



The Storefront Project: Toward a Revised Category of "Chicago Theatre"

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The identity of Chicago theatre has long has been entwined with the unexpected spaces in which it has historically occurred, and the social structures within which it has been embedded. At whatever storied point along the Chicago theatre timeline one stops – community-based performances at Hull House in the early 20th century, the birth of modern sketch and improv comedy in a Hyde Park barroom in the late 1950s, an ensemble of young people in the 1970s making bare bones theatre in a church basement who rocketed to national attention and founded a major cultural institution, the flowering of large-scale puppet spectacle in the streets during the 1990s – Chicago theatre is usually making use of spaces not designed as theaters to make work that responds to the limits and possibilities those spaces present, physically, culturally, and aesthetically. Some historically and aesthetically bounded examples of this approach have been codified under the narrow label “Chicago storefront theatre,” which is identified with certain groups and individuals in particular places at a specific moment in time.

By reputation, the definition of Chicago storefront theatre defaults to dramatic minimalism and strong authorial control, verisimilitude produced by intimate environs and the charismatic presence of unvarnished performers in close proximity, and to channeling the sublimated aggression associated with straight white male working class experience, which the bare bones, reclaimed performance venues tended to evoke. The standard story behind this aesthetic category has it that small bands of independent artists taking over disused commercial spaces in the 1960s and 70s forged a unique brand of social realist drama rooted in the material and historical facts of their physical surroundings. These stripped-down storefronts imparted a kind of raw honesty about the urban environment, sometimes reinforced by nearby ‘L’ trains literally rattling theater seats as they went by. The environmental aesthetics were echoed in rough, strategically inarticulate language, stories rooted in commerce, crime, and dysfunctional family life, and spatial dynamics that felt plucked from the seemingly identical storefronts across the street, the apartments upstairs, or the street outside the makeshift theatre.

That intimacy has been attributed to the close quarters that empty storefronts and other informal spaces provided, in which small gestures and ordinary speaking voices could read to an entire audience. Those non-traditional venues were made available in part by the recession that began in the US in 1973, and became more easily usable as ad hoc performance spaces starting in 1974, when artists from Chicago’s burgeoning independent theatre scene successfully lobbied the city to change fire codes that, following the Iroquois Theater fire of 1903, had previously sanctioned only purpose-built theaters with proscenium stages and fire

curtains. As it happened, though, the resulting uninflected, vernacular style developed in these marginal spaces merged seamlessly with the media landscape and the dominant aesthetics in film and television at the time. The social consciousness of the 1960s had given portrayals of apparently “real,” preferably marginal, societal contexts mainstream appeal. With the ability to at once bring cameras and microphones closer to performers in real, often “gritty,” urban locations, rather than on constructed sets, an aesthetic sensibility aligned, by reputation at least, with Chicago-style storefront theatre made its way into a default conception of what dramatic realism would look like in the US, then and still now.

Yet as influential as many of the performances that established the Chicago storefront template may have been, that template has never described the totality or diversity of Chicago’s performance scene. Rather, what became branded, thanks to celebrity and wide circulation in adjacent media, “the Chicago storefront aesthetic” actually describes only a small subset of Chicago’s performance culture, one that has come to obscure a much longer and more diverse lineage of theatrical practice in Chicago. That lineage winds through the 20th century and beyond, across disciplinary and aesthetic lines, and between communities defined by economic, ethnic, and racial marginalization.

Far from the sole example of Chicago’s unique artistic tendencies, the so-called storefront aesthetic can itself be understood as part of the deeper and wider history of Chicago theatre, within which aesthetic markers take a backseat to the shared structural logics that have motivated and organized theatre here for well over a century. Grassroots conversions of non-theater spaces, reliance on ensemble to make and maintain both the work and the institutions that house and support that work, and populist, working-class perspectives all bind the iconic storefront theatre movement of the 1970s to the long-established history of community-based and collectively-driven theatre making in Chicago, and to the improvised spaces and organizational structures on which that tradition has always relied. Regardless of the marquee successes of the occasional Second City, Steppenwolf, or Lookingglass, Chicago theatre is defined by grassroots institution building, and the long-term maintenance of those institutions, even when, by design or otherwise, they do not grow in scale. This represents a civic orientation in Chicago that sees performance training, experimentation, and presentation along a practical, integrated continuum of local community engagement that cannot be easily separated from its status as “high art.”

