time and that 63rd House provides a site and a landmark where the identity of Chicago Lawn can both grow and shine. Serrano envisions a place where working families can have accessible space to come together, to grow, and to care for one another. Devonta Boston, another 63rd House advisory board member and also founder of TGi Movement, a Chicago Lawn nonprofit and youth center, spoke of this shared commitment to the community—sites such as 63rd House and TGi are investments for the future and steps towards hope. Boston told me about their own experiences as a life-long Chicago Lawn community member: how the city has long divested from Chicago Lawn (in concert with white flight) and that the resources offered through neighborhood-led organizations, such as 63rd House and TGi, are of the utmost importance as they are rooted in the community. They are both made by and for the people of Chicago Lawn.

63rd House is a space where kids will be able to see and build community connections of their own. Yet, this is not to say these spaces of connection and community do not exist in Chicago Lawn; right now, they just might be found in homes, schools, corner stores, or the park. Without people, without families, working families, the youth of the community, without community, 63rd House would simply be a former post office. It is the community connection and the care that Blue Tin and 63rd House's advisory board put into their work that makes the possibility of 63rd House exciting. [F](#)

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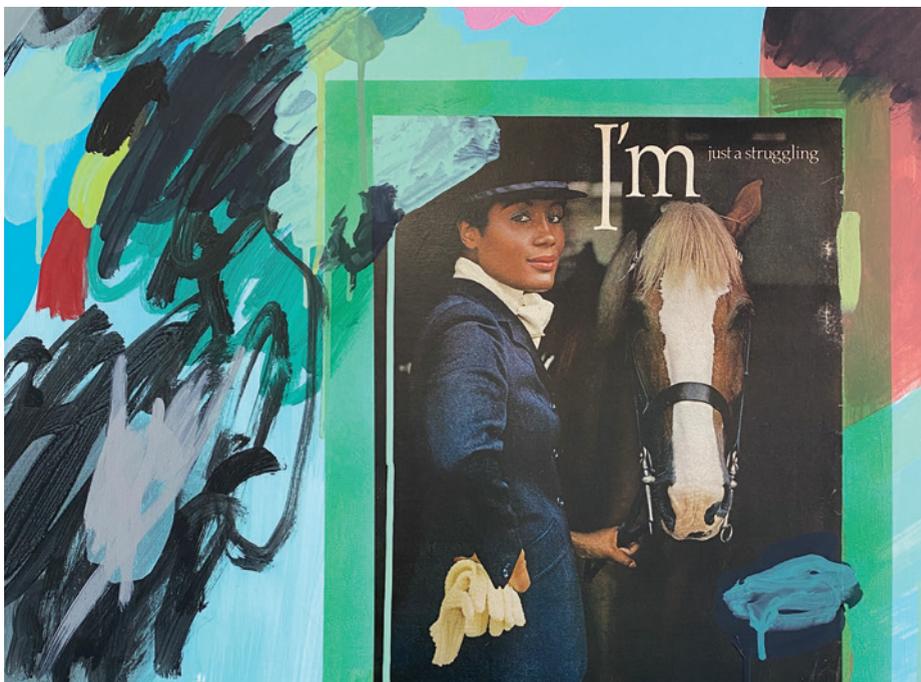


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WINTER ARTS PREVIEW



Left: detail from *I'm Just A Struggling* (2021); right: *Lotion That Adds Even More* (2021) COURTESY AYANAH MOOR

ART PREVIEW

Open canvas

Ayanah Moor welcomes viewers into a world of imagination and identity.

By BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

Painter Ayanah Moor is careful not to reveal spoilers about her work.

The Chicago artist incorporates highly focused intentions into her paintings in the “I Wish I Could Be You More Often” exhibition, on display at the Cleve Carney Museum of Art from February 10 through April 10, but she wants patrons to be able to bring their own experiences when they interpret her work.

The title unlocks impressions of the 20-some paintings in the exhibit, but it is also a lyrical, open-ended invitation to viewers, something for them to ponder.

“How the viewer thinks about the title might affect the way they come to see the work in the show,” Moor says. “Rather than illustrating something or it being a theme, I like that there is a poetic element to the title that the viewer carries with them. They have to kind of negotiate what that language is in relation to the paintings. The ‘I’ could become them—they

could be the speaker. Or they could be curious about who the ‘I’ is. Is it the artist? Is it a figure in the work? Those are some of the things that play in the title.”

In some pieces, Moor creates collages that pull images from magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet*. She incorporates images that reflect Black life in Chicago and nationally. The rich histories in the magazine archives allow her to source storytelling imagery that engages ideas about Blackness and queerness. They can spark different connections for different people.

“My attraction to certain images is very complex,” Moor says. “I’m really interested in the subtlety that operates with these ads. I’m very interested in the kind of queer subtext that could be read in some of these relationships. That’s something that may be readable by some viewers and may not be readable by others. I like multiple entry points. You may pick up on a queer sensibility in some of the

works, and if not, you might be attracted to the use of color and composition and technique. That is something I really embrace. I don’t want to limit what the work is doing because I think the work is doing multiple things.”

An artist trained in painting and printmaking, until recently she has mostly focused on print and performance. The Cleve Carney show will mark her first solo museum show showcasing her paintings, works that range in size from 48x60 inches to 60x80 inches.

She began working with curator Justin Witte before the pandemic, engaging in a dialogue around her work that sparked her interest in exhibiting at the museum. As an art professor for more than 20 years, Moor was attracted to the educational aspects of the museum, located on the Glen Ellyn campus of College of DuPage. The show was scheduled and, like so many things in the world of COVID-19, got delayed repeatedly. The delays, though, gave her an opportunity to create more.

“There were a number of paintings the curator thought would make a good show at this museum,” Moor says. “Since that time, I kept making work. This is really about two years of painting.”

Most of the works are abstract, though she says they sometimes have something in them that is very specific and direct. She grapples with material that exists to create something new with its own function.

“I’m really right now attracted to a more abstract sensibility,” Moor says. “There are elements within the work that could allow someone to kind of name what it is, but largely they are pretty abstract paintings. I’m really thinking about pleasure and there are aspects of the painting where there is a conversation between really loose brush strokes and a field of color or really harsh diagonals and a circle. There are very formal compositional things I’m playing with, coupled with the colors, that has made it really exciting for me.”

While she waxes eloquently about the poetic resonance of the works, she ultimately

backs away from providing meaning.

“I don’t want to reduce the experience they could have with the work which is outside of what my words might convey,” Moor says. “I don’t want to overly reduce the experience of the work by oversimplifying.”

Instead, she invites visitors to visit the art museum to lose themselves in the complex wonder of a person’s wish to be another. **✎**

RR “AYANAH MOOR: I WISH I COULD BE YOU MORE OFTEN”
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Ray Johnson. *Untitled (65 02 15:13)*, about 1965. Gift of the William S. Wilson Collection of Ray Johnson. © Ray Johnson Estate. COURTESY ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

ART REVIEW

Communicating from beyond

Work by the prolific artist Ray Johnson at the Art Institute of Chicago

By **DMITRY SAMAROV**

Have you ever felt like a thing was made especially for you at just the right time? This was my overwhelming impression as soon as I walked into the Art Institute's Ray Johnson show. I didn't know much about Johnson prior to a deep dive I took, prompted by this exhibition's sprawling collection of his endeavors. In my experience, Ray Johnson's reputation has been more often name-checked than explained. The mystery and misdirection, it turns out, were by design. Johnson was an artist obsessed with communication, but was loath to reveal

much about himself. 27 years after his death by suicide, his fragmentary, hard-to-pin-down approach to reflecting his world and the human relationships within it, speaks loud and clear to our own crumbling, centerless mode of being.

Born in Detroit in 1927, Johnson studied with Josef and Anni Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and other cutting-edge artists at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, then migrated—like so many other unclassifiable talents—to New York City in the 1950s. The work he produced over the remaining 40 years of his life included collage, painting,

performance, as well as several modes he either popularized or outright invented. The term “moticos” (which he coined to describe his early collages) is slippery in that he uses it in the singular and plural, and not only to describe the physical piece of art, but also the spatial or atmospheric phenomena that inspired it. Throughout the exhibition, there are several attempts via wall text, manifesto, and handwritten notes, to pin down what this fugitive thing truly is. As with everything else Johnson involved himself in, the target remains elusive and open to endless reinterpretation. The mutability was the point—Johnson was an artist who refused to be pinned down.

Cocurator Caitlin Haskell writes in the excellent catalog that accompanies the exhibition, “Double-speak, paradox, and self-contradiction were just a few of Johnson's strategies for directing attention away from himself, allowing his name to circulate like a rumor.” Johnson's primary activity was sending letters and art through the mail. Unlike most visual art, his creations had a specific and particular audience; a “to” and a “from.” He's said to have sent upwards of 200 pieces of mail a day. Such an extreme compulsion belies a desperate need to communicate and connect, but it's coupled with an equally insistent desire to remain hidden. As Henry Martin (one of Johnson's correspondents) noted in an audio interview on the Art Institute website, “Everybody's Ray Johnson is a different Ray Johnson.”

Johnson's fondness for clashing, playful typography recalls the work of Saul Steinberg—an illustrator and artist who made a career of visual wordplay and liked to call himself a writer who draws, which isn't a bad description of Johnson's enterprise as well. His reworking of pop icons like Elvis Presley anticipates pop art. He beat Warhol to that punch. Yet Johnson stubbornly refused to be pegged to any one impulse, philosophy, or movement. In this, he comes off as utterly contemporary. Confronted with a nonstop glut of information—be it printed paper for him, pixels and data for us—sometimes the only viable coping mechanism is to jumble things

up and spit them back out as absurdist poetry. What every scrap of painted cardboard, defaced newsprint, and flamboyantly addressed envelope on show relates is a sincere desire to make sense of the profoundly senseless. Johnson took it all in and responded the only way he knew how.

My favorite part of the show might be a set of moticos displayed in the middle of the first gallery. Shown on a platform and protected by plexiglass, this grouping of little cardboard constructions is not unlike an old-fashioned city diorama. Each individual piece was once mailed to a particular person, but has now come to rest among its cohort for a time to sing in polyphony to passersby.

Every artist needs a collector and archivist in order not to be lost to time, and in this aspect Johnson hit the jackpot with William Wilson. Wilson, along with a few assistants and friends, saved and organized every piece

RR “RAY JOHNSON C/O”
Through 3/21: Thu-Mon 11 AM-5 PM, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan, 312-443-3600, artic.edu

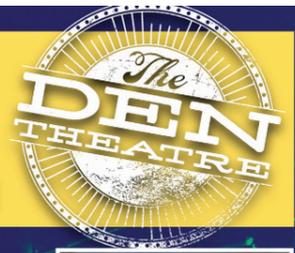
Johnson sent him. In this way, he, along with everyone else who ever got something from the artist, became his collaborator. Comprising 173 three-ring binders and around 100 framed pieces, Wilson's archive was acquired by the Art Institute in 2018. This show and catalog is but the start of a project to study and understand one of the more unique talents of the 20th century. There is some irony of course in the idea of a cultural institution dedicated by definition to the preservation of timeless masterworks taking on an artist whose modus operandi revolved around ephemera and impermanence. Johnson wasn't at all sure his work should ever be framed or displayed. To him, this killed off the possibility of its morphing further into yet-unknown states.

When our plague lockdown began nearly two years ago, I was forced to pivot my mode of art-making inward. Rather than drawing people on the bus or playing music in small clubs, I began to dig through old sketchbooks, homework assignments, letters, and other flotsam for inspiration and points of departure. I inadvertently stumbled into an intuitive mode of collage-making that I now know jibes with Johnson's efforts from decades back. It's like having a talk with an old friend I've never met.

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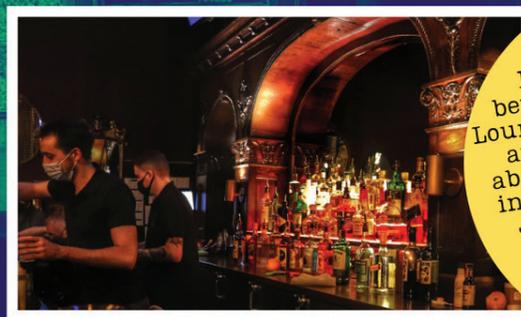
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ARCHITECTURE

On winter and the built environment

Writer Anjulie Rao on architecture critics, newsletters, and supporting new voices

By TAYLOR MOORE

Winter is inevitable, but it still feels like an unwelcome surprise each year. To architecture journalist Anjulie Rao, it's a season of reevaluation, reflection, and transformation.

Fascinated by what winter represents, Rao has started a small publication on the topic—a “grand experiment” whose biweekly publishing schedule will follow the length of the season, December 21, 2021, to March 30, 2022.

Through *Weathered*, a newsletter hosted on the platform Substack, Rao commissions reporting and essays about winter from writers of all backgrounds. In the past few years, newsletters have become popular amongst writers with offbeat interests or underrepresented perspectives—for some, it's become a viable full-time job or a news outlet itself.

Weathered is one of the first, if not the first, indie newsletters in Chicago with aspirations of publishing new voices. It's supported by subscriptions starting at \$5 per month and a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts to help pay writers and illustrators.

So far, *Weathered* has attracted nearly 400 paid subscribers and published two editions. The most recent edition was a meditation from writer Marianela D'Aprile on the New York subways as a third spaces and the injustices forcing the unhoused to shelter inside them. Other planned pieces include a profile of an urban arborist, a report from northern California's controlled-burn areas, and an essay on radiators.

Most recently the editor of *Chicago Architect* magazine (the bimonthly publication of

the American Institute of Architects Chicago), Rao writes frequently about design, public spaces, and the effects of urban policy on marginalized communities. Her desire to create independent media stems from turmoil in the industry. “As publications focused on the built environment shutter, and opportunities for new voices become slim, *Weathered* wants to try to keep some hope alive,” Rao writes.

I spoke to Rao, who is a *Reader* contributor, about starting the project, the state of architecture journalism in Chicago, and how we can deepen our understanding of the built environment.

This interview was edited for print; a full version is online at chicagoreader.com.

Taylor Moore: What made you decide to start *Weathered*?

Anjulie Rao: When I left my full-time job [at *Chicago Architect*], a lot of people reached out and said, you know, if you wrote a newsletter, I would subscribe to it. I read Anne Helen Petersen's Culture Study religiously; she has a wonderful way of dissecting the world around her, but I love it when there are other voices included [in her newsletter]. I was thinking like, do I want to write a newsletter where it's just me? And then I realized I could just actually put out a call for pitches.

And what's interesting about having spent a lot of time at SAIC now—I teach writing in various departments—is that I come indoctrinated into this weird world of interdisciplinarity. I wanted to make sure that other types of nonfiction writers could also pitch.

And why the focus on winter?

I am really fascinated by how we talk about change, especially in cities. I think what's interesting about winter is that we really learn a lot about ourselves. If you live in a place where there is a winter season—whether it means just getting colder or you get ten feet of snow—our habits change, our way of operating in the world changes. Our personal ethos about how I feel about my friends, how I feel about my family, what is worth traveling for—all of that is motivated in the context of winter change. Winter is a microcosm of what happens to us when we're forced to confront change that we don't control.

What is the state of architecture media now, in Chicago and nationwide, and whose voices are missing?

When I was working at *Chicago Architect* magazine, we watched *Curbed Chicago* close, along with [Curbed's] other city sites. The midwest editor position at *The Architect's Newspaper* was terminated, and it was communicated to me by one of the people who was running *Architect's Newspaper* at that time that they didn't see value in having a midwest editor.

The thing that's missing is new voices. I think there has finally been a recognition that having diverse voices is important. Architecture is consistently 20 to 50 years behind on changing the actual profession, and I think that also happens with architecture writing.

So it doesn't surprise me that only recently did the Architectural League [of New York, a design nonprofit] launch fundraising around a fellowship for new architecture writers. I think it's really great, but if you get ten amazing BIPOC writers, we need to make sure they can still sustain a life for themselves [after receiving a fellowship]. It feels like we're competing with each other for the same maybe five to ten publications. We can bring in all of the amazing diverse voices we want, but at the end of the day, if they can't pay their bills, why are they doing this?

What do you hope readers take away from *Weathered*?

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I want people to think differently about architecture writing. Part of me is hoping to send a signal to editors and readers that there's a lot more to writing about the built environment than what Blair Kamin or Paul Goldberger or Michael Kimmelman focused on. The issues of the built environment touch a lot of different social and political happenings and issues, so it's not just writing building criticism.

On the personal side, I hope we're able to see ourselves as parts of change—that change isn't something that happens to us. Change is something that we cope with, and we adapt to. How can we apply that lens to some of the more dangerous futures that we're facing right now? 

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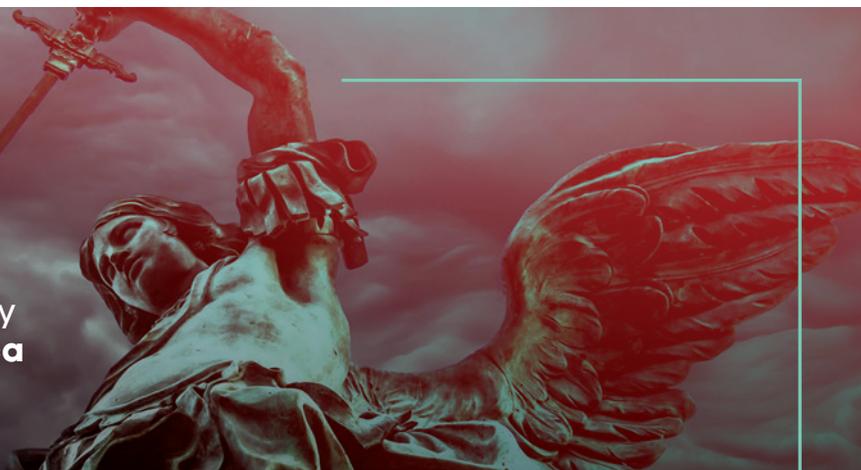
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MIKE CENTENO

ORAL HISTORY

It's become a different world

Conversations with Chicago stage managers and front of house staff about life and work during the pandemic

By **MARK LARSON**

We see a show and later learn that it had to close abruptly. We can empathize with the actors' disappointment and distress because we can visualize their faces and recall their voices. But how has the pandemic impacted those we see only briefly in the lobby as we enter or don't see at all? How are they managing this crisis? I talked to stage managers and front of house staff at large, medium, and small Chicago theaters in late December and early January. When we talked, some theaters had canceled productions for the second time since the initial lockdown in 2020, most temporarily and due to staff or cast testing positive. Others remained open or were about to open. As we talked, it

was clear to me that they saw their futures as both very promising and very uncertain.

