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Chay Yew, Ian Damont Martin, Lisa Portes, Anna D. Shapiro, Lili-Anne Brown, and Robert Falls at Steppenwolf's Front Bar. (Photo by Michael Brosilow for American Theatre)

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Direct From Chicago

A town known for tight acting ensembles and distinctive writers may have another ace in the hole: its directors.

BY KERRY REID

This story is part of a package of stories on Chicago theatre. For more, go [here](#).

Lisa Portes wants everyone to know one thing: Chicago may be famous for its devotion to the ensemble company model and (increasingly) for the playwrights who cut their teeth in our storefront scene before moving on to regional and Broadway productions (not to mention Hollywood writers' rooms). But it's a directors' town, too. Or at least it's "a fantastic town for directors to develop, hone, and even transform their work over time," as Portes puts it.

Portes is seated at a table by the window in Steppenwolf's Front Bar, and her eyes sparkle as she hands me a list she scribbled out just before our meeting. It's a who's who of Chicago stage directors, broken down in categories that run from the nationally recognized (Goodman's Robert Falls, David Cromer of *The Band's Visit*, who lives in New York now but frequently returns to his hometown, Steppenwolf artistic director Anna D. Shapiro), to those whose national profile is growing (Lili-Anne Brown, Marti Lyons, Sean Graney) to those who moved here after establishing national reputations (including Chay Yew, artistic director of Victory Gardens), to those who are just beginning to break out (Monty Cole, Regina Victor). There are more than 60 names on the list, which concludes with an apologetic note, "And I'm still missing SO MANY!"

Evangelical fervor about the state of directing in Chicago is arguably part of Portes's job description: After all, she is head of the directing program at the Theatre School at DePaul University, as well as an in-demand director at regional theatres in and out of town. But, as she points out, getting good as a director takes more than solid academic training.

"Directors practice in public," she says. "We don't write drafts, we can't go practice in a class. The only way we practice is in production, and it's production after production after production. For a number of reasons—actually five specific reasons—directors get to production quickly in Chicago."

Being an ensemble town is one of those reasons. The university theatre programs in Chicago—including DePaul, Northwestern, Columbia College Chicago (my alma mater, where Cromer and Shapiro were my classmates in undergrad), Loyola, University of Illinois at Chicago, and Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts (like the The-

atre School, a conservatory-based program) foster the creation of ensembles post-graduation. “And each of those ensembles has a season of one, three, five plays or productions. And each of those productions needs a director,” notes Portes.

And—the second reason—those are *productions*, not workshops or readings. As Portes puts it, “In New York, for example, as a young director, you might be directing readings and workshops for years before anybody hands you the keys to the car. In Chicago it’s a different story, again, partly because actors want to act.”



Lisa Portes in rehearsal.

Reason three, and this is music to the ears of a theatre critic: Portes maintains that as the Chicago stage scene grew and changed over the years, “The critical community arose with it.” Directors, playwrights, and ensembles who are just starting out can get reviews right out of the gate. The relationship with critics can sometimes be contentious, as Portes notes. (Her staging of Kevin Coval and Idris Goodwin’s play about graffiti artists, *This Is Modern Art* with the Steppenwolf for Young Adults program in 2015, set off one of many uproars around former *Sun-Times* critic [Hedy Weiss](#).) But Portes notes that critics in Chicago tend to follow artists over the long haul, and don’t write them off after one “little stinker.”

Which leads to the fourth reason: the “permission to fail” that theatre artists have in Chicago, where even a bad review from the *Chicago Tribune* won’t necessarily kill a show, or a career. And that, Portes concludes, dovetails with the fifth reason: responsive audiences.

“Chicago has an audience that supports at least three flagship theatres, at least half a dozen midsize theatres, and more off-Loop and storefront theatres than I think all the other theatre towns combined,” Portes maintains. (The [League of Chicago Theatres](#) currently lists around 200 members; there are also companies in Chicago who are not League mem-

bers.) That mixed ecology allows directors to work with a great deal of fluidity, moving from smaller to larger stages and back again, in a way that Portes says reminds her more of London than New York.



Director Robert Falls, center, with Nathan Lane and Brian Dennehy in rehearsal for “*The Iceman Cometh*.” (Photo by Liz Lauren)

A View From the Flagship

“I don’t quite know what it means that Chicago is a director’s city, other than the fact that there are a lot of really great directors here,” says Robert Falls with a laugh. Falls has been artistic director at the Goodman since 1986, after making his bones with the long-defunct Wisdom Bridge Theatre with groundbreaking productions of *Hamlet* and *In the Belly of the Beast*. But he acknowledges that the long-held perception of the Goodman as a “director’s theatre”—whereas Steppenwolf, by contrast, was long considered the premier actors’ the-

atre in town and Victory Gardens was noted for its playwrights' ensemble—has some merit.