In part because of the conflation of independent performance in Chicago with the bounded set of approaches and time period associated with the storefront theatre aesthetic, Chicago’s fringe and alternative performance history has usually been considered distinct from, even unrelated to, the postwar New York avant-garde. As with most arts disciplines, the performance experimentation that occurred in downtown Manhattan during the 1960s and 70s, the same period usually identified with the birth of the storefront theatre movement, has so completely come to stand for the artistic innovations of the time that any developments elsewhere are assumed to have either occurred under the direct influence of the New York avant-garde’s extended reputation, or to be advancing vaguely regressive, provincial attitudes toward theatre

and performance not relevant to the latest activities. Either way, this view often presupposes the irrelevance of engaging contemporary performance movements and histories that did not originate in New York, as it is assumed they will either too closely resemble or else completely fail to respond to the latest developments coming from a few square block in Lower Manhattan.

Under these exceptionalist circumstances, New York performance of the 1960s and 70s has developed into a particularly influential hybrid genre (or genres), variously comprised of aspects of theatre, dance, visual arts, poetry, musical composition, and a wide range of intermedia, ritual, and quotidian activities. Though developed in the particular context of the downtown cultural upheaval of the time, the resulting performance formations, together with some more or less contemporaneous developments from Europe, have since come to form the basis of a distinct set of approaches promulgated through an international network of institutional hubs for teaching and showcasing contemporary performance. These are often associated with universities and art museums, and are generally understood to be distinct from and operating outside the institution of theatre as it is currently understood and practiced in the U.S. So, the storefront theatre aesthetic represents at once a historically marginalized, hyperlocal, theatrical vanguard, and a key ingredient in the construction of mainstream theatrical and cinematic realism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Downtown New York experimentalism, on the other hand, remains both the only significant instance of an artistic avant-garde in the U.S. on which there has been anything like consensus, while also setting the terms and framework for a globalized set of performance aesthetics that have, of necessity, become more or less detached from specific locations or communities.

Considering this background, the two institutions instigating The Storefront Project – Prop Thtr and MCA Chicago – would seem to sit at opposite poles in Chicago’s performance ecology. The Prop is a longstanding staple of Chicago’s fringe, hopping from storefront to storefront while maintaining a rather protean artistic profile over the course of nearly forty years. In its time, The Prop has produced everything from world premier English translations of Brecht to a blockbuster nostalgia-tinged one-person show about Chicago’s former Mayor Richard J. Daley. For the last 15 years it has occupied a more permanent home in a linked pair of former storefronts on a relatively unassuming stretch of Elston Avenue in the only-recently gentrifying Avondale neighborhood. With two black boxes plus gallery and rehearsal space across the two buildings, Prop has also often been able to offer shelter to other companies and artists as renters or presenting partners, including hosting and co-producing for the last decade or so the Rhinoceros Theatre Festival, Chicago’s oldest (and currently only) fringe theatre festival, organized by Prop’s frequent partner company, Curious Theatre Branch.

The MCA Stage, meanwhile, has over the last 25 years or so become Chicago’s primary stop on the global contemporary performance touring circuit that the New York avant-garde gave birth to and relies on, making it the main point of contact between Chicago audiences and the performances that are setting critical and creative agendas nationally and internationally. The MCA does maintain a commitment to regularly presenting work being made in Chicago by Chicago artists and ensembles (including at least one prior intersection with the Prop as part of

a 2006 commemoration of Samuel Beckett's centennial, organized with Curious Theatre Branch, which featured "a multiplicity of kinetic site-specific performances in the hidden corners of the MCA, including the galleries, stairwells, and even the freight elevator," a description that might have a familiar ring to it.) Nonetheless, it would be unusual to think of the MCA and The Prop – or most Chicago storefronts, whatever their aesthetic profile – together. That is not necessarily a bad thing; institutions can be complementary without necessarily being similar. The Prop would be a good place to encounter a particularly eclectic array of performance work, all deeply embedded in Chicago's creative community, while the MCA provides a key portal to the kind of high-level, interdisciplinary, experimental performance being seen, discussed, and funded in the wider self-identified performance world.