"We're canceling tonight and shutting down the theater."

March 2020

Christine D. Freeburg (stage manager, Steppenwolf Theatre): We had a staff meeting the week before we closed [*Bug*]. Someone had been talking about [COVID] during tech, but I really didn't know what they were talking about, and I just sort of ignored it. Then David Schmitz, our then-executive director, said, "With a show of hands, how worried is everybody about this virus that's happening overseas?" On a scale of one to

five, it was like twos and threes.

Not long after that, I got a call from our production manager when I was on my way to Steppenwolf who said, "We're canceling tonight, and we're shutting down the theater." I called everybody, and they said, "Well, look, we're on our way; we need to pick up our stuff, anyway." So, we all arrived at the theater and sadly cleaned out our dressing rooms, made sort of a closing toast because we were scheduled to close that Sunday, anyway. It was really sad and really, you know, scary.

Maegan Burnell (freelance union stage manager, previously on *Cinderella* and currently *Groundhog Day* at Paramount Theatre): At the time, I was working on a

production of *Grease* at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. We were three days away from our closing when we were sat down by the executive director of the theater and told that that Thursday night would be our closing night. We were just four performances away [from the end of the run], but it still stings.

Abigail Madden (managing director, A Red Orchid Theatre): We were right in the middle of our run of *Do You Feel Anger?* We had to cancel our last week and a half of performances, and then ended up having to cancel the third show of the season completely. It seemed very abrupt. Until last week, we still had the costumes from that show hanging in



Christine D. Freeburg COURTESY THE ARTIST

our administrative office. They'd been there for the past year and a half while we were in flux, working from home. We didn't really get to say proper goodbyes.

Alden Vasquez (stage manager at Goodman for more than 30 years; now freelancing): We were in our fifth preview for *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*. We were called into a meeting in the green room. Because we were in previews, Lili-Anne Brown, the director, was there, and then Adam Belcuore [casting director] came down and gave the news to the cast. It was the hardest thing for me to witness because we had a cast of very young ladies, most of them in their 20s, and this had been their big break. They were on a Goodman stage in a really good play. So, when Adam gave them the news, it was just devastating to them. They were just stunned. Tears, disbelief. It was hard for me as a human being to watch the disappointment on their faces, but I had to put on the "stage manager face" and get them and the crew ready. It was "half hour" when they were told. By the time the meeting was over, it was 15 minutes.

I was very proud of them. After coming out of that meeting, with tears and hugs and devastation and disappointment, they went onstage and did their job, and they did nothing onstage that would indicate that this was over.

Jim Jarvis (vice president, programming and sales, Paramount Theatre): We ended up going from 274 full- and part-time employees on March 13 [2020] and by May 13 we were down to 12 employees. I happen to be one of the people who was left as part of that 12. Unfortunately, I had to make calls and say, "I'm calling because we're furloughing, you guys." A lot of the staff that I work with live close enough where I could actually drive to



Jennifer Aparicio JOEL MAISONNET

their house and stand across from them and say it in person. [Pauses] I'm getting teary-eyed right now because it broke my frickin' heart to do that to everybody.

Burnell: It was a weird feeling closing and seeing other theaters closing and wondering what is this going to do to our industry, to us? To live in this uncertainty. I think when the first shutdown happened, we all kind of thought, two weeks and we'll be back. But we lived in the uncertain nature of like, but is that true? And then two weeks go by and you don't come back, and three weeks go by and you don't come back, and we kept getting notifications from our upcoming gigs, saying, "Hey, we're just not sure." It was very hard, very hard. We were in uncharted waters.

On a personal note

Stephanie Pecharich (front of house manager, Paramount Theatre): There were no vaccines, yet. My family got COVID at the end of November last year [2020]. My daughter picked it up at high school. She ended up in the ICU for a couple nights. It was devastating. I got really, really sick for about ten days. My husband got it, too. My boys got it. Tim Rater, our CEO, would check in on us, making sure that we were OK and leaving care packages on the porch. It felt really good to have someone like him checking and making sure that I was OK. That helped.

Jennifer Aparicio (freelance AEA stage manager and production manager for Teatro Vista): I lost all income. I was officially unemployed because that was all I did. I mean, I would babysit, but even that kind of went out the window because families were starting to be cautious, and people were working from home, so they didn't need caregivers. As a union stage manager, I also lost my health insurance because, with the



Caitlin Body JOEL MAISONNET

union, in order to get your health insurance, you have to work so many weeks, and it accrues over the course of 12 months. Because I had not worked in 2020, I had no insurance for 2021. And that was basically the case for everyone in the union. I ended up doing Obamacare.

Vasquez: I learned to be a landscaper. I have a friend who taught me how to plant bushes, and I learned how to put in a patio. I did demo on sidewalks and planted trees. We also had about 20 clients where once a week I would go around and cut their grass and use the leaf blower and tidy up. I was lucky I was able to work outside.

Caitlin Body (freelance stage manager, currently working on *Wellesley Girl*, *Compass Theatre*): A lot of stage managers started to go online. We have a lot of Facebook groups for us where we can go and talk to each other. I was meeting stage managers that I've heard of around Chicago, but never really had the chance to meet since it was always "go, go, go" all the time from one production to another. In 2020, as one stage manager of color, I knew maybe two or three others in Chicago who were stage managers. And it wasn't until we all started being in Zoom rooms that I was like, "Oh my gosh, I've never heard of you and yet you've been working here for like ten years!" So, I made a lot of good stage-manager friends, and not just in Chicago but I feel like around the world. It's a really amazing community, and that's probably what got me through most of 2020.

Madden: Not only was I maneuvering being the leader, with Kirsten Fitzgerald, of a small nonprofit and all that it entails, I was also making sure that my small team was taken care of emotionally as well, because there was a lot of emotions running high. And added to that, I was pregnant for most of



Shane Calvin KEYANA MARSHALL

2021, and then having a baby during COVID—it was an interesting experience, to say the least.

Rita Vreeland (stage manager, Northlight Theatre): Part of our job is to have one foot in the management world and one foot in the creative world to try to keep people's confidence up. It's not an official part of the job; it's what we want to do. We want to help everyone feel comfortable coming to work. It is a very hard time to feel confident about anything in the arts right now, to be honest, a tough time to project confidence.

Freeburg: The goalpost just kept getting further and further away. And I thought, "We're never coming back. We have this beautiful new theater [at Steppenwolf] that we just built! How are we not going to use that?" I was just holding onto [the belief that] live theater cannot be dead, this cannot be the end of live theater, we'll figure out a way to do it, even if we have to sit in little bubbles or livestream it every night. This is not the end of my industry, but it may be the end of my industry as I know it. And I'm going to have to learn some new skills and start figuring out how to do it in a different way. But this isn't the end, we will figure out how to come back.

"We did not want to close, again." 2021

Jarvis: Early on Tim [Rater] had started asking, "What is life going to look like after we return?" Chances are we're going to have to be wearing masks. So, we started talking about different protocols way back when. What do you do to enforce them? And how do we get the messaging out? We looked at every single thing. The box office director and I sat down, and we started [working out] the socially distanced seating arrangements inside

WINTER ARTS PREVIEW

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the Paramount with six feet in every direction. We're an 1,800-seat venue. I think [we ended up with] a maximum capacity of 425 people that we could have fit in at the time.

We had been literally working on all that for almost, I don't know, 16 months before we opened *Kinky Boots* [August 2021]. The goal was to keep everybody as safe as possible on all sides of the stage. After so many of us being out for 17 months, we did not want to close again.

Pecharich: When we did our scheduling for the very first *Kinky Boots*, our first night back, I was like, I'll do that one! We have a bartender-and-usher meeting before we open the doors to get everybody set up for what they need to be doing. They're part of our front line, and they're amazing people. It was very powerful. I actually broke down in tears. I probably never cried so much at work. I cried while the show was going and at the end of the night. I was so happy to be back.

Freeburg: Just the idea of going back for the first time in 18 months was terrifying because I thought, "I have to remember how to do my job!"

Burnell: For me, it was a bit like riding a bike but having to put the training wheels back on. It took a couple of weeks before I could say, "Ah, yes, I remember how to do this."

Vreeland: In September [2021] when I came back to rehearsal, I felt so hopeful and so positive, like this was a rebirth of this industry, and that things were changing for the better and that we all knew what to do [about COVID].

Freeburg: It's now part of the Equity contract that you have to have an independent COVID safety manager who takes care of all of that COVID stuff.

Jarvis: We test three times a week and the COVID safety manager is responsible for taking the tests and then getting the lab results, contacting the vice president of production and the CEO if we have anybody test positive. They're also watching to make sure that all the protocols are being met during rehearsals, which is a whole different ball game from what we do in front of house.

Vasquez: The *Christmas Carol* people, in past years, would bring doughnuts and munchies. All that changed. I'm known to bring birthday cakes, which was a big disappointment for me. We just could not do it anymore. And lunch hours, we had to be spread out and couldn't eat in the rehearsal

room. All the children in the show, including Tiny Tim, had to be 12 or older because when we started, younger people couldn't get vaccinated.

Vreeland: There are no dressing-room visits, there are no stage-door visits, nothing like that. All our spaces are for just our production group, which includes our staff, designers, management, creatives, the cast itself, understudies.

Jarvis: We knew we were going to take flak [from the public for our patron protocols]. And I will say when we announced them, it was a firestorm for a while. I literally had people calling telling me that there's no proof that this vaccination works, that you can't force somebody to put a chemical into their body. I was called un-American. I had a person tell me that I needed to be stopped as quickly as possible. We were getting calls from around the country, people who weren't even our patrons but were calling us to tell us what we're doing is unconstitutional. It was tiring for everybody.

We got tipped off that somebody was orchestrating a huge antivax, antimask demonstration at our first preview. The police had contacted us and said they were monitoring it. There ended up being about 40 people out front, and it was a peaceful protest. When they were done, they had their kids take sidewalk chalk and write antivaccine and antimasking messages on our sidewalk before they had left.

Later, I walked out of my office and did a double take. Bless his heart, Tim Rater, our CEO, was out there himself, cleaning off the sidewalks.

Pecharich: Once people are inside, a problem for us is the mask patrol. Sometimes people don't want to abide by keeping their mask up. We started with signage that said, "Please wear a mask." We ended up changing the wording to "Masks are required."

Because we are doing the right thing, people feel safe to come here, so they get involved if there's a problem. One time I had a woman who I had asked to pull up her mask. She turned to me and said, "It's not in the Constitution that I have to wear a mask." Well, a woman on the other side of her turned and said, "It's also not in the Constitution that you have to stop at a red light. It's just doing the right thing."

Jarvis: For *Cinderella* [opened November 10, 2021] we identified the fact that one of the challenges was when people, for various reasons, might not have a vaccine card, like



Bug at Steppenwolf Theatre [MICHAEL BROSILOW](#)



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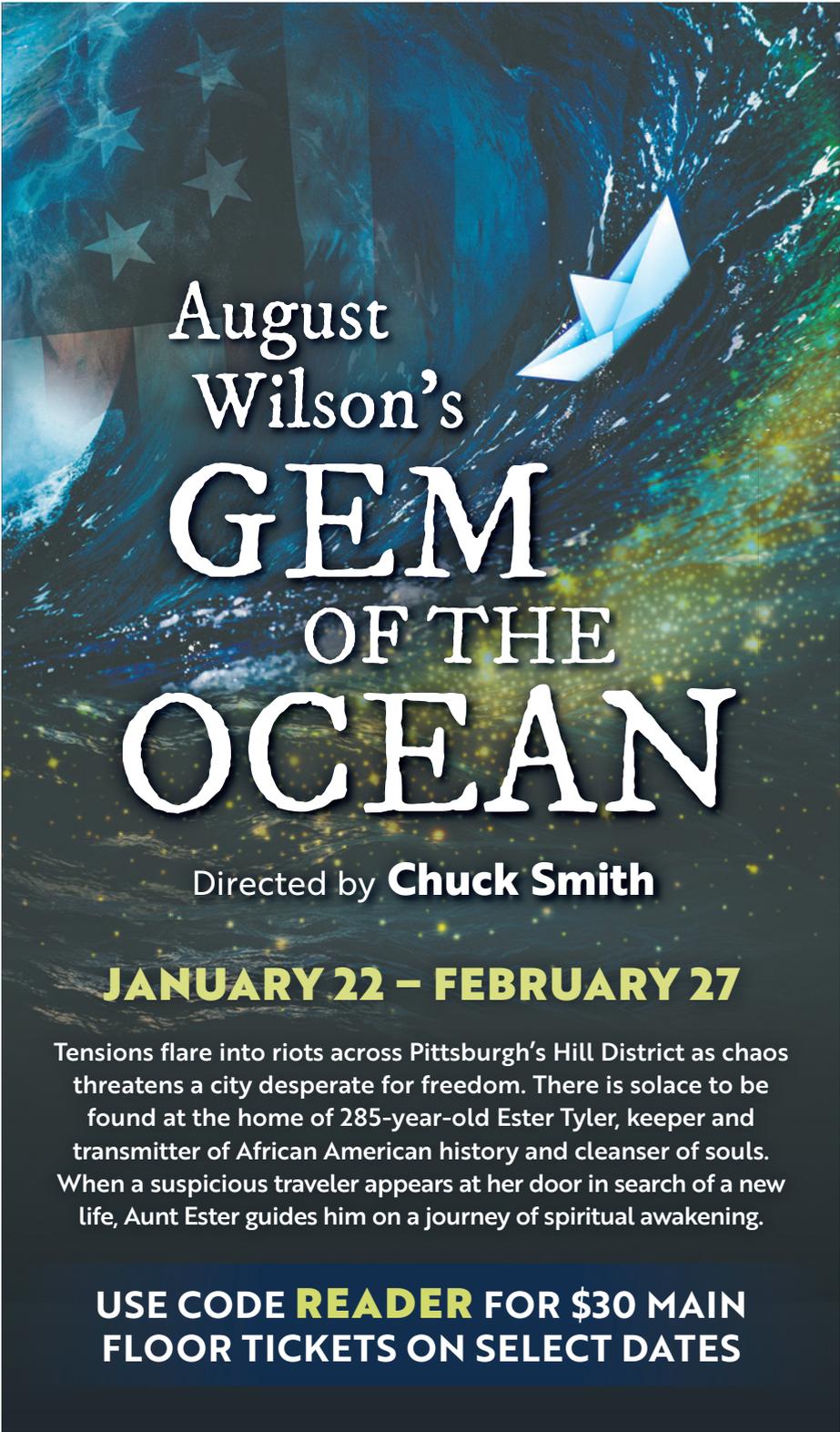
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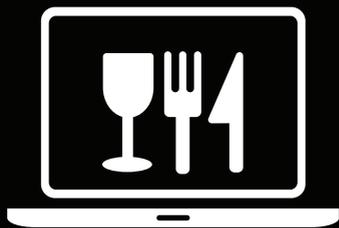
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maybe they got the tickets as a gift and didn't know. They show up and they're getting turned away at the door because they don't have a test. So, we worked with Northshore Clinical Labs and set up a remote testing site for our patrons near the theater. They did over 1,100 tests [at last count]. Once we got set up, the turn-away rate dropped to almost zero. Knock wood, we haven't had any case traced back to attendance at Paramount.

Pecharich: It's mostly very rare, though, to deal with a belligerent person or someone that we would even need to discuss having to ask them to leave. And when people do want to argue with us, I always say, "We're not singling you out. We don't want to make things difficult for you. We're just trying to stay open. We're just trying to keep this alive for everybody and keep everyone safe in this very difficult time in this world." That is our bottom line.

"I'm watching the industry change."

Vreeland: This is kind of the biggest takeaway for me as an artist and a theater practitioner: for the first time in my life, I'm understanding and feeling sympathy for these folks in coal country who've devoted their lives to working with fossil fuels. They say, "This is my job. And this is my life. I don't want to pivot to green energy." I get it now. I didn't get it before.

After 25 years of stage managing in Chicago, I'm watching people having to pivot, and I'm watching the industry change. I'm watching people become Zoom stage managers or remote project managers or doing corporate work online, and suddenly I am a coal miner, saying, "I do not want to pivot." I got a degree in this back in the last century. I came to Chicago as a 22-year-old kid, and I worked my way up, and now I am almost 50 years old. I do not want to change my job. I belong in a booth with a headset on, calling hundreds of cues. I belong in a rehearsal room with a director next to me, helping execute their vision. I belong in this office making this calendar for these actors that are going to show up on Tuesday and need to know where they're supposed to be. I want to do live theater in a live room with a live audience with live actors. I sound so crabby right now. I'm sorry.

Burnell: There's been a call for a lot of changes in our industry that are good. There's a saying, right, that the show must always go on. Well, does it need to? I am finding that we are leaning in towards taking care

of each other and ourselves more. That's my experience. There's a lot of stage managers and performers who were not standing up for themselves before.

Aparicio: I don't want to sound negative about it, but it was like taking people for granted, you know, like, "Oh, well, they're gonna come. They're gonna be here." I think that the mentality of "the show must go on" was very firmly ingrained in everyone, and all this is having people rethink that a little bit.