With The Storefront Project, though, Olivia Lilley and Tara Aisha Willis have made the simple yet surprisingly audacious move to see past the established habits and assumptions of history, and to jointly create a platform for performance that circumvents default associations with their home institutions, instead highlighting the broad spectrum of aesthetic and procedural approaches that can be found in Chicago's performance communities. Both are young independent artists occupying relatively new leadership roles at the Prop and MCA Stage, respectively, very different institutions each with a long history and entrenched narrative about its place in Chicago's arts ecosystem. Together, Lilley and Willis are using the respective resources of their institutions to present new work in ways that center difference – individual, institutional, architectural, geographical, aesthetic – and to emphasize collective processes of theatrical creation. The history of Chicago theatre and performance they are summoning is one that we are only now beginning to be able to remember, one that looks and feels much more like the city in which we live. The artists they have invited to helm the six new devised works that comprise The Storefront Project include individuals with very different creative and personal profiles, cutting across age, identity, and artistic background, who nonetheless each represent an authentic example of a Chicago theatre and performance artist.

Lilley and Willis have given them each a structure and a set of constraints that seem designed to emphasize some of the most familiar and celebrated aspects of Chicago theatre, but that push those signature elements toward more fully realized applications of ensemble creation, intimate spatial relationships that integrate physical and social environments, and inventive adaptations in response to repurposed performance spaces and contexts. These six newly commissioned works not only had to be designed for nontraditional performance spaces outside the two theaters' formal stages, but also crucially to move between the very different institutional contexts of the Prop and the MCA. While that pairing in particular may not describe a common circuit, it does approximate the opportunities presented and the adaptations required in the professional lives of these artists, each of whom moves between the theatrical mainstream and the fringe, allocating their time and resources between big cultural or educational institutions and itinerant independent ensembles. These artists make work in storefronts, of course, but also in state of the art theaters, and in nightclubs, park district buildings, and church basements,

building on the nimble and resourceful tradition of Chicago theatre, while always striving to make something entirely new.

Under the guidance of the lead artist, each of these works has been made collectively, not from a script by a single author, but by excavating historical materials and identifying source texts in the public domain through shared devising processes. Those source materials include turn of last century advertisements, obituaries and Instagram accounts, literary fiction, biography, popular song, and personal diaries. Though the role of the author is reimagined, the primacy of language remains. Subject matter includes anti-lynching campaigns, historical trans experience, mental health and creativity, and Karl Lagerfeld's cat, representing perspectives on race, gender, sexuality, disability, and popular culture that may be deeply personal, but are also always publicly oriented, shared, and collectively held. The results promise original works that make theatre out of non-dramatic texts in non-traditional performance spaces, while also explicitly building on the long history of theatre in Chicago, and the institutional structures co-created by Chicago artists across time. At the same time, they offer a glimpse into the material realities of the lives of working theatre artists in Chicago now, as they negotiate increased economic precarity, shifting institutional and geographic configurations, relationships with presenting partners, the transitory community of collaborative ensembles, and the complex inheritances of Chicago's performance history.

At stake is the question, perhaps more critical now than ever, of just who is being talked about in discussions of "our community" or "our history"? Who does that include and who does it leave out? As Coya Paz, one of the directors included in this project, recently wrote together with her co-author Chloe Johnston in *Ensemble-Made Chicago* (Northwestern UP, 2019), their survey of the creative practices of fifteen Chicago devising ensembles, "Chicago is a city where a variety of cultural practice and traditions converge, and many . . . companies . . . honor performance traditions that are more likely to be ignored in discussions of what constitutes American, or Chicago, theater." (xv) Like Paz and Johnston's book, this project invites audiences and artists alike to participate in expanding and reimagining the dimensions of what Chicago, and maybe American, performance can be. It is an opportunity to remember that performance in Chicago is not defined by its aesthetic limitations, but by an awareness of physical space and institutional structures, by the communal processes through which work is created, and by the communities it is created with, for, and by. As configured by Lilley and Willis, Chicago theatre is defined by a fundamental commitment to eclecticism, to difference as a strength, and to forging new, seemingly incongruous connections across space and time.

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