Freeburg: That is a big change to our industry that I really hope that we continue. Taking care of each other is ultimately what it comes down to.

Vasquez: I think that's the new norm now. "The show must go on" is no longer viable.

Body: I honestly think it's because we romanticized [that idea]. I also feel it's very American, in a sense: "We will do whatever it takes to get this done." And then forgetting that we also need sleep. I think it's a mentality that's breaking. Now it's: No, you need to take care of yourself.

Burnell: It's hard. Some of the conversations are hard, but I'm seeing that people [in management] have been open to it, which I think is incredible.

"It's just not the same world."

Vasquez: When we [reopened *School Girls*] in July [2021], we spent hours of rehearsal asking each cast member about their experience over the past year and what they went through. It was a very eye-opening experience. Being African American actors, being women, they were going through COVID and the racial upheavals [after the murder of George Floyd] and also the theater going through its changes with diversity and "We See You, White American Theater." I mean, they went through all of that in that year. That first day back was a very emotional day. I sometimes live in my own little bubble and the blinders are on, but that opened up my perspective a lot.

Shane Calvin (youth leader at Circles & Ciphers and stage manager for *A Breath for Humanity*, Perceptions Theatre): Perceptions is a new, Black-founded theater company that's located on the south side. They [were founded] in 2020 and for now they're doing everything on Zoom. *Breath for Humanity* is a play about protest, prisons, and the pandemic. It is about the literal pandemic that we're living in, and how us living in this pandemic is opening our eyes to all of the

other pandemics that have existed throughout American history since colonization, from racism to homophobia, transphobia, and sexism and all of the isms and phobias that you can think of, and *why*. Pretty much the pandemic put a pause on everything, and it forced us to sit and reckon with where we are as a country. You know what I'm saying? It's like we're really paying attention to things that matter.

For myself, I've found that I don't want to just work, I want to be productive and be a part of and contribute to creating a functional, sustainable community. That's really what I want. And that's what I feel like I'm doing. I didn't feel like I was doing that before. I was miserable before.

Body: When George Floyd happened, and then later in 2020, a couple of colleagues and I tried to start Stage Managers of Color—Chicago. Our intention was to have a place where people in Chicago who were stage managers of color could come together and talk about problems we might be facing or just have someplace that you could go and know that there was not going to be a presence in the room that you felt you had to cater to. We wanted to have a place where anyone of color could come and ask questions and know that there was no judgment.

Burnell: I just don't think we can ever go back to doing theater the way we did in February of 2020. It's just not the same world we're in, anymore.

Freeburg: I don't know if it was because we knew this company already, but [when we reopened *Bug* in November 2021] all of that BS small talk that you usually have, we skipped right over that. I don't know if it's because "time is too short," but we were having really deep conversations that maybe we wouldn't have had two years ago. You're like, "How are you? No, really; how are you?" And someone would tell you how they really were: "I'm stressed out about this. And I'm thinking about that." It felt like we had been through this trauma, all of us together but all in our different ways, so we delved right into the meat of any sort of conversation.

Maybe it's because there's not much to chitchat about because the world is such a shit show right now anyway, but I do feel like we have been through something with this group. We crawled our way, and we survived, and we made it through, and we'll move on to do another show.

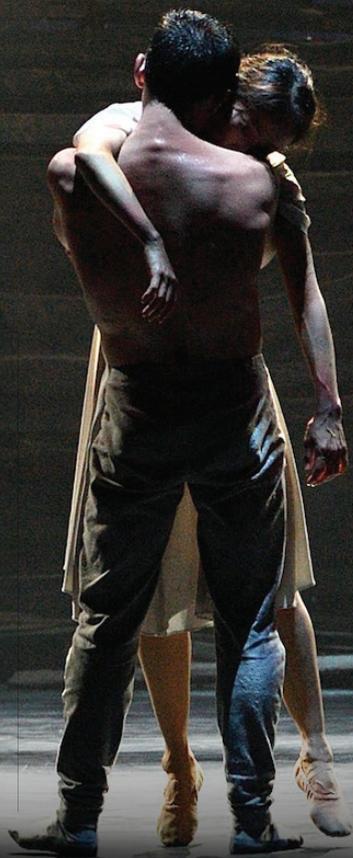
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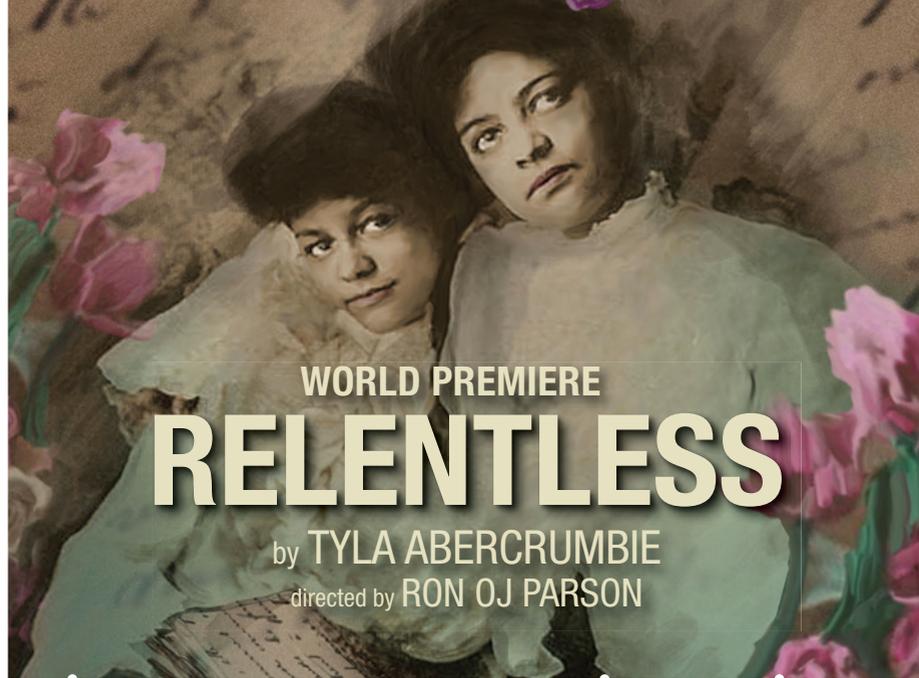
Jeffrey Cirio and Elna Takahashi in Creature by Akram Khan. Photo by Laurent Lotardo.



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WINTER ARTS PREVIEW



TRANS VOICES

Welcome to Venus

Mercury's inclusive cabaret space rolls with the COVID changes.

By CATEY SULLIVAN

Back in December, there was a shining sliver of time when it looked like we—as individuals, as artists, as arts institutions—were forging a clear, or at least clearish, path forward.

Hundreds of people were back at work on live, in-person shows. *A Christmas Carol* burned bright at the Goodman. *The Snow Queen* got a shiny new reboot from a refreshed House. *The Nutcracker*, problematic as ever, nevertheless took root in the Joffrey's sumptuous new home at the Lyric. And in an outcome not even the most optimistic of us dreamt of when its demise was announced in 2020, Mercury Theater Chicago delivered a *Sister Act* that reminded us all of the almighty power of a robust contralto to spark joy.

Next door to the singing nuns, the Venus Cabaret also reopened. Carved out of what used to be Cullen's Bar and Grill (named for Michael Cullen, the original owner of the

Mercury), Venus first opened in fall 2018 with a production of *Pippin*. But like every other theater in Chicago, it fell dark in 2020 while a planned production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* was in rehearsals in the intimate space.

But now it's back, a vision in lavender lighting. Such are the show-business powers of Chicago icon, singer-actor-cabaret star, and activist Honey West and Mercury Theater Chicago's Christopher Chase Carter, who has been breathing life into the venue as its new artistic director. (In an interview with *Reader* theater and dance editor Kerry Reid in April 2021, Carter expressed the desire for the Venus to become the Chicago equivalent of New York's famed 54 Below cabaret.)

On dark nights for the Mercury's musicals, Carter and West decided there should be a chance for all kinds of performers to bring their lights next door.

"We want the Venus to be a place where you

can just come in and join in the singing and the laughing. Chris and I both lived marginalized lives, and we know what it's like to be starting out and we know what it's like to be accomplished and doing this for decades," West says.

"We want to create a space where artists can elevate their career. And let people know, 'Hey, I'm not only an actor, I'm also a singer. Or a contortionist.' We want to challenge the notion of what cabaret is," Carter says.

December 12, when there was yet hope for a quasi-normal holiday season, the Venus was packed. The vax-checking was rigorous. ID, vax card, or a negative test, no exceptions. Most everybody inside wore masks, except when they were imbibing Sarah Wurz's concoctions from the glimmering bar at the back of the room.

West and Carter set the tone in refurbishing the Venus into an intimate, 90-seat lounge with padded booths and cocktail

tables curving adjacent and in front of the stage. It's small enough to ensure there really are no bad seats, large enough to accommodate a roaring, rambunctious crowd to cheer on the artists.

West had several nonnegotiables in redesigning the space.

"After 30 years, I've sung in a lot of rooms. It's made me a stickler for good sound. The acoustics are obviously important. I can be kind of obsessive about them," West says. "Also padded seats. You've got to have padded seats. And you know what I really love? I love our lighting. I think it's beautiful, all the violets and lavender."

On the night of December 12, the Venus hosted the Trans Voices Cabaret, which has had previous iterations in Chicago in 2017 and 2019, at Stage 773 and Steppenwolf, respectively. The evening featured a (finally) consensual take on "Baby, It's Cold Outside," a comic Hanukkah number that had the au-

Interior of Venus Cabaret; Honey West COURTESY MERCURY THEATER CHICAGO; RANDY JOHN PHOTOGRAPHY

WINTER ARTS PREVIEW

dience snort-laughing, and a poignant cover of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” among other delights.

“We’re looking to get people seen. To boost them to the next step. This is all about showcasing trans talent,” says producer Lars Ebsworth. Between numbers, Ebsworth proved a suave and joyful emcee, eventually announcing that Larry Trice was stepping into the producer’s role for future Trans Voices Cabaret endeavors. “Oh. By the way! This is my first show post-top surgery!” Ebsworth said, raising a glass to a cheering crowd.

It was a celebratory moment that also provided a stark reminder of how much things have changed, at least in some places, since West debuted her award-winning show *A Taste of Honey* in 1990. Then, West points out, the word “transgender” did not even exist and the binary was even more violently enforced. Certainly not many people were toasting anything outside it.

Before Chicago and transitioning, West performed on cruise ships and theme parks.

“When I started in Chicago there would be

people who would say, ‘I don’t think anyone will take you seriously as an actress.’ Or, ‘We like you but what would people think?’ Meaning, ‘We won’t cast you because people will run screaming out of the theater,’” West says.

That’s an attitude trans artists still face, says Will Wilhelm, one of the Trans Voices Cabaret’s featured vocalists. “With the cabaret, I can do the song I want to do. That speaks to me. I don’t have to wait for someone to give it to me,” they say.

That’s precisely the vibe the Venus is going for, with all of its programming.

“We just want to give people permission and support to express who they are on our stage, without having to apologize or hide or explain yourself,” Carter says.

The ethos drives Carter and West’s regularly scheduled Sunday-Tuesday Dark Night Series programming that includes a monthly comedy night hosted by Chicago comic and bon vivant Scott Duff and a karaoke night. Ricky Harris, a rising force on the musical theater front, showcased his vocal chops January 16. Ronnie Marmo’s *I’m Not a Comedi-*

an . . . I’m Lenny Bruce ran weekends after its initial run at the now-shuttered Royal George was cut short by COVID-19.

Still, since December’s early promise, West and Carter have been contending with COVID-induced closures, sometimes coming within hours of showtime. As it turns out, mid-December was arguably more of a blip than a harbinger of back-to-whatever-normal-passes-for. Breakthrough cases—fueled by variants that flourish in unvaccinated populations and spread rapidly—closed down every show listed in this piece. (Marmo’s show is currently scheduled to come back January 28, with karaoke on the calendar for Tuesday, February 1.)

West sounds singularly sanguine about the uncertainty.

“Every show is a blessing and every one could be our last for a while,” she says. “Theater is a tough business to begin with and because of that, we are resilient. We have no choice but to roll with the punches and assess every day what is the best course of action.”

Moreover, at 60, she’s lived through plague

years before. It’s not an exaggeration to say AIDS wiped out a generation, at least, of extraordinary talent, with a woefully inadequate early response from the federal government.

“[The COVID pandemic] brings up a lot of trauma and memories of a very difficult and seemingly hopeless time,” West says. “Those of us who are still here are able to know the shoulders we are standing on and aspire to be those very shoulders that others will be standing on in the future.”

And if ticket sales are taking hit after hit, well, West isn’t hitting the panic button.

“I think all theaters have faced a decline in ticket sales. It’s understandable why people are cautious. Our relationship with our actors and patrons is constantly evolving. We maneuver through this time with an honest and thoughtful process of being as safe and adherent as we can, to make crossing our threshold the positive experience it has always been.” **RS**

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2.04	NEMR	2.19	PETE CORREALE	2.25	ENTER THE HAGGIS	3.03	IDES OF MARCH
2.07	NELLA	2.20	BEATLES BRUNCH	2.26	DAVID ARCHULETA	3.06	EDWIN MCCAIN
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						3.10	HEATHER LAND

BLACK ARTS IN MOVEMENT

Kia Smith: diplomat of dance

South Chicago Dance Theatre honors its roots by expanding the repertoire.

By **NORA PAUL**



At Chicago Dancers United's Dance for Life festival last August, the Jay Pritzker Pavilion stage reverberated with layers of rhythm. Each row of dancers formed a different section of intertwining phrases—movements playful and powerful that recalled the musicality of jazz. The piece, South Chicago Dance Theatre's *Architect of a Dream*, was the work of Kia Smith, the company's founder and executive artistic director.

Smith created the piece for SCDT's annual Black History Month Performance Series. Sharing the stage with names such as Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and the Joffrey Ballet in one of the city's largest annual community-based performances, *Architect of a Dream* recalled the famous speech and profound legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In its fourth annual Black History Month Performance Series, the company is set to perform a portion of this piece at roughly half a dozen Chicago elementary schools next

month. The series expands upon workshops and performances that the company brings to CPS students year-round.

The Black History Month Performance Series will pay homage to the Great Migration and Chicago's Black Arts Movement. Smith emphasizes the weight of these themes, and how for her they hold a personal meaning.

"I feel like everyone knows about the Harlem Renaissance and all these names in other cities, but not everyone talks about the Black Arts Movement," Smith says. "So the show profiles themes in the Black Arts Movement, and I relate it directly to my own history of my great-grandmother and my dad as well."

Smith's great-grandmother came to Chicago from Memphis during the Great Migration and ran a church on the south side. Her father was a jazz musician who established Jazz in the Alley, music events in the 1960s and '70s that celebrated jazz traditions. "Between the two of them, you know, I have deep roots on

Kia Smith of South Chicago Dance Theatre
COURTESY THE ARTIST

the city's south side, and I'm a native of Chicago, and so I just felt strongly about being a dancer and having my company have a name-sake of a part of where I come from."

SCDT partners with the Hyde Park School of Dance, where Smith herself trained, and the company rehearses at its studios on 57th and Woodlawn. "Whether it is on the south side of the city or not, we are always engaging that part of the city in that work."

In 2019, an elementary school reached out to Smith to ask if her company could perform there for Black History Month. They brought the program to a few different schools that year. In 2021, the Black History Month Performance Series was held virtually. It included a prerecorded show and a workshop in African American social dance for around 11 participating schools.

The company plans to bring an in-person, interactive performance to its partner schools this year. Smith will speak in between different sections of the piece, which will be followed by a Q&A, time permitting. Smith says that "depending on each school's comfortability . . . it will look different at each school because of COVID, but we're still very excited about moving forward with the project."

In SCDT's operation, the company and community interact reciprocally and inextricably. This past fall, workshops with schools included a performance exchange at Kenwood Academy High School, in which students showcased their own choreography. Company members are inspired by their visits to schools, and performing company repertoire in the schools helps the work evolve.

Heather Cagle joined SCDT in 2020 and has been involved in the Black History Month Performance Series since February 2021. She was also the main teacher when SCDT partnered with After School Matters, a nonprofit offering project-based after-school and summer opportunities to Chicago high school students. "Teaching students who have never really danced before is a whole different experience," she reflects. "Watching them from the beginning of the program to the end, they grow so much, and it really boosts their confidence."

"Diversity is a large part of our organiza-

tion," Smith explains, as is "utilizing that diversity to invest in our community. So we bring in artists from all over the world to our organization, but we're rooted in the city's south side, so I make sure that everything that we do is pouring into the community."

The company has embedded itself in relationships of learning and engagement that span the globe. Through its Choreographic Diplomacy program, in 2018 SCDT began collaborating with Joseph Kim of Choomna Dance Company based in Seoul, South Korea. Kim and members of Choomna Dance Company performed and led a Korean traditional dance master class at the inaugural Choreographic Diplomacy residency this past November. In March, SCDT and Choomna will participate in a cultural performance exchange at ArtEZ University of the Arts in the Netherlands. SCDT will present a 30-minute piece that Kim created for the company.

SCDT will end its fifth year with an inaugural performance at the Harris Theater on May 20, 2022. The five commissioned choreographers—Stephanie Martinez, founder and artistic director of PARA.MAR Dance Theatre; Crystal Michelle Perkins, associate artistic director of Dayton Contemporary Dance; longtime Chicago dancer and choreographer Ron De Jesus; Wade Schaaf, founder and artistic director of Chicago Repertory Ballet; and Smith herself—represent a wide variety of styles, blending genres in the evening-length show. This heterogeneity reflects the spectra of race, dance background, and artistic style that Smith curates in her company and its apprenticeship-like Emerging Artist program.

Smith, whose father died this past summer, describes her piece in the May show as being "about grief and how we embody grief and experience it." She received Chicago Dancemakers Forum's Lab Artists Award, with which she will prepare an evening-length work in 2023. A piece she created inspired by her father was commissioned for Congo Square Theatre in the past, "but this is a different feeling."

Smith insists, "I don't want to feel like I've been pigeonholed into one style or one way of doing things."

With far-flung leaps that nurture the immediate, honor the past to strengthen the future, and bring dance from a dream to a form of power in her work with SCDT, she does not have to worry. **✎**

[@noraapaul](#)

SWORD PLAY

Putting on the plaid

Cat McKay's horror tale celebrates combat and queer women.

By BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN



Cat McKay COLLIN QUINN RICE

It's not unusual to pick up labels in life; some you're born with, some you achieve, some are thrust upon you. Cat McKay's labels have come to her by all three methods as she wends her way through a theater career taking her from Ohio to London to Chicago.

Some labels she's collected are fighter, nerd, feminist, and queer theater artist. Her resume reveals she is an actor and playwright. She's performed on stage and on camera, and for a while laid claim to having performed more aliens than queer humans, though she said that balance has begun to shift.

She's a three-octave singer who can belt out such genres as musical theater, pop, classical, and opera. She's a member and featured soloist with two of Chicago's LGBTQ+ choruses—the Windy City Treble Quire and the Windy City Gay Chorus.

She's a committed student. With a bachelor's in theater (acting) and music performance (voice) from Case Western Reserve University in Ohio (where she studied the Chekhov technique), she's also studied music at the Cleveland Institute of Music, and taken classes at the Acting Studio Chicago. She's been a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London and has numerous stage

combat certifications.

And now? She's getting ready for the opening later this year of *Plaid as Hell* with Babes with Blades. Originally scheduled for a January premiere, it has been postponed until the current COVID surge ebbs.

McKay moved to Chicago nearly seven years ago. A professor in college told her if she wanted to be an actor, she needed to either go to the coasts or to Chicago. A mid-westerner born and bred, she chose Chicago.

Since arriving, she's performed with such companies as PrideArts, WildClaw Theatre, and Otherworld Theatre, theaters known for their queer, horror, and science fiction shows, respectively.

She saw one of the Babes shows shortly after arriving in the city, and later auditioned for them, but *Plaid as Hell* is her first time working with them.

Plaid as Hell was born from the company's Joining Sword & Pen playwriting competition. Babes publishes an image which becomes a part of the scripts. The ensemble reads and votes on the winner which they put into development with their "Fighting Words" program.

"Babes had a contest image that I loved," McKay says. "It was a picture of some of the

Babes company members all in flannel and holding weapons. I wanted to do a cabin-in-the-woods story. My husband is a horror film buff and I thought horror would be fun as it has a determined structure."

She'd only written a few plays and never one in the horror genre, in part because she doesn't like shows with a lot of gore. However, she did have experience with the genre on stage.

"I had produced *Evil Dead* in college," McKay says. "I liked *Cabin in the Woods*. Babes' shows have to have fights and it's built into many horror shows. It doesn't have to be gory. What I like best about horror is the idea that the scariest thing is whatever we brought with us, not what is out there. It is the stuff we are already dealing with."

McKay identifies *Plaid as Hell* as a dark comedy that starts with four queer women on their annual weekend in the woods. Three are very close and the fourth is the new girlfriend. Then everything takes a turn for the worse. It doesn't help that there is a serial killer on the loose.

She wrote the sort of play that she would want to act in. As she says on her website, "Any show where I get to swing a sword (or a batleth!) is a good show."

The fights in *Plaid as Hell* are less about swords and more about found objects, which she says is some of her favorite stuff to watch.

"Someone working with what they have is exciting," McKay says. "They're the kind of thing that you would use if you were to get in a bad situation and you're not a trained combatant."

It's also important to her that the play represents the kind of work that Babes with Blades does, which is to give people a chance to fight who might not otherwise get the opportunity. She wanted to make sure there were underrepresented artists in the show and that they had meaty roles to work with.

"I think all of the characters are fully fleshed-out humans," McKay says. "As an actor, I like that; even if a role is not as large, it is important that it be a whole person."

She also says that she loves a show with a twist—one that surprises her. She claims inspiration for that from the shows done at Jackalope Theatre Company in Chicago, and it was something she tried to incorporate into *Plaid as Hell*.

"You think you are going on one journey and then you're not," McKay says. "I love that. I love good roles for women that are complex and complex plays that are as gay as fuck."

From the time she first turned the script into the contest to the day rehearsals were postponed because of the pandemic, McKay notes that the story has undergone a lot of changes—changes she feels have made the play stronger.

"I had worked with Christina [Casano, the director] before as an actor," McKay says. "She's amazing. She has a real gift for looking at something and saying, 'This doesn't work. Here's why and how it can be fixed.'"

She also credits the cast with giving her feedback that made the characters more authentic. The majority of characters she wrote are not white, but she is. So those actors with lived experience were able to help her make it more realistic. She found as she edited and rewrote scenes that listening to the voice of another actor gave that character a stronger part.

McKay started finding her own creative voice when she was in high school. She was in the band and started to do the school musicals. When it came time for college, she had to pick something and decided that theater was interesting.

"And I haven't quit yet," McKay says.

As a self-described science fiction nerd, she's found a lot of shows that match her interests. It's how she managed to play so many aliens—that and because those shows were ones that had fights in them. She did *A Klingon Christmas Carol* a couple of times and such shows as *Improvised D&D: Season 1*, *Valkyries: Badasses on Bikes*, and *Engage! A Choose-Your-Own Sci-Fight Adventure* at Theater Wit.

"In the choose your own adventure, the character was just named Alien," McKay says, pointing out that perhaps that could count as a queer character. "We don't really know the sexuality of any of them. It is up for debate."

While she has a lot of professional labels, she's picked up a few private ones too. She likes to pet dogs, weight train, and read.

"I am a proud bi woman, a big nerd," McKay says. "In my spare time, I read a lot of science fiction, but you know, the pandemic—it murdered all the hobbies."

But Babes with Blades promises that *Plaid as Hell* will rise again.

@BridgetteRedman

THEATER



Audrey Billings and Jennifer Engstrom in *The Moors* at A Red Orchid Theatre. © FADEOUT FOTO

OPENING

RR Sinister spinsters
The Moors dissects Victorian goth with flair.

Jen Silverman's *The Moors* is a brilliantly executed pastiche of everything from *Wuthering Heights* (the gloomy insalubrious environs of the title) to *Rebecca*, complete with a menacing parlor maid/scullery maid named either Marjory or Mallory, and suffering from either an unwanted pregnancy or typhus, depending on what room you catch her in. (Played to perfection in either case by Jennifer Engstrom.) But it's the underlying tone of isolation and repression that takes both the script and Kirsten Fitzgerald's stellar production for A Red Orchid Theatre (their first live show in two years) beyond the antic genre satire of Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* into dark existential absurdism.

Two spinster sisters, domineering Agatha (Karen Aldridge) and fluttery Huldey (Christina Gorman), who harbors dreams of being a great writer, hire a new governess, Emilie (Audrey Billings), though apparently no child is in the house. (But Agatha has a plan for that!) Meantime, a philosophical mastiff (Guy Van Swearingen) stakes his happiness and vision of the divine on an injured moor-hen (Dado).

Fecundity, fame, faith: all the characters seek meaning and connection in Silverman's play through one of those three attributes. (Well, perhaps not Marjory/Mallory, since servants in Victorian lit can't afford introspection, and fecundity just leads to more poverty, not the securing of the family estate.) As the story grows more histrionic, Fitzgerald's ensemble deepens our investment in these stunted lives. As in Showtime's *Yellowjackets*, it's not so much the grim acts they commit that keep us watching, but the anguish of their lives and the lies upon which those lives are built.

Rest assured, it stays funny as hell even as the characters descend into madness, and it's also a visual treat, thanks to Myron Elliott-Cisneros's witty costumes, K. Story's crepuscular lighting, and Milo Bue's set, which feels like the waiting room in a mausoleum designed by Edward Gorey. *The Moors* is simply one of the best

shows I've seen since live theater returned. —**KERRY REID** *THE MOORS* Through 2/27: Thu-Fri 7:30 PM, Sat 3 and 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM, A Red Orchid Theatre, 1531 N. Wells, 312-943-8722, aredorchidtheatre.org, \$30-\$40.

RR Comes a horseman
City Lit stages the OG of Westerns.

City Lit's original stage adaptation of Owen Wister's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, focuses on the experience of two easterners adjusting to the rough-and-ready way of life in pre-statehood Wyoming in the 1880s. One is "The Virginian" (he has no other name), the foreman on a ranch owned by a wealthy cattle baron. The other is Molly Wood, a genteel schoolteacher from Vermont. Their friendship evolves slowly and shyly into romance, until the Virginian leads a posse to track down a gang of cattle rustlers. With no reliable legal system available in this far-flung territory, the men feel they must take the law into their own hands—and cattle theft is a hanging offense. Molly's conflicted emotions are tested even further when the leader of the rustlers challenges the cowboy she loves to a shoot-out at sundown—a classic trope of Western novels (and, later, movies and TV shows) that found its first depiction in Wister's story.

L.C. Bernadine and Spencer Huffman's script strips Wister's sprawling narrative to its essence. Ray Toler's set design uses movable flats to depict various indoor locations, with painted backdrops evoking the sprawling wide-open spaces against which the drama is set. Musical underscoring is provided live by solo cellist and composer Kelsey Vandervall. The 15-member ensemble under Terry McCabe's direction includes Robert Hunter Bry as the soft-spoken Virginian, Ben Auxier as his rustler nemesis, Liz Falstreu as Molly, and David Fink as an ill-fated cowboy with a deep attachment to his pony Pedro. In a story where humans' relationships to their horses is an essential element, the use of puppet horses designed by The Puppet Company brings an engaging playfulness to the proceedings, enhancing the production's folksy, homespun feel. —**ALBERT WILLIAMS** *THE VIRGINIAN: A HORSEMAN OF THE PLAINS* Through 2/20: Fri-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 3 PM; also Mon 2/7 and 2/14, 7:30 PM, City Lit Theater, 1020 W. Bryn

Mawr, 773-293-3682, citylit.org, \$34 (\$29 seniors, \$12 students and military).

Talking it to death
Wellesley Girl examines democracy in dystopia.

If you think Congress is inept in a crisis now, just wait till you see what 2465 has in store! In Brendan Pelsue's dystopian dramedy, *Wellesley Girl*, the U.S. has been reduced to three (or maybe four, if you count abandoned Wellesley) towns in Massachusetts—the only places on the eastern seaboard where, thanks to MIT scientists, the water is safe to drink. The population is so small that everyone is a member of Congress, though the Supreme Court is now just Donna (Deanna Reed-Foster), the only lawyer around.

When a military force shows up outside the walls, the resident legislators have to decide if they'll send an emissary for peace. Since the alien force is from the "Theocratic Yurt Village of Texas," the diplomatic overtures don't go over so well, and with the urging of bellicose Scott (Todd Wojcik), who tells them "An angry crowd is an honest crowd," they move to a scorched-earth response. But Marie (Allyce Torres), who survived the poisoned water in Wellesley as a child, doesn't want to bring her own kids into the uncertainty of the wilderness, and files for a stay of the counterattack. Which puts Reed-Foster's Donna on the hot seat, trying to decide if preserving the rule of law underpinning the nation/community is more important than preserving the community itself.

Her performance is the best element in this Compass Theatre staging by James Fleming, which never quite finds the balance between political satire and despair. The production feels static early on, and really only gains a sense of anguish and danger once Reed-Foster is introduced (though Wojcik does an admirable job channeling Angry White Man energy). There are moments of poignancy and sharp-elbowed wit, but overall the tone is too inchoate to sustain the stakes of the story. —**KERRY REID** *WELLESLEY GIRL* Through 2/5: Thu-Sat 7:30 PM, Sun 2 PM, Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont, compass theatre.org, \$40 (\$35 seniors and students).



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The Afterparty

At the after-party of a 15-year high school reunion, a famous alumnus is murdered and his classmates are all suspects. Tiffany Haddish stars as the detective trying (not very hard) to find out whodunit. The rest of the cast is filled out by a murderers' row of *SNL* and *SNL*-adjacent comedy vets, none breaking a sweat. Each episode threatens to focus on a different character and send up a separate film genre, but aside from the painful parody musical featured in episode three, I wasn't able to identify anything distinct, aside from an avalanche of jokes that failed to land. The title sequence, however, is a half-assed rip-off of Saul Bass's iconic typeface work. I'd counsel his heirs to sue, but no one who could enjoy this production would ever get the reference. Blessedly, due to Apple's press embargo, I only had to sit through three of at least seven scheduled episodes. If you're a fan of Haddish or anyone else involved, I'd recommend you look for your yuks elsewhere. Billed as a genre-defying murder mystery, the only thing this tone-deaf pastiche-fest defies is a reason to be seen. —DMITRY SAMAROV *Season one premieres January 28 on Apple TV+.*

RR *Cicada*

Matthew Fifer and Kieran Mulcare's *Cicada* isn't sure what it wants to be. Is it a cinematic narrative or a heart-wrenching documentary? The story of a partnership, or a classic character study? A tale of love overcoming obstacles, or of opposing identities colliding? When Ben and Sam's lives—and traumas—intersect, it creates a cacophony much like the song of the cicadas: a scream we can witness but cannot quite understand. But cowriters and costars Fifer and Sheldon D. Brown don't ask for understanding, for pity, or for advice. When Ben's childhood trauma leaves him a shuddering, sweat-soaked mess; when homophobia and violence tear Sam in two, emotionally and physically; when both men learn the power of telling their own stories; again and again, they only ask us to bear witness, to listen.

At times, it feels as if *Cicada* splits, with both characters' stories competing for the spotlight (a symptom of the creators' aim to combine narrative and documentary conventions). Sam's worries—of existing at a divergent intersection of race and sexuality, of being the token minority in his partner's circle of friends—are often overshadowed or quickly resolved; the film seems more focused on alluding to Ben's past as a survivor of sexual abuse. Still, much like Ben and Sam themselves, their two storylines lean on one another, lift each other up, intertwine. A narrative that unfolds like a relationship, *Cicada* sheds its skin slowly, and then all at once, transforming into something loud and beautiful. —BROOKS EISENBERG *97 min. Streaming through PrideArts January 23-31*

Nocturna: Side A - The Great Old Man's Night and Nocturna: Side B - Where the Elephants Go to Die

Gonzalo Calzada's ghost story *Nocturna* is broken up into two distinct films: Side A, the more linear narrative, and Side B, an abstracted addendum that parallels the events of Side A. Narratively, *Nocturna* tells the story of elderly Ulises (Pepe Soriano) who lives a life bordering on reclusive, his only companion being his wife Dalia (Marilú Marini), who imposes a constant fear that the building association is going to forcibly remove them from their apartment due to their age and their home's lack of upkeep. Stuck in the same daily routine and spurred by a series of disquieting encounters with neighbors, Ulises reaches his breaking point, spiraling down a rabbit hole of his own memories and regrets.

The films combine to create a psychodrama on loss, family, fading memory, and loneliness. We as viewers are often steps ahead of Ulises on his journey of realization and acceptance, and watching the old man try to piece together the vague snippets of his faded memories is at times melancholic verging into devastating. The set design of Ulises's decrepit apartment is well executed, heightening the sense of faded beauty leading to decay and tension of a collapsing and forgotten past.

While reaching some poignant emotional moments, Calzada has a frustrating tendency to linger too long, letting the score overtake the poignancy and verge into cheap melodrama. That said, the diptych films of *Nocturna* are at the very least an inventive imagining of an end-of-life story, capturing both the beauty and the melancholy that make up our memories. —ADAM MULLINS-KHATIB *Side A: 107 min, Side B: 67 min. Wide release on VOD*

RR *The Scary of Sixty-First*

The Scary of Sixty-First is an ambitious film, and while it doesn't always hit its mark, it remains admirable in its attempts. Noelle (Madeline Quinn) and Addie (Betsey Brown) seemingly strike gold during an apartment hunt by landing a swank duplex on Manhattan's Upper East Side. It is, of course, too good to be true. But the drawbacks are much more sinister than shitty plumbing, noisy neighbors, or an asshole super. It turns out the property used to belong to the infamous and recently-deceased Jeffrey Epstein. This information is shared by a mysterious woman (director Dasha Nekrasova), with whom Addie becomes obsessed. As the two women spiral deeper and deeper into Epstein conspiracy theories, Noelle begins exhibiting her own odd behavior. Notably, she finds herself in fits of what can only be called "age-regressed sexual mania." All of this takes place in what Nekrasova has likened to *Eyes Wide Shut* New York, and it is, in fact, as alluring as its influences, pulling viewers into a film that teeters between absurdly funny and absurdly frightening. —BECCA JAMES *81 min. Music Box Theatre*



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HISTORY

Art houses live

The Gene Siskel Film Center celebrates its 50th anniversary.

By KATHLEEN SACHS



Gene Siskel Film Center interior © LORI HILE

In an article for the *Chicago Tribune* published on November 26, 1972, film critic Gene Siskel (after whom, ironically, the institution would later be named) announced the pending commencement of a new film center at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, set to open on January 3 of the coming year.

“This article,” he wrote, “is dedicated to the hundreds of persons who have stopped me in movie theaters, dinner parties, baseball games, and lecture halls and complained that Chicago is a cinematic hick town, that they never can find any good art films.”

He continued: “Your problems are over.”

Just four months earlier, in that newspaper’s same pages, an abridged version of a master’s thesis by Neill Rosenfeld declared in its headline, “Art houses die—Chicago’s not even second anymore.” Rosenfeld went on to lament recent closures of local art house theaters—with charming names like the Termite Theater, the Three Penny, and the Little Stabs of Happiness Cinematheque—or their conversion to theaters specializing in “skin flicks,” an alleged reasoning behind his pronouncement of Chicago as a “hick town.”

The proprietor of the Clark Theater, which

had been bought and turned into one of those dens of iniquity, is quoted in the article as saying, “Sex and violence are the only things people will go downtown for. I don’t think there will ever be another art house in the Loop.”

As the Film Center celebrates its 50th anniversary, it’s clear that this assertion has been proven wrong just as many years over. Accompanying Siskel’s November article was a large photograph of Camille Cook, the woman who founded what was then called, very straightforwardly, the Film Center at the School of the Art Institute.

Before that Cook was known for her interest in experimental and avant-garde cinema. A member of the Society of Typographic Arts (STA), the city’s oldest professional design association, she founded the STA’s Magic Lantern Society, screening films at such locations as the Tribune Tower and the basement of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Seeking to expand her endeavor, Cook looked to the venerated Pacific Film Archive (PFA) at the University of California at Berkeley. Sheldon Renan, the PFA’s founding director, encouraged her to pursue a grant through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA); he also advised that she’d need to find an institutional sponsor in

order to qualify. This was during a time when the NEA was distributing such grants so as to encourage the creation of various regional film centers across the country versus just on the coasts.

Cook approached the Art Institute of Chicago, which summarily rejected her proposal. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), however, did not, and thus, the Film Center came to be, with an even more expansive mission toward the beginning (like PFA, Cook had hoped to amass an archive as well as establish an exhibition venue). Barbara Scharres, who retired from her position as the Film Center’s director of programming in winter of 2020, after having been there for 45 years (more than one person with whom I spoke calls her the soul of the Film Center), lauded Cook’s tenacity.

“She was not going to take ‘no’ from anybody,” she says. “At that time women didn’t go up against the authority of the Art Institute of Chicago.” Things have a way of working out—the Film Center’s first location was in the Art Institute of Chicago’s regal Fullerton Hall auditorium.

Esteemed critic and scholar (and one-time *Reader* film writer) B. Ruby Rich took tick-

ets on opening night; she became the first full-time staff member after the Film Center received a grant from the Illinois Arts Council allowing for her hire. Upon arriving in Chicago from her native New England, she had also had the idea of starting a film society. Roger Gilmore, then dean of the School of the Art Institute, recommended she seek out Cook.

Rich would eventually become the Film Center’s associate director under Cook, and the two were co-programmers. Writing about the experience in her book *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, Rich summarized her time there succinctly: “I was able to have fun and premiere important films.” Though she was only there for five years, Rich helped organize numerous memorable screenings and events, including two film festivals sponsored by the *Tribune*.

The first (and the Film Center’s first festival altogether) was *Films by Women*, held in September 1974. Siskel had pitched it to Rich and the Film Center, noting in the *Tribune* that “the idea for the festival began [the year prior] with two articles I wrote while attending a similar program in Washington.” The festival included 25 features, more than 30 short films, and several workshops. Standout titles include Leontine Sagan’s *Mädchen in Uniform*, Agnès Varda’s *Cléo from 5 to 7*, Ida Lupino’s *Outrage*, and a retrospective of films by Dorothy Arzner, among many others.

“I would be stopped in the street for years by women whose lives had been changed by whatever they saw there or whoever they met there,” says Rich.

Politics were then becoming more important to Rich, which, coinciding with the nation’s bicentennial, led her to program a festival of revolutionary films from all over the world. The American selections ranged from Frank Capra’s *Meet John Doe* to King Vidor’s *Our Daily Bread*; international titles included Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov’s *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* and Shinsuke Ogawa’s *Narita: The Peasants of the Second Fortress*. This is but a smattering of the more than 70 films included in the event.

Like Cook, Rich also had an interest in experimental and avant-garde films, and she

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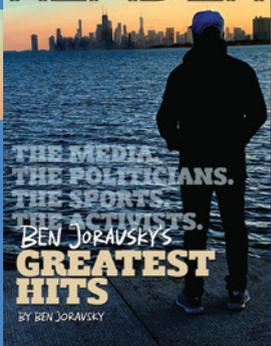
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FILM

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helped bring to the Film Center such figures as Chantal Akerman (who stayed at her home for a week), George Kuchar, and Kenneth Anger. “In the beginning we were both very taken with the idea of showing films to the Chicago public,” Rich says of her working relationship with Cook. “Of making something happen in Chicago. Of making a mark for the Film Center. Of stirring things up.”

In the years after Rich’s departure came two new associate directors: first Scott Levine, then Richard Peña. Though Levine’s tenure was short-lived, “[those] two and a half years are pretty rich in remembrance.”

“The thing that I’m most proud of when I was there is that I programmed a film festival called *The Actress on Film*,” Levine says. This took place in 1979 and was also sponsored by the *Tribune*. One of the festival guests was screen legend Sylvia Sidney. As Levine recounts, she was dismayed at being put up in the Blackstone Hotel, which had fallen from its former glory.

“I was 25 years old at the time, and I got this phone call, and it was Sylvia Sidney,” he says. “And she was not happy. This was before she came . . . she says to me, ‘You wouldn’t ask Henry Fonda or Bette Davis to stay at the Blackstone.’ And my response to her was, ‘I would. It might have been a mistake for them as well as you, but I certainly would ask them to stay at the Blackstone.’”

Scharres, who became a full-time employee of the Film Center in 1975 thanks to a Community and Economic Development Association grant, remembers it differently. In her recollection, it was Sidney who’d wanted to stay at the Blackstone, even though it had become run-down since she stayed there as a traveling stage actress. Regardless, these discrepancies in memory shape another kind of history, which endures in the hearts and minds of the people who lived it but who, like all humans, are subject to the fallibility of reminiscence. Less concrete than chronology, of course, but ever more impactful.

In 1976 the Film Center moved locations again, this time to the 280 Building of the School of the Art Institute, on Columbus Drive at Jackson Boulevard, and, as a result of its gaining another screen, further expanded its programming. Peña, who would go on to be program director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and artistic chief of the New York Festival, became assistant director in 1980 and director some years later. Cook (who passed away in 2020) left in 1981.



Students celebrate the dedication of the Film Center’s new Columbus Drive location, October 6, 1976. © GENE SISKEL FILM CENTER

There were other festivals, too, some of which started at the Film Center and others which found their home within its walls. Among them are the Hong Kong Film Festival (per the Film Center, one of the first in North America to screen John Woo’s films); the Annual Festival of Films from Iran (started in 1989 by Alissa Simon and continued by Scharres, with advisement from filmmaker and professor Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa); the Black Harvest Film Festival (which began in 1994 as a continuation of Floyd Webb’s Blacklight Film Festival, with Sergio Mims as its longtime programmer until last year); the Asian American Showcase (a collaboration with the Foundation for Asian American Independent Media that originated in 1996); the Chicago Palestine Film Festival; and the European Film Festival (later the European Union Film Festival), which this year will celebrate its 25th edition in early March.

Scharres became the Film Center’s director in 1988, when Peña departed for New York. She had been its first-ever executive director, until the role was split up with Scharres retaining the director of programming title. Randy

Adamsick then became executive director in 2000 and stayed for a little over a year. He was followed by Jean de St. Aubin, who’s held the role since. Coming from the Chicago Park District, de St. Aubin helped revive the theater during a particularly low point in the early aughts. De St. Aubin understands that at the heart of an organization like the Film Center isn’t only its staff, but also its audience. “[The audience] is key. They’re the most important.”

She expands on the unique dilemma of a film organization trying to attract wider audiences while staying true to its mission. “I think we’ve always had a delicate balance between programming films that introduce people to new genres [and] film communities and then showing things that have name recognition, whether it’s a director or a star.”

The current director of programming, Rebecca Fons, likewise recognizes this dilemma and feels the Film Center is meeting it head-on. “I think we’re successfully introducing new ideas and new concepts while also holding on to who we’ve been for 50 years,” Fons says, referring in part to initiatives that have begun emerging in the arts sphere, dedicated

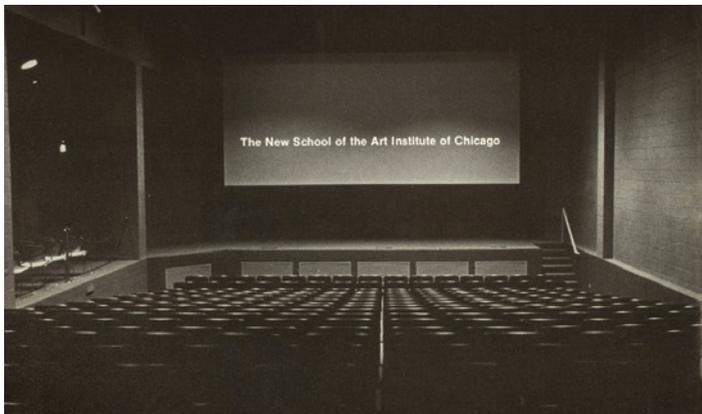
to inclusion and visibility for marginalized groups heretofore left out of the conversation.

“I’m really hopeful we can put some action to those words with some conversations,” she says. “Because I think . . . even if you present a film that counterbalances that history, or any film history, or is an examination of that history, to do so without a robust conversation is tricky.”

Fons began during the pandemic, several months into the venue’s temporary closure and after a round of layoffs at the Art Institute decimated the Film Center’s already lean staff. For various reasons the Film Center has had to pause on some of their more robust, typically in-person offerings, such as the yearly lecture series, which involved having a film academic or historian teach a several-week course both for SAIC students and the general public, who could stay for the lecture after the film screenings.

Former associate director of programming Marty Rubin, whose tenure began in 2000 and who was one of those laid off in the summer of 2020, is most proud of his work on the lecture series.

FILM



Film Center interior, 1976 © GENE SISKEL FILM CENTER

“I thought that was one of the best things that the Film Center did,” he says. “I think it provided a unique opportunity for film academics to interact with the general public in a way that I thought was mutually enriching.” Rubin specifically recalls a recent series on Orson Welles taught by former *Reader* film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, during which Rosenbaum delivered, seemingly off the cuff, illuminating histories and anecdotes about Welles after screenings of films such as *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and others.

In 2000, the Film Center was renamed the Gene Siskel Film Center, after the late *Tribune* film critic who had passed away in 1999. This was a development some found questionable, considering the lack of interest Siskel had, especially later in his career, toward less mainstream fare. The next year, in 2001, the organization moved to its current location on 164 North State Street, across the street from the Chicago Theatre—whose iconic marquee can be seen through the lobby windows, along with the dance students at the Joffrey Ballet, a fitting location for one of downtown’s pivotal cultural establishments.

In keeping with Cook’s initial mission of showcasing experimental and avant-garde films, the Film Center began hosting the Conversations at the Edge screening series in 2001, created in partnership with Video Data Bank and the SAIC Department of Film, Video, New Media, and Animation. Its current head, Amy Beste, director of public programming for the department of Film, Video and New Media at the School of the Art Institute, sees the series as a meeting point between the Film Center’s more traditional cinema offerings and other realms of moving image art.

“In some ways I felt like Conversations at the Edge exists as this kind of doorway between the . . . repertory aspect of the Gene Siskel Film Center and these other versions of

media art or cinema art, that could lead you to other places,” she says. “It was also a way to kind of bring them together so that people could really have a more complicated understanding of media culture or media arts in general. And then think about them in relation to the history of cinema with a capital C. Especially because it’s happening in this beautiful cinematic venue.”

The Film Center, with its range of repertory and contemporary programming, continues to be among the best places in the city to engage with cinema history and to revel in its expanded modes. To celebrate the theater’s golden anniversary, Fons has programmed the 50/50 series, in which a film from each year of the theater’s history will screen every Monday night in 2022.

Titles so far have included Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (1972), Francois Truffaut’s *Day for Night* (1973), and John Cassavetes’s *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). Upcoming films include Akerman’s landmark *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975); Siskel’s all-time favorite, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977); Kathleen Collins’s *Losing Ground* (1982); and Varda’s *Vagabond* (1985).

More information about these can be found in the Film Center’s newly republished *Gazette*, a longtime offering of the Film Center with its own rich history; a note from de St. Aubin in the issue recognizes the publication’s history and expands on a new, more “responsive” approach to programming going forward.

In a world whose problems are far from over, this article is dedicated to the tens of thousands of people who know that there is a place in the Loop where good art films can be found, where a respite from reality can lead to a greater understanding of it. It’s been here for 50 years and, hopefully, 50 more to come. **A**

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TELEVISION

Black female friendships are taking over the small screen

After a drought, more TV shows than ever are centering friendships between Black women. Could we see even more in the coming years?

By JANAYA GREENE

Ever since Bernadine, Gloria, Savannah, and Robin laughed together, cried together, and fussed at each other in the name of friendship in theaters around the world, many have exalted the 1995 film *Waiting to Exhale* as the blueprint for showing Black women's friendships on-screen. *Waiting to Exhale* fol-

lowed four African American women experiencing the ups and downs of love and romance in Phoenix, Arizona. Based on the 1992 novel by Terry McMillan, the film has also stood the test of time in the hearts of those too young to remember when it premiered, if they were even alive at all.

Over the years many TV channels have kept

the movie alive, and today it's even streaming on HBO Max. Though the film had major success, after 1995 there remained a lack of films centering Black women friendships. Shows like *Living Single* and *Martin* were largely popular amongst Black communities in the 90s, yet they didn't last into the next millennium. Meanwhile *Friends*, often said to have

been based on the mostly Black *Living Single*, was green-lit ten seasons compared to *Living Single's* five.

With the golden age of Black sitcoms ending in the 90s, there seemed to be no major shows and films exclusively about the everyday lives of Black women and their friends. In 2016, Issa Rae's *Insecure*, a series about a woman navigating her career and relationships in Los Angeles, premiered and garnered a huge following, many of whom had watched Rae's former webseries *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*. It wouldn't be until 2017 that theaters around the world would see another major film about a group of friends, this time on a *Girls Trip*.

Tracy Oliver and Kenya Barris's comedic film stars Queen Latifah (who also starred in *Living Single*), Regina Hall, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Tiffany Haddish as HBCU alums

FILM

Twenties  BET PRESS

who've struggled to reconnect after the woes of post-college life got ahold of them. From thriving and failing businesses to managing motherhood and infidelity in marriage, the story was a hilarious reminder that we can go far alone, but we can go further with friends. The hysterical film, set at one of the Black community's most sought-after events, Essence Festival, with a star-studded cast, was a recipe for success. The film and its cast earned many awards and nominations, but perhaps *Girls Trip*'s largest reward is the sheer number of television shows centering Black womanhood and friendship that've been green-lit since.

With *Insecure*'s recent series ending, many Black women are not only mourning the friendship of main characters Issa and Molly, but also the moments where they get together with friends and talk about the breakups, reconciliations, and arguments we can all relate to. These newer series provide different worlds viewers can fall into.

In 2019, BET picked up *Twenties*, a comedy series from Lena Waithe, following Hattie, an aspiring screenwriter who is queer, and her two straight best friends as they chase their dreams in Los Angeles. The premiere episode features a heartwarming scene with the main characters singing "Exhale (Shoop Shoop)," an homage to *Waiting to Exhale* and the song's singer, Whitney Houston, whom Waithe often notes as an inspiration.

In 2017, Tracy Oliver, who cowrote *Girls Trip* and starred in *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, began writing the pilot for *First Wives Club*, a series inspired by the 1996 film *The First Wives Club* about three divorcees who seek revenge on their exes for leaving them for younger women. The revamped series is not only extremely fun to watch, it's also freeing to see Black women in their 40s figuring life out as best they can and not necessarily calling it quits because their marriages, jobs, and friendships are not working out as they'd planned.

More recently Oliver created *Harlem*, a Prime Video dramedy that follows a group of friends navigating similar challenges. The group is a bit younger, in their 30s, with Harlem as more of a character than a backdrop. As in *Twenties*, one of the leads is queer, but this character, Tye, is coming to terms with dating a white woman while she runs a dating app for queer women of color. Leigh Davenport's *Run the World* on Starz, which also takes place in Harlem, was renewed for a second season last

year. She says that she'd been working on the show for ten years prior to its success. The last few years have proved to be the time that studios finally realized that just like *Sex and the City* and *Girls*, series like *Run the World*, *First Wives Club*, *Twenties*, and more need to be on television, where Black women everywhere are itching to watch.

Though the premises of these series may seem the same, each brings a different flair and different voices to the screen that are relatable to an array of women who are doing their best to figure out their complicated lives. This year viewers could see even more shows centering Black women. Recently, Netflix teased a new show coming to the streaming service about a Houston-based group of friends navigating a world of affluence while trying to find balance in their everyday lives. *Waiting to Exhale* may also see a TV series reboot featuring the daughters of the original characters.

Yet, there are still many stories in this genre that are untold. Many of the series already on-screen feature women living in coastal cities like New York and Los Angeles. Like Netflix's teased series, viewers could see more women living in the American south—and possibly the midwest, too. Another striking occurrence in many of these shows is the inclusion of one queer character in a friend group of mostly straight women. It'd be a welcome relief if new shows could reverse this since, let's face it, many queer folks have groups of friends aligned with their sexual identities, including friends who are also Black. More queer folks assigned female at birth are open to rediscovering their gender identities today than ever, and often lean on their friends for additional support throughout the process. Could these stories also be told? There are a thousand ways the doors that are opening for shows centering Black women could open even further.

Often, Black women are each other's safety in workplaces, in public places like grocery stores and shopping centers, at universities, and all over the world. To see aspects of our everyday lives on-screen, and to see them in a comical yet real light, is refreshing. We are each other's home. One can only hope that, unlike the golden age of Black sitcoms in the 90s, we don't see the end of these series anytime soon—that they can expand in a way that is authentic and hasn't been done before. 

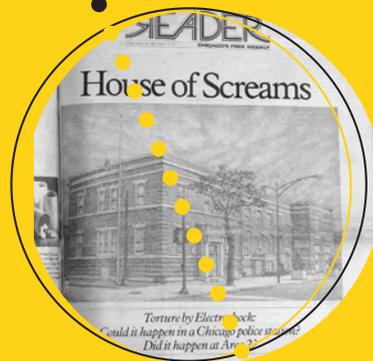
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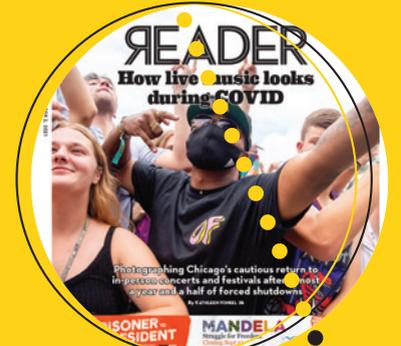
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many months prior to the show. She'd been reflecting on her place in the universe while working on a loose series of dreamlike, sample-based beats, some of which she'd begun before 2021. That night at SummerStage cast this unreleased work—whether completed songs or half-finished experiments—in a new light. She'd rapped on her own beats and recorded verses on other producers' instrumentals, and she assembled her favorites into a full-length, adapting the material to suit her new vision. She also found an interview with Sun Ra and augmented a few tracks with a sample of him declaring "It's the truth."

"Everything just seemed to weave itself together as I started doing it," Semira says. The resulting album, *I Got Bandz for the Moonlandin'*, came out in September. It wasn't her first full-length of 2021: in February she'd released *Mira*, a collection of nine brief, forceful tracks made in collaboration with producer Morgan Varnado. Her debut project, a six-song release called *Wait!*, had dropped in November 2018, and for a few years before that she'd uploaded singles to Soundcloud.

Moonlandin' is a milestone for Semira, in part because it's her first album to showcase her skills as a producer—half its instrumentals are hers. As a beat maker, Semira arranges brief, boisterous samples whose humane warmth accentuates her convivial personality on the mike. She plays off the music in a way that's both dizzying and inviting, intensifying the intimacy in her playful, twisting verses—the album feels like messages shared between best friends when no one else is around.

Semira had an inkling *Moonlandin'* would be different. "When making the project, I was like, 'This is something. This is going to go further than anything I've created before, because I know that this is good—this is a story and I feel very connected to it,'" she says. "I was able to unlock something in myself that I don't think I was ever brave enough to do."

After she dropped *Moonlandin'*, Semira got booked at Sleeping Village to open for a couple of revered underground NYC rappers: Mike in October and Wiki in December. By the end of 2021, her name was appearing alongside theirs on the year's best-of lists. Phillip Mlynar included *Moonlandin'* in his best 2021 hip-hop

The Chicago rapper-producer's latest album made her a critical favorite and one of the city's brightest new stars.

By LEOR GALIL

Semiratruth Garrett remembers the exact day her creative life opened up. It wasn't the afternoon in 2014 when she first recorded a song at Harold Washington Library's YouMedia lab, or the day several years later when she rapped her way onto Netflix's 2019 hip-hop competition, *Rhythm + Flow*—though both those

moments are also burned into her brain. It was in New York City on the evening of July 24, 2021, when Semira went to SummerStage in Central Park to see her friend Teiana Davis, aka pianist-singer Anaiet, open for the Sun Ra Arkestra with her jazz trio, Sistazz of the Nitty Gritty.

"I was blown away by Teiana's band,"

Semira says. "But also seeing the Sun Ra Arkestra—I was like, 'I feel spiritually connected to this.' To see the importance of space—especially as a Black person, like, the space you take up, the space of your mind, the space of past ancestors. All of that was really drawing me."

Semira had felt the pull of the cosmos for

roundup for Bandcamp Daily, and Gary Suarez ranked *Moonlandin'* at number six on the best hip-hop list for his crucial newsletter, Cabbages. Harmony Holiday put Mira at number four on her best music list for *Artforum*. The acclaim for *Moonlandin'* exceeded even Semira's expectations. "A lot of people that I was fans of was like, 'This hard,'" she says. "A lot of people see a little part of themselves in it. And that's all I could ask for, honestly."

Semira, 21, grew up all over Chicago's south and west sides, including a few years in the south suburbs. While attending elementary school in Park Forest, she got her first taste of performance by acting in the ensembles for school musicals; at age eight, she started piano lessons. She soon took an interest in poetry, and in fifth grade she won a poetry competition.

The art of reciting poetry transfixed her, though it'd be a few years before she'd feel confident doing it herself. "It's something very critical that moves people, and how you put together words, and how you can paint a picture just by moving your mouth and vibrating your little vocal cords," she says. "As a young kid, I was attracted to that."

Semira was living in Austin during middle school, when representatives from Uptown-based hip-hop arts organization Kuumba Lynx came to talk to one of her classes. Their poetry programming piqued her interest, and Semira eventually learned the ins and outs of slam poetry through Kuumba Lynx. "That is very important in where I am today," she says. "Because that initially taught me how to perform, and how to write and visualize pieces so I can present them." Semira also learned about hip-hop from her father, who played her the gritty, cerebral music of Ghostface Killah and MF Doom.

In fall 2014, Semira began her freshman year at Jones College Prep, a few blocks south of Harold Washington Library. Incoming students got a tour of the library as part of the school's orientation program, and that introduced her to the YouMedia Lab, an after-school teen creative space that's incubated a generation of Chicago artists. Semira made a habit of visiting YouMedia, drawn by the promise of free access to a recording studio.

Eager to learn her way around a studio, Semira slid into a stranger's recording session at YouMedia one day her freshman year. "He's like, 'I'm making a song.' I was like, 'Well, show me how to do it,'" she says. By the end of the session, they'd both recorded verses atop an

instrumental ripped from YouTube. "On the train ride home, I'm listening to it," Semira says. "I said, 'I ate him up! This is fire!' That's my first song that started me off. Like, 'OK, we can do this—this is it.'"

YouMedia's staff also mentored Semira and fostered her musical and poetic ambitions. Veteran underground rapper and former Nacrobats member Marcellous Lovelace, aka Infinito 2017, served as a YouMedia music instructor, and Semira enrolled in his hip-hop workshops. She learned about hip-hop production and the history of the culture, and within a couple years she'd joined the pool of hosts for a YouMedia podcast he produced called *Underground Feed Back Stereo*. "I think that helped ease me into stuff," Semira says. "I remember him being, like, 'Oh, you're good. You can rap—you're fire.' That expanded my, like, 'OK, I can do this, and build upon it with this poetry shit I'm doing on the side.'"

Poetry proved to be a major part of Semira's YouMedia experience too. Teaching artist and poet Jennifer Steele became an invaluable inspiration. "She really expanded my writing, and grew how I performed pieces," Semira says.

Steele was among the coaches of YouMedia's Louder Than a Bomb slam-poetry team, for which Semira successfully auditioned her freshman year. She remained on the team for three years, which allowed Steele to see her growth up close.

"I remember thinking that this young woman that I have been coaching for years found the space where she could be this fully animated person onstage—not just having the lyrics and the words and the images, but being able to embody those words on the stage," Steele says.

Semira also proved that she understood how to be part of a team. "She was someone who was kind and caring towards her teammates, and really a champion of everyone else's voice and style," Steele says. "She wasn't quiet, but she had this gentle spirit that was expressive and fun, all the time."

Some of the friendships Semira formed with her teammates have lasted beyond her time at YouMedia—that was when she met future *Mira* producer Morgan Varnado, for instance. "One of his beats is on *Wait!*, one of the first projects I ever did," Semira says. "People just kind of fall into the trajectory of my life." Semira also met Teiana Davis at YouMedia by walking into a friend's recording session. "We grew up a lot together in that space," Semira says of Davis. "And I will hold her dear to my

heart because of that."

Semira graduated from Jones in spring 2018, and in the fall she left for what turned out to be a short stay at Illinois State University. "I was finding a lot of joy in the start of my adulthood in Chicago," she says. "When I left, it felt like it was stripped away. I knew nobody. The person I was supposed to go to ISU with, she couldn't do it no more—so I was there all alone. Tried to make friends but could not do it. I was like, 'No, I need to be back home.'" She dropped out after 11 days and moved in with her aunt in South Shore.

Netflix debuted *Rhythm + Flow* in October 2019. Early in the fourth episode, Chance the Rapper heads to Harold Washington Library's Cindy Pritzker Auditorium, where he's also hosted his own teen performance series, OpenMike (Semira had been a regular while at Jones). The episode shows a handful of rappers onstage in the auditorium—just a fraction of the number who'd turned up—and Semira's tempo-shifting verse charms Chance and fellow judge Lupe Fiasco. She says she was invited to advance to the next round but declined. The editing of the program doesn't let us see either way, but she already had plans to fly to New York City the next day—she was going to have her first in-person meeting with a collective of like-minded musicians she'd gotten to know over Soundcloud a few years before.

Dropping out of college turned out to be a boon for Semira. Once she returned to Chicago, she became a regular at open mikes around the city—her favorite was a monthly run by Shawnee Dez (also the *Reader's* special projects associate), which for a time made its home at FDC Studios in Logan Square. "That's how I started building momentum, building a name for myself in the scene," Semira says. "My mother, in high school, she didn't let me go out a lot after hours or go out to random places without knowing a lot of details. Once I was 18, 19, I hit the ground running." She took a lot of unpaid shows, but in December 2019 she performed her first big paid gig, opening for Roy Kinsey at Schubas.

Semira made some of her most rewarding connections outside the city. On the New York trip she took instead of advancing on *Rhythm + Flow*, she met several folks from musical collective and label FreeThe (she'd already become its only Chicago member) and bonded especially tightly with a rapper named Mimz. They were the youngest people in the collective, and they got closer as they discov-

ered how much they had in common.

"The more we got to know each other, and the more we understood our upbringings and stuff, we understood that our friendship was a responsibility to each other," Mimz says. "The support that we had for each other was important, and not something to be thrown away, or something that was disposable."

Semira put out one project through FreeThe, the 2019 EP *I Don't Wanna Have to Yell for You to Listen*, which features a verse from Mimz; neither is involved in the collective anymore, but their bond has deepened—and influenced both their music.

"There was a time where I genuinely wasn't feeling good about my music, and when I would listen to Semira, I would hit her up and be like, 'Honestly, this made me want to make a song right now,'" Mimz says. "And she would tell me, 'I was just listening to one of your songs and it made me want to make songs.' It fills your heart, because you feel like people weren't listening to what you're saying, and you're hearing somebody who you genuinely love and care about and also feel inspired by telling you that they're feeling inspired by the words you're speaking at the same time. It's a very self-sustainable relationship."

The two rappers have tried to close the distance between them by traveling to each other whenever possible. Mimz spent a week in Chicago last year, and Semira crashed with Mimz for all of November 2021. Last February, they rendezvoused in Los Angeles and recorded the track "Soup" with a producer named Alexander Spit. Earlier this month, Semira released it as part of a two-track collaboration with Mimz called *Oh, the Places We'll Go!* The title refers to their travels together as well as to their mutual aspirations.

"It's a beautiful thing to be in friendship with somebody where you feel like the possibilities are infinite," Mimz says. "Like, you've come from a place where you felt like you were going nowhere, where you used to not be able to imagine your future because of how uncertain it is. Now we still can't imagine our future only because of how abundant it could be."

Semira's work over the past year or so has also helped her see the shape of her own future. "To find my own power in the words that I'm curating has helped me build my confidence, and pull from people that are no longer here with us, so I can pull from their power too," she says. "I'm saying things that are going to live forever." **FI**

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CHICAGOANS OF NOTE

Elton 'L10MixedIt' Chueng, recording engineer

"A lot of the times, where I find success is to be as empathetic as I am, just as a person, and to have that translate on a technical level."

As told to LEOR GALIL

Elton Chueng, 33, began his career as a professional recording engineer with an internship at Classick Studios in 2011. He's since worked with some of the brightest stars to emerge from Chicago's hip-hop scene in the past decade, including Saba, Noname, Smino, and Chance the Rapper. In November his contributions to Yebba's 2021 debut, Dawn, earned him a Grammy nomination for Best Engineered Album, Non-Classical.

I always loved music growing up. It really was something that got me by on a daily level. I had a hard time paying attention in class and doing homework, so in order to power through those moments I'd listen to music. It was mainly R&B and hip-hop. As far as rap and stuff goes, a lot of it came down to the attitude; it felt very expressive and cool. Something about 90s hip-hop and R&B was the coolest thing to me.

I grew up in Skokie. I was born in Chicago. My parents wanted me to have a better education, so [they] moved the family up into the suburbs. I felt a little out of place. I had

more of an interest in these things [hip-hop and R&B] than other people. Later in my education—when you're supposed to make these important decisions about what you want to be—I found myself a little bit out of place. Something in my gut told me, "Hey, I want to do music, or I want to do something in music." I didn't know what it was yet. But I kind of felt like an outcast, 'cause any time I would mention something like that, I would have friends, like, "Oh man, that's kinda risky. What happens if you don't make it in that?" Everybody else wanted to be, like, doctors, accountants. I just wanted to do music.

It stuck with me all the way through college too. I had the hardest time trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I went with my gut with that too, and just was like, "I don't have the interest to do anything else, so let me see what I can do in music." While I was studying, I was blasting music; I was listening to a lot of Kanye. I was like, "The emotion in the music is so expressive, it's damn near theatrical. It's a lot of energy in this. How do I get involved in something like this?"

In high school, I had a bunch of friends who would rap in the hallways. My cousin had bought me this little recording setup, so I had a bunch of friends come by and record. I found my way into engineering that way, because I was so much more obsessed with how to make stuff sound professional. It was 2003—something like that. It was a little recording package that you'd get from Guitar Center or Musician's Friend. I don't know how I even figured out how to set all of that stuff up at such a young age—I guess I was kind of nerdy with the computer stuff.

I got the word out that I had a little recording setup in high school—it definitely created a slight clientele for me. But I didn't even realize what I was doing. I was so obsessed with making this sound professional and radio ready, just like everything I grew up listening to.

I'm extremely hard on myself. I'm always pushing myself to learn. I think when I first got into engineering, it was having this internship at Classick Studios with [founder] Chris Classick; I learned everything under him. It was under him, my good friend HeadAche [Clinton Walker], who is also an engineer, and Jeff Jackson. These were the very first engineers

over at Classick. We would nerd out and trade little tips and tricks and stuff as we went along with our journey. I owe it to those guys, who gave me that push to get better and learn the trade and the skill set.

This was around 2011, when I first started interning and stuff. It was like translating emotion into technical skills. "Oh, you like this particular sound—you like how the song felt? Well, in order to make this music translate, you have to understand how to do this, this, and this—particular skills and engineering." I took those little skill sets along with me this entire—what has it been, ten years now? I can finally really tell, from top to bottom, what a song is supposed to feel like or sound like.

The engineering field is very selfless. A lot of the times, where I find success is to be as empathetic as I am, just as a person, and to have that translate on a technical level. I guess it does register as an emotional sonic palette. But using that as a little bit of background—I use that to make those stories and those songs come to life for artists.

I use everybody that's around me that I can call a friend or a colleague to draw inspiration from, because I think a lot of us shared the same struggles. I'm the type of person that'll never forget where they came from, so I use that as a driving force. Like, "Look how far you've come, from being the person who didn't know what they want to do in life to..." We just got nominated for a Grammy, so I'll be making an appearance at the Grammys for the first time this year. It's kind of mind-blowing.

We need every single one of us to keep uplifting each other and keep this thing going. I'm still reaching back to try to find, like, "Oh, who's doing what next? Who's a young artist that we should be looking out for? Let's get behind them and champion them, just like how we did with Chance, Kids These Days, Chief Keef." I think that's a dope thing—we gotta keep this thing going. I think that's more important than anything to me.

I get those questions all the time, like, "Hey, when are you moving out to LA? When are you moving down to Atlanta? When are you getting out of Chicago?" I think it's more rewarding for me to do things out of here; there's still so much to build here. And I wish everybody the best, and we've just gotta keep this ecosystem growing, for our artists and our creative community to thrive. As hard as it is to get it done here, we still got something going for us. **■**

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PICK OF THE WEEK

Cloakroom tap into their dreamier side on *Dissolution Wave*

VIN ROMERO

CLOAKROOM, MATT TALBOTT, DJ SETS FROM PHYSICAL MEDIUM
 Fri 1/28, 10 PM, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western, \$18, \$16 in advance. 21+

ON THE UNTOUCHABLE 2017 LP *Time Well*, Cloakroom dialed in and perfected their take on modern slowcore, blending Hum-flavored space rock and atomically heavy walls of guitars with syrupy, dreary, and heart-wrenchingly sad vocal melodies. The Northwest Indiana trio have since undergone a lineup shift, and some members have also spread their wings in other projects. Founding drummer Brian Busch has departed, replaced by Chicago hardcore stalwart Tim Remis (from Sweet Cobra, the Killer, and countless other bands), while singer-guitarist Doyle Martin is now pulling double duty as a full-time member of shoegaze-revival powerhouse Nothing and bassist Bobby Markos has launched a cinematic acoustic solo project called Documa. Judging from Cloakroom's brand-new third album, *Dissolution Wave* (Relapse), those changes (and the ongoing pandemic) have impacted the band's approach to songwriting, ushering in a new era and pushing them in a more escapist direction. *Dissolution Wave* is a loose rock opera centered in a cosmic space, with songs that combine space rock and western rock for a dreamier, less aggressive feel than Cloakroom's previous work. "Dreaming up another world felt easier to digest than the real nitty-gritty we're immersed in every day," Martin explains in the album's press materials. This is still recognizably the Cloakroom that I've always loved so much, but new leaves are turning over: the tracks remain heavy and heady, but they're more ethereal and take more room to breathe, evoking atmosphere and drawing out tension rather than focusing solely on crushing heaviness. *Dissolution Wave* is as yearning and forlorn as Cloakroom's earlier records, but the bleakness isn't overwhelming—warm hooks and sunny hope glimmer through the darkness. —**LUCA CIMARUSTI**

CONCERT PREVIEW

THURSDAY 27

MONOCHROMATIC BLACK *Orinoco, Deaf Ear, Enox, Lost in the Current, and others to be announced open. 7 PM, Cobra Lounge, 235 N. Ashland, \$12. 17+*

In 2018, Long Island progressive death-metal band Monochromatic Black threw down the gauntlet with a video for their debut single, "The Herd," announcing themselves as a force to be reckoned with. The following year, they released their first EP, *Pneuma*, to considerable acclaim: it's an intense, versatile, and strikingly assured burst of brutality that hit like a progressive deathcore derecho and left me wanting more. Last fall's full-length *Vicissitude* has scratched that itch for sure. Guitarists John Gribbin and Dan Rivera, bassist Arthur Erb, and drummer Eddie DeCesare build a majestic, ever-changing foundation atop which singer Tanya Beickert can stretch out, switching between deep growls, mountain-lion screams, ethereal clean vocals, and anything else a song's atmosphere calls for. Monochromatic Black's music maintains a tension between high-tech and primal while leaving room for windy, fatalistic romanticism—though they never allow it to linger for long.

With ten fierce tracks that bounce among styles—progressive and technical death metal, metalcore, hints of black metal—with remarkable ease and flexibility, *Vicissitude* proves that *Pneuma* was no fluke. The album's confident power suggests that Monochromatic Black could be hugely influential in their genre for generations of bands to come. They've also released a 40-minute documentary about making the record, which provides insight into their writing process and the interpersonal, logistical, and musical challenges of recording during the pandemic—including laying down their parts separately without the benefit of their usual practice schedule. In the documentary, the band members are up-front about their mental state the past couple years, as well as the toll that being unable to play live has taken. Nearly every member has lost someone close to them since the pandemic began, and they tell touching stories of how grief and loss fuel their music. The way Monochromatic Black powered through the pain and put out an impressive first



Monochromatic Black DOM DELFINO



Earthless © MARTA



Dogs at Large © JULIE DIDOMENICO

full-length under these conditions bodes well for their ability to handle whatever the future throws at them. —MONICA KENDRICK

FRIDAY 28

CLOAKROOM See *Pick of the Week* at left. **Matt Talbott** opens; **DJ sets** from *Physical Medium*. 10 PM, *Empty Bottle*, 1035 N. Western, \$18, \$16 in advance. 21+

SUNDAY 30

TIM DAISY *Birdwatchers* headline; the **Tim Daisy 4tet** opens. 9 PM, *Hungry Brain*, 2319 W. Belmont, \$10. 21+

In January 2021, I profiled local percussionist Tim Daisy by detailing his creative response to the limitations imposed by COVID-19. At the time, he had just issued a virtual collaboration with electronic musician Ikue Mori on his own label, Relay Recordings. While Daisy has continued to exploit the potentialities of home recording and technologically facilitated connection, when concerts before audiences became a possibility again, he wasted no time returning to the stage. On February 1, Relay releases *Circle Back*, a robust celebration of chamber-music intimacy and rhythmic vitality that Daisy recorded with violinist Mark Feldman during the Catalytic Sound Festival last October.

This concert introduces two new bands rooted in established relationships. The Tim Daisy 4tet provides an outlet for the drummer's compositions; inspired by the tuneful, impassioned performances that Don Cherry recorded for Blue Note in the 1960s, Daisy has devised open-ended themes to get the improvisation rolling. The combo renews Daisy's long-standing partnership with cornetist Josh

Berman and also includes two local musicians of a younger generation, tenor saxophonist Molly Jones and bassist Jakob Heineman. The trio *Birdwatchers* partners Daisy with two players who have histories with him but not with each other. Raconteur Marvin Tate once performed as a guest with Daisy's group, *Vox Arcana*, and Relay recently issued a decade-old concert recording by the drummer and the unstoppable Mars Williams, who typically plays an armful of saxophones and a table full of percussion, toys, and other sound-making objects. All three men are fearless improvisers, and they will use no prepared material for this set. —BILL MEYER

LYRA PRAMUK 8:30 PM, *Empty Bottle*, 1305 N. Western, \$20, \$18 in advance. 21+

Lyra Pramuk's music has a sparkingly ethereal, woodland quality—like disco meets *Midsommar* (minus any residual fascism). The Berlin-based artist was born in Pennsylvania and grew up singing in small-town church choirs. While going through the motions of performing as a boy content to sing religious songs in the round, she developed a rich, private online life where she explored the boundaries of her gender and sexual identity. The sense of creative freedom she found in the digital realm not only informs her music but also influenced her decision to transition in her 20s.

Coming out as trans, Pramuk wrestled with whether to start vocal therapy—a nonsurgical technique of training one's voice to better match expected characteristics of one's gender identity. Ultimately, she rejected learning to use her voice—which she'd already rigorously trained at the Eastman School of Music—in that new-to-her way. Instead, she began to play with ways of contextualizing, layering, and manipulating her vocal instrument to arrive at something feminine without surrendering to societal ideas of what femaleness has to be. Working in digital music let her explore the possibilities of the person she was becoming by cre-

ating songs that feel simultaneously organic and cybernetic. This is similar to how transition can be a negotiation with the binary of what's natural or artificial about gender, and with which object relationships determine how we approach those questions.

After graduating from Eastman in 2013, Pramuk moved to Germany and immersed herself in the European techno scene. There she found a new sense of ritual and communion that evoked social and creative aspects of her early religious experiences. She collapses these qualities back into her music, leaning heavily into chanting, repetition, and beats to create a sort of Gregorian rave sound. That crystallizes on her 2020 debut, *Fountain*, which consists completely of vocal tracks, many of them electronically reshaped. For the double-album remix project *Delta*, released in September, she invited a dozen artists, including Hudson Mohawke and Eris Drew, to have their way with tracks from *Fountain*—and in the process, they demonstrate how even familiar things can be reimagined to reveal new facets of beauty and humanity. —MICCO CAPORALE

MONDAY 31

DOGS AT LARGE *Baby Jesus Paper Boy* headlines; *Space Gators* and *Dogs at Large* open. 8:30 PM, *Empty Bottle*, 1305 N. Western. 21+ **FREE**

Since the mid-2010s, Chicago multi-instrumentalist Sam Pirruccello (aided by a shifting group of collaborators) has been releasing languid, Americana-inflected indie rock as *Dogs at Large*. In 1975, Pirruccello's father, Bo, and Bo's brother Frank (Pirruccello's uncle) cofounded the delightful country-rock band *Ouray*, and the music of *Dogs at Large* has a noticeable twang too. *Dogs at Large*'s sixth album, *My Epiphany* (which they self-released in December 2020), began as a series of demos Pirruccello worked out in isolation, and its homey, lo-fi intimacy mutes the usual country-rock influence. He eventually brought

in a few folks to flesh out the record—including longtime *Dogs at Large* collaborator Adam Gilmour—but it retains the feel of Pirruccello performing in a quiet, cozy space, adding a newfound warmth to *Dogs at Large*'s already inviting music. He recorded the album at home using a Tascam Portastudio, often in combination with a MacBook Air, and on songs such as "Shelter in Place" and "The Black Death" he employed synthetic percussion whose sound falls on the tasteful side of tinny. Pirruccello further explored his electronic experimentation with a project called *Lost Wages Sound*, a duo with Will Leemkuil that released a self-titled instrumental EP in December 2021. Its ambient soundscapes sometimes feel a little derivative, like beat-scene wallpaper, but the best of them carry the same gentle joys as Pirruccello's main musical concern. —LEOR GALIL

ALBUM REVIEWS

EARTHLESS, NIGHT PARADE OF ONE HUNDRED DEMONS
Nuclear Blast
earthlessofficial.com

Earthless started releasing anachronistic 40-minute jams steeped in 70s hard-rock riffing at a time in the early 2000s when spindly postpunk seemed to dominate the underground rock landscape. A new wave of psychedelic metal was also beginning to take shape, though, and the Southern California trio's studio debut, 2005's *Sonic Prayer*, opens with a track whose title references Japanese experimental psych act Flower Travellin' Band (even though the music sticks mainly to stoner-rock tropes). Isaiah Mitchell's guitar leads have featured prominently from the start, constituting this mostly instrumental group's raison d'être across almost half a dozen studio efforts, scattered live recordings, and collaborations with psych-rock peers such as San Diego's Harsh Toke and J. Mascis project *Heavy Blanket*.



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SATURDAY, MARCH 5 8PM

**Alasdair Fraser &
Natalie Haas** In Szold Hall

SUNDAY, MARCH 6 7PM

Jorma Kaukonen

THURSDAY, MARCH 10 8PM
THURSDAY, MARCH 11 8PM

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SATURDAY, MARCH 12 8PM

Mipso

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Silvana Estrada @HILDA PELLERANO



Kahil El'Zabar Quartet @CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

continued from 53

Earthless's latest album, *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons*, is a reaffirmation of values following 2018's *Black Heaven*, where they exerted their songwriting acumen and came up with a six-tune album centered on lyrics (according to press materials for *Night Parade*, the band did not enjoy the process too much). While *Night Parade* consists of two instrumental tunes—the extended two-part title track and a 20-minute closer—it also foregrounds a melodic sense drawn more from the metal world than from 70s rock. The title track starts with lambent noodling, takes a hard turn into a melodic plunge from Mitchell and a thudding breakdown from bassist Mike Eginton and drummer Mario Rubalcaba, then concludes with a triumphant major-chord theme that segues into a spacey jam that lasts about as long as all the other parts combined. The influence of Black Sabbath pervades each lurch and metallic gesture the band makes here, and the end of “Night Parade of One Hundred Demons (Part 2)” is basically Tony Iommi worship. It's long been a cliché for a stoner band to idolize Sabbath, but those dusty icons apparently still inspire engaging (if not revelatory) shredding from Earthless. —DAVE CANTOR

SILVANA ESTRADA, MARCHITA

Glassnote
glassnotemusic.com/artists/silvana-estrada

On her exquisite debut album, *Marchita*, Mexican singer-songwriter Silvana Estrada dissects the many bruised facets of a breakup in 11 intimate, elegant tunes. Estrada colors her compositions with her experiences growing up in a family of classical musicians and luthiers as well as her jazz studies at the University of Veracruz. On *Marchita*, she traces a line between those influences and iconic Latin American composers from the mid-20th century, including Chilean folk luminary Violeta Parra and Mexican songwriter María Grever (whose 1934 tune “Cuando Vuelva a Tu Lado” was rewritten with English lyrics and later popularized by Dinah Wash-

ington as “What a Difference a Day Makes” in 1959). Estrada has an impressive range as a singer, and while on *Marchita* she primarily accompanies herself on Venezuelan cuatro (a four-stringed instrument similar to a ukulele, but with a deeper sound), she also surrounds her crystalline, controlled voice with the warm sounds of cello, double bass, jarana, and the occasional saxophone. Estrada lays her emotions and angst bare in poetic lyrics deployed in delicate, fierce phrases that recall one of her favorite vocalists, Billie Holiday. Her delivery accentuates the raw romanticism of claiming the power a bereft lover still has after a breakup: admitting being vanquished without accepting defeat and treasuring scars as evidence of healing. On “Tristeza” she sings, “Sadness, I ask: How long must I wait until you understand that instead of crying, I sing?” While *Marchita* may be Estrada's first album, its maturity and assuredness speak volumes about her talent, and I can hardly wait to hear the music she comes up with next. Her upcoming show at Schubas is subject to the state of the pandemic, like so much else, but if all goes well she'll perform there on Wednesday, March 2. —CATALINA MARIA JOHNSON

KAHIL EL'ZABAR QUARTET, A TIME FOR HEALING

Spiritmuse
kahilelzabar-is.bandcamp.com

It's probably not possible to give a brief overview of Kahil El'Zabar's resumé—the Chicago jazz percussionist has been a crucial part of the city's musical heritage since he joined the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians at age 18 in the early 1970s. (He also served the AACM as its chairman for a few years beginning in 1975.) He's spent decades making high art that grips your body as well as your mind. His melodies swing between hypnotic and ecstatic, and I've often found myself bobbing to the rhythm of one of his spellbinding numbers without being able to recall the moment it cast its trancelike spell. El'Zabar attracts virtu-

osos too: on the new double LP *A Time for Healing* (Spiritmuse) he communes with gifted younger Chicagoans Justin Dillard (keys), Corey Wilkes (trumpet, bells), and Isaiah Collier (sax and other reeds). (Collier and his ensemble the Chosen Few issued an immersive spiritual-jazz album last May called *Cosmic Transitions*, and I suspect future generations will see it as influential.) El'Zabar handles the quartet's vocals, and among his many percussion instruments is the kalimba, aka mbira or thumb piano, whose delicate tones provide a guiding light on the somber “We'll Get Through This” and the sprightly “Urban Shaman.” On the humid “Drum Talk (Run'n in the Streets),” the pitter-patter rhythms of El'Zabar's hand percussion sashay around each other like a double helix—the state of hypnosis he sustains is a lot easier to feel than it is to describe. —LEOR GALIL

VIC SPENCER, SPENCER FOR HIGHER 4
Old Fart Luggage
vicspencer.bandcamp.com

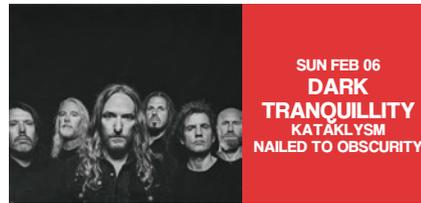
Chicago rapper Vic Spencer has built a catalog worthy of a book-length exposition, but for the time being I'll restrict myself to a handful of observations about December's *Spencer for Higher 4* (Old Fart Luggage). One: UK rapper-producer Sonnyjim, who had a hand in every beat on the album, employs sumptuous sonics that help even Spencer's most petulant turns go down easy and give his voluble verses a lived-in resplendence. Two: Spencer sometimes sounds like he's dragging his raps across sandpaper, a gritty affectation that gives his declarative statements an iron backbone. On “GS3 Pt. 4,” he puts it more succinctly: “I got the voice of a leader.” Three: A harmless feud can be fun, especially if it produces the kind of amusingly twisted verses Spencer rolls out on “Ex Biggest Supporters.” Four: Spencer demands a lot from his comrades in hip-hop, but that doesn't make him a hypocrite. He clearly demands just as much from himself, and I'm sure he'll keep holding himself to underground hip-hop's highest ideals on his next album too. —LEOR GALIL

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DORIAN ELECTRA
MY AGENDA WORLD TOUR

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ALIX PAGE

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SUNDAY FEB 20 / 7PM / 5+

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MADONNA /
HARRY CROSS

SATURDAY JAN 22
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JUAN MACLEAN

FRIDAY JAN 28
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DIZ / DJ HEATHER
WYSER

SATURDAY JAN 29
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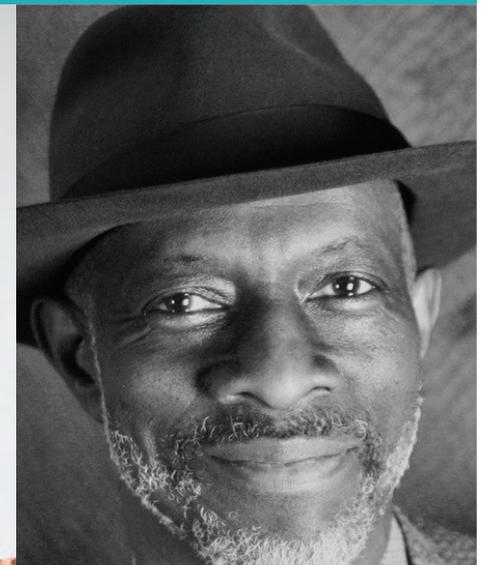
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Rodney Atkins & Rose Falcon 2/3, 8 PM, City Winery
Baile de los Enamorados featuring Gerardo Ortiz, La Fiera de Ojinaga, El Coyote, Alacranes Musical 2/12, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+
Bay Ledges 2/8, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Beatles Brunch featuring Phil Angotti and friends 2/20, noon; 3/20, noon, City Winery
Eric Bellinger, Sammie 3/24, 8 PM, Park West, 18+
Clint Black 3/18, 7 PM, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana, Gary
Black Veil Brides, Motionless in White, Ice Nine Kills 4/2, 6 PM, Aragon Ballroom
Cory Branan 2/4, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston,
Broods, Ella Vos 6/5, 8 PM, Park West, 18+
David Broza 2/9, 8 PM, City Winery
Budos Band, Billy Swivs 3/5, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Toranzo Cannon & the Chicago Way 2/18-2/19, 9 PM, Rosa's Lounge
Bruce Cockburn 3/10-3/11, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Joanna Connor 2/7, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Converge, Full of Hell, Uniform, Thou 3/19, 8 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
Cribs 2/10, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall
Daydream Review, Oux, Alaska Young 2/20, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Dayseeker, Holding Absence, Thornhill, Caskets 4/29, 6:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+

Iris DeMent 3/23, 7:30 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Don Broco 4/19, 7 PM, Metro, 18+
Charlotte Dos Santos 3/2, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Droeloe, Ford, Chuck Sutton 3/25, 8 PM, Concord Music Hall, 18+
Patrick Droney 2/20, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Eagles 3/19, 8 PM, United Center
Tinsley Ellis 3/13, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Elrow: Spring Edition 4/2, 7 PM, Radius Chicago
Equipment Pointed Ankh, Bob Frye's Exoplanet, Blue Lick 2/24, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Femdot, Alex Banin, Ohana Bam 3/11, 7 PM, Bottom Lounge
Fish Narc, Blackwinterwells, 8485 2/11, 6:30 PM, Subterranean
Flobots, Bonelang 3/20, 7 PM, Chop Shop, 18+
Fontaines D.C., Just Mustard 5/6, 8 PM, the Vic
Neil Frances, Luke Wild 2/18, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Alasdair Fraser & Natalie Haas 3/5, 8 PM, Szold Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Front Line Assembly, Rein 5/14, 9 PM, Metro, 18+
Fugees 3/2, 8 PM, United Center
The Funky Brunch presents the Magician 2/6, noon, Headquarters Beercade
Gaelic Storm 3/18-3/19, 9 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Gang of Youths 5/3, 8 PM, Metro, 18+
Geographer, Meija 3/29, 10 PM, Empty Bottle
Ghostly Kisses, Blake Ruby 2/13, 7:30 PM, Schubas, 18+
Greeting Committee 2/6, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+

Todrick Hall 4/3, 7 PM, House of Blues
Hanson 8/13, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom
Houndmouth, Ona 2/25-2/26, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Husbands, Dream Version 2/3, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+
Il Volo 3/30, 8 PM, Chicago Theatre
J. Worra, DJ Heather, Ekho 2/4, 10 PM, Prysm Nightclub
Jaewon, Ripley, Kasia 2/7, 8 PM, Schubas
Joan, Sawyer 2/22, 8 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Aaron Kamm & the One Drops 2/4, 9 PM, Schubas
Jorma Kaukonen 3/6, 7 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Kraftwerk 6/2, 8 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+
Leland Blue, Stay Outside, Weekend Run Club 2/9, 7 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Lil Durk 5/2, 8 PM, United Center
L'Imperatrice 4/11, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Little Simz 5/15, 7 PM, Metro
Lucius, Celisse 5/20, 8 PM, Riviera Theatre, 18+
Lunar Ticks, Zoofunkyou 2/4, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
Magdalena Bay, Cecile Believe 2/24, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Meute 3/31, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Microphones, Emily Sprague 3/2, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Mike 5/2, 6:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+
Mipso, Bella White 3/12, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Mr. Blotto 2/8, 8 PM, Reggies Music Joint
MØ 2/26, 6:30 PM, Concord Music Hall

Mogwai 4/12, 8 PM, Metro, 18+
Nella 2/7, 8 PM, City Winery
Nemr 2/4, 7 PM, City Winery
North Coast Music Festival featuring Armin Van Buuren, Illenium, Porter Robinson, Fisher, Gryffin, Jai Wolf, Seven Lions, Kaytranada, Slander, Tchami, Malaa, Svdden Death, Eptic, Cid, and more 9/2-9/4, 2 PM, SeatGeek Stadium, Bridgeview, 17+
Ocie Elliott 2/8, 7:30 PM, Schubas, 18+
Okey Dokey, Nordista Freeze 2/11, 8 PM, Schubas, 18+
Oktave featuring DJ Nobu, Jeff Derringer 2/11, 10 PM, Smart Bar
Ouray 2/10, 8 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Pablo Vittar, Alice Longyu Gao 4/25, 8 PM, Metro
Parkway Drive, Hatebreed, Black Dahlia Murder, Stick to Your Guns 5/25, 7 PM, Wintrust Arena
Pinksqueeze, Cut Your Losses, Boundary Waters 2/6, 8 PM, Beat Kitchen, 17+
A Place to Bury Strangers, Glove, Ganser 2/6, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Alfonso Ponticelli Trio 2/6, 7 PM, SPACE, Evanston
Porches 3/25, 8 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Rebellion, Denn, DJ Mackle 7/22, 8:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+
Red, Keith Wallen 2/9, 8 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Rezz, A Hundred Drums 2/19, 7 PM, Navy Pier, 18+
Olivia Rodrigo, Gracie Abrams 4/15-4/16, 8 PM, Aragon Ballroom
Claire Rosinkranz, Aidan Bissett 3/3, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge
Saba, Lute, Amindi 5/5, 6:30 PM, Aragon Ballroom, 17+
SamaSama Project 2/23, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Serpentwithfeet, Apollo Mighty 2/22, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Sevendust, Tetrarch, Dead Poet Society 3/23, 7 PM, House of Blues, 17+
Shame, They Hate Change 2/23, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Short Fictions, Your Arms Are My Cocoon, Mush 2/5, 8 PM, Schubas
Slenderbodies, Mokita 2/17, 8:30 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
Solo the Dweeb, Dial Up 2/10, 7 PM, Subterranean, 17+
Son Lux, Kiah Victoria 6/3, 9 PM, Metro, 18+
Chris Stapleton, Highwomen, Mavis Staples, Dirty Knobs with Mike Campbell 7/23, 4 PM, Wrigley Field
Static-X, Fear Factory, Dope, Twiztid, Cultus Black 3/26, 5:30 PM, House of Blues

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Subtronics, 12th Planet, Riot Ten, Boogie T, Dirt Monkey 3/19, 5 PM, Navy Pier, 18+
Suffocation, Atheist, Soreption, Contrarian 5/29, 6:30 PM, Reggies Rock Club, 17+
Surfbort, Pussy Gillette, Mz Neon 2/25, 10 PM, Empty Bottle
Sweet Cobra, Birdhands, Documa 2/10, 10 PM, Empty Bottle
Taylor Fest (Taylor Swift tribute party) 2/4-2/5, 9 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
10 Years, Black Map, Vrsty 4/24, 7:30 PM, Bottom Lounge, 17+
10,000 Maniacs featuring Mary Ramsey 2/10-2/11, 8 PM, 2/12, 5 and 8 PM, City Winery
Tukkiman 3/9, 8:30 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Tvinn, Levity, Tazu 3/4, 9:15 PM, Chop Shop, 18+
The Warehouse Initiative presents Marco Carola 2/12, 10 PM, Cermak Hall at Radius Chicago, 18+
Waxahatchee, Madi Diaz 2/20-2/21, 8:30 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Way Down Wanderers, Railway Gamblers 2/12, 9 PM, Lincoln Hall, 18+
We Are Scientists 2/5, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Wet Leg 3/4, 9 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
John Paul White, Parker Millsap 3/4, 8 PM, Maurer Hall, Old Town School of Folk Music
Kamaal Williams, Isaiah Collier & the Chosen Few 2/3, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle
Henry Wu, Jitwam, Leja Hazer Yola, Jac Ross 2/17, 8 PM, Thalia Hall, 17+
Young Man in a Hurry, Otherpeace 2/10, 7:30 PM, Schubas, 18+
Zac Brown Band, Robert Randolph Band 7/9, 4 PM, Wrigley Field
Zombi 2/19, 8:30 PM, Empty Bottle

UPDATED

DaBaby 2/17, 7 PM, Aragon Ballroom, canceled
Cody Johnson, Ian Munsick 2/3, 9:30 PM, Riviera Theatre, canceled
Luis Vasquez 2/4, 10 PM, Empty Bottle, canceled



GOSSIP WOLF

A furry ear to the ground of the local music scene

GOSSIP WOLF HAS YET to hear a note from **Honestly Same**, but the temptation is strong to refer to the five-piece improvising collective as a supergroup—kind of like Temple of the Dog for the local new-music scene! The quintet is packed with big-time talent: percussionist **Samuel Scranton** (half of the duo Beautifulish), synthesizer player **Zach Moore** (part of Mocrep and cofounder of Parlour Tapes), pianist **Mabel Kwan** (a member of Ensemble dal Niente), clarinetist **Zachary Good** (part of ZRL, Mocrep, and Eighth Blackbird), and cellist **Lia Kohl** (also from ZRL and Mocrep). In 2020, Good and Kohl released the Parlour Tapes duet *Standing Lenticular*, one of the year's most intense drone albums. **Honestly Same** call their music “patient and contemplative,” and on Thursday, January 20, they debut live at **Constellation** on a bill with Forest Management. The venue will also livestream the show via its YouTube page.

On his October 2021 release, **Easy Has Never Been the Way**, Chicago singer-songwriter **Peter Joly** sets his plaintive vocals and alluring melodies to folksy, front-porch instrumentation that should appeal to fans of such legendary storytellers as John Prine and Loudon Wainwright III. On Saturday, January 22, Joly and his group will play a free show on the **Fitz-Gerald's Sidebar** stage at 9 PM.

On Sunday, Chicago indie-rock duo **Orisun**—multi-instrumentalist **Kai Black** and front person **Asha Adisa**—dropped a two-track EP called **All Gender Bathroom**, whose lo-fi charm gets an extra bump from Adisa's cool-and-collected singing. “SIM” combines frothy keys, echoing vocals, and guitars that toggle between fuzzy and piercing; “Fortitude” draws its power from a rhythmic guitar pattern thrumming with feedback. **Gossip Wolf** suspects **Orisun** will play the songs from *All Gender Bathroom* when they headline the **Hideout** on Tuesday, February 15; tickets cost \$12 and the show starts at 9:30 PM. —**J.R. NELSON AND LEOR GALIL**

Got a tip? Tweet @Gossip_Wolf or e-mail gossipwolf@chicagoreader.com.

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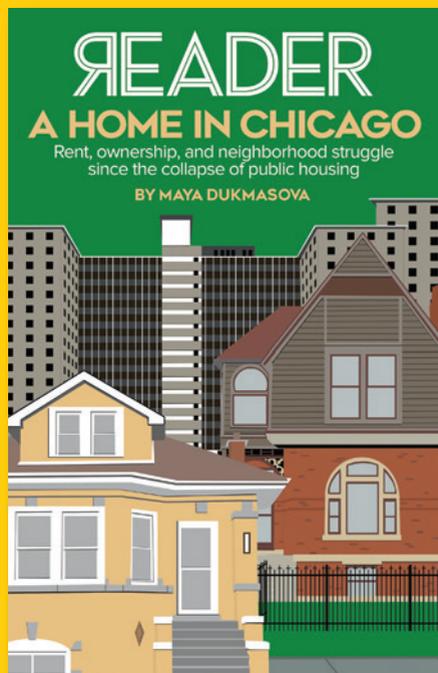


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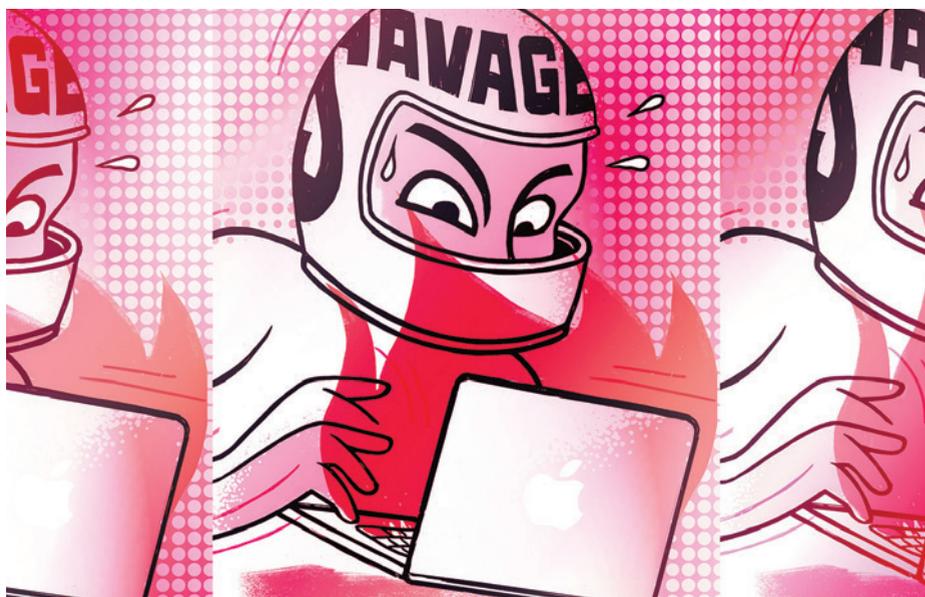
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SAVAGE LOVE

Bi for spankings

Plus, revisiting AJ, UNCUT, and SADSON

By DAN SAVAGE

Q: I have wanted to be spanked by older men. Does this make any sense? Because I'm confused. I don't like or want penis. Yet I want to be spanked as a punishment by men. I don't understand myself sometimes. —**SINCERELY PONDERING AND NOT KNOWING**

A: The truly important question here isn't why you want this, SPANK, but how much more time you're gonna waste sitting on your ass wondering why you want this when you could be out there getting that ass spanked? And even if you came up with a neat and tidy answer, you're still gonna want older men to spank you. Because getting to the bottom of a kink—identifying some childhood trauma that explains everything—isn't a cure. Instead of seeing the spankings you want as a riddle you need to solve, you

should see them as a reward for all the wondering you've had to do. If you need a label, SPANK, just say you're bisexual for spankings. Not bi for blowjobs, not bi for anal, not bi for JO or mutual masturbation. Just bi for spankings.

Q: I'm hoping to get an objective POV on something. I'm a 31-year-old male bottom. I have been in an open relationship with an amazing 31-year-old male top for 12 years. One year ago I started to suffer some gender dysphoria. At roughly the same time he expressed a desire to be topped. I never had any desire to top someone, I've never even felt that male urge to thrust my hips, but I hate that I've let my BF down. I can do this, but only with the help of ED meds. How can I get some pleasure out of it? —**TOPPING BURDEN**

A: You could penetrate your BF with toys, or you could take one (or give one) for the team once in a while (by taking ED meds and topping him), or your boyfriend could bottom for other men, seeing as your relationship is already open. Or all of the above. And if it's the thrusting and/or being in control that turns you off (or tweaks your gender dysphoria), take an ED med and let your boyfriend ride your hard dick—then instead of you fucking him, he'll be fucking himself. Power bottom, sub top!

Q: I'm wondering how AJ, the FinDom you quoted at length in your most recent column, wound up on your radar and getting what amounted to free advertising in your column. You said he lives in the Pacific Northwest. Isn't that where you live, Dan? And you said his bathroom is

JOE NEWTON

always spotlessly clean. How would you know that? Are you in his bathroom? —**DAN'S ETHICS ARE LACKING**

A: I've never met AJ in person, there's more than one city in the Pacific Northwest (and we don't live in the same one), and I found AJ looking for gay FinDoms on Twitter who might want to answer CASHFAG's question. That said, DEAL, while I'm far too cheap to be anyone's FinSub (or their sugar daddy, for that matter), I do enjoy cleaning bathrooms—but not in a pervy way. I enjoy cleaning bathrooms in an eat-an-edible-and-listen-to-musicals-and-zone-out-doing-housework-while-the-husband-and-his-boyfriend-are-at-the-gym sort of way. So, while I wouldn't necessarily say no to cleaning AJ's bathroom, I haven't been asked, DEAL, and consequently haven't had the pleasure.

Q: This is about your recent response to UNCUT, the guy who met men who believed they were uncut when they were very much cut. You suggested that these men were lying about being uncircumcised. But not knowing might be more common than we assume. This is from *Epidemiology*, the authoritative textbook written by Leon Gordis of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health: "They asked a group of men whether or not they had been circumcised. The men were then examined by a physician. Of the 56 men who stated they were circumcised, 19, or 33.9 percent, were found to be uncircumcised. Of the 136 men who stated they were not circumcised, 47,

or 34.6 percent were found to be circumcised. These data demonstrate that the findings from studies using interview data may not always be clear-cut." —**SOME TRULY ARE THROWN**

A: While it's true that men lie to prospective sex partners all the time—and, yes, #NotAllMen and #SomeWomenToo—it turns out that men may not be lying about this. In addition to the textbook example you shared, STAT, other readers sent along a clip of Patrick Stewart on *The Graham Norton Show*. In it, Stewart tells Norton he got into an argument with his wife about his dick one day. He insisted he was circumcised, she insisted he was not. Stewart, who thought he knew his own dick, followed up with his doctor and it turned out his wife, who may have had a larger frame of reference, was correct: contrary to what Stewart believed about his own dick, he was not circumcised as an infant or at any time in his life. The clip, which is easy to find on YouTube (and very funny), is yet more evidence—*anecdotal*, in Stewart's case—that some men don't know from their own dicks.

Q: In your reply to SADSON, you are clearly taking sides based on how comfortable you must be about withholding the truth from a partner. You say the father should have "kept his mouth shut" about the affair he had! You know nothing about this couple's values and decisions! Who are you to push your views on others? Many of us consider lying about cheating reprehensible! And the last sentence of your response ("I hope there were other women") was astonishingly juvenile, mean-spirited, and vindictive—and for what reason? To take sides against a clearly tormented

heterosexual woman! Disgusting and shameful! —**THOROUGHLY APPALLING TAKE ENRAGES READER**

A: This is an advice column, TATER. People send in questions; I answer those questions. So, I'm not pushing my views on anyone here. I'm sharing my views. That's literally my job. And I'm not the first advice columnist to urge a cheater to withhold the truth from a partner: "The adulterer who wants to 'set everything right' by telling all would be better advised to keep his mouth shut and work out his guilt by behaving in a more thoughtful, loving, considerate way and stay out of other beds in the future." That's from *The Ann Landers Encyclopedia*, which was published in 1978. (Ann assumes all adulterers are male; I guess she could also be accused of "taking sides.") In the case of SADSON's parents, TATER, don't you think SADSON's mom would've been happier if her husband had taken Ann Landers's advice and kept his fucking mouth shut? Instead, SADSON's dad told SADSON's mom about the affair he'd had a decade after it was over. So, it wasn't the affair that tormented SADSON's mom, but knowing about it. As for my snarky postscript ("I hope there were other women"), SADSON's mom has made her husband's life a daily living hell for 30 years. Why? Because he fucked somebody else 40 years ago. I don't know about you, TATER, but I think the punishment should fit the crime. And there's only one way that's possible here: more crimes, lots of crimes, so many crimes. ☒

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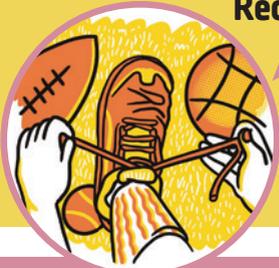
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