It's something the company fosters today through the [Michael Maggio Directing Fellowship](#), named in honor of the Goodman's late associate artistic director, who died in 2000. The program provides early-career Chicago directors with a year-long stipend, an assistant directing role on a Goodman production, and "the chance to become involved in the ongoing artistic life of the Goodman." Those who have participated include [Joanie Schultz](#), who just returned to Chicago after a two-year stint as artistic director for Water-Tower Theatre in suburban Dallas, and Erica Weiss, who co-created the eight-episode, shot-in-Chicago CBS series "The Red Line" this past year with her longtime collaborator Caitlin Montanye Parrish, and also staged Rebecca Gilman's *Twilight Bowl* on the Goodman's smaller Owen stage. This year's Maggio Fellow, Sydney Chatman, comes to the Goodman from her own company, the [Tofu Chitlin' Circuit](#), where she wrote and directed the well-received *Black Girls (Can) Fly!*

Falls adds, "It does always seem to me that in Chicago directors make their mark, if not by starting their own companies, then by having long associations with companies that do a certain kind of work." He notes that, in the case of Cromer, for instance, that early mark came in the form of reimagining mid-20th-century American classics, whereas [Mary Zimmerman](#)'s career-making calling card was staging non-theatrical works of literature, often of an epic nature.

One recurring theme: Directors who've stood out have largely made their own work rather than waiting to get hired. "You know, in a way it's very hard for a young director to get a job in the city of Chicago. There are a lot of wonderful directors, but how you break out of the pack—that's a really interesting, difficult question.

"When I came to the Goodman I was really ready to burst the seams doing big work," says Falls. "And what's interesting is very few directors even now get a chance to burst through and do really, really big work." The result is that directors in Chicago who start out in the storefront scene learn to do "really gorgeous work with very little resources."

Learning to do that, though, can be its own kind of natural resource. “I sort of say, take advantage of what Chicago is best known for, which is actors and acting and plays, and find a company,” Falls advises. “What I say to directors is: Get to know every theatre company that interests you in town and even the ones that don’t interest you. I also say the biggest entrée, and this has been true throughout my entire career, is for a director to be affiliated with a playwright.”



Chay Yew, right, in rehearsal with Sandra Oh on “Death and the Maiden.” (Photo by Michael Courier)

Cracking the Closed Shop

Chay Yew has been a playwright, director, and, since 2011, the artistic director for Victory Gardens Theater, which has long been dedicated to fostering new plays. The company be-

gan the [Directors Inclusion Initiative](#) in 2015, aimed at supporting directors who identify as disabled, women, transgender, gender non-conforming, and people of color. Those selected serve as assistant directors on Victory Gardens productions throughout the season.

“I would say, before I came to Chicago, Chicago was a closed shop,” says Yew. “It was the only city where I could never get work [as a director]. Chicago basically has its own community. I would work coast to coast everywhere else, but rarely would I or other people [outside Chicago] get a call to work in Chicago.” Yew’s associations with Asian and Latinx playwrights did help get him some of his initial gigs in town, with Northlight and the Goodman, before he took over at Victory Gardens.

“There is a huge community of artists in Chicago, and we need to give them homes,” he acknowledges. “We need to develop them at all stages until they actually direct outside of Chicago, which is one of my major goals. There is a pipeline here of directors coming out of schools and people coming into town from the Midwest, seeing how many theatres we have. The opportunity for any director to do their craft is immense.”

In many cases, doing that craft leads to directors in Chicago starting their own companies. (Graney, who founded and served as artistic director of the Hypocrites for 20 years, is a prime example.) But that can unintentionally reinforce the sense of insularity and lack of diversity, as Yew observes.

“If people aren’t hiring people outside their own ensembles, because it’s a closed shop, it’s a neighborhood, what am I supposed to do? Segregation begets segregation. It’s part of the DNA of the city.” In practical terms, Yew says, “It’s a city of wonderful neighborhoods and it’s also a city of wonderful ensembles. As an outsider coming in, I always wished there were more collaborations among ensembles, because ensembles can learn from each other. I think it’s slowly happening. Artists are now jumping around. Less than 10 years ago, some directors never worked outside their own ensembles. You’re building your own prison; if you keep directing within your own ensemble, your tools will be the same.”

The idea of Chicago as a “closed shop” is certainly not limited to theatre. As Andrew J. Dia-

mond put it in his 2017 book, *Chicago on the Make: Power and Inequality in a Modern City*, Chicago can feel like “Manhattan smashed against Detroit”—the result of decades of racist policies that enforced segregation and deliberately underfunded communities of color in favor of white neighborhoods.

Segregation in Chicago also plays out culturally, with artistic organizations on the South Side routinely struggling to get the same access to funding and mainstream media attention that their North Side counterparts receive. Yew notes that there is also an imbalance at theatres, with white directors still receiving more opportunities to direct works by playwrights of color than vice versa.

But Yew notes an increasing willingness on the part of Chicago theatres to reflect on segregation inside and outside their own community. He relates that to the most important tool needed for a director, particularly of new work. “Are you listening? Directors are not the originators of work. We are interpreters. If you start saying, ‘This is the way it should be done’ about a play whose culture doesn’t belong to you, you’re being colonialist. Are you willing to say, ‘I don’t know’ and learn?”

Yew sees Victory Gardens as “a conduit for a storefront director to go to the Goodman and to the Public Theater [in NYC].” Yew also scopes out talent by frequenting Chicago’s many storefront scenes, because otherwise, he feels, the scene “becomes ghettoized and the directors who direct in those small theatres never get a chance to do something really big or interesting or different in the bigger theatres and grow as artists.”



Anna D. Shapiro in rehearsal for "Mary Page Marlowe" at Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

From Storefront to Steppenwolf

Anna D. Shapiro, who has been associated with Steppenwolf Theatre since 1995, was named artistic director in 2015, and still teaches directing in the MFA program at Northwestern University, calls me from New York. She's about to head into choreography rehearsals for *The Devil Wears Prada*, the new musical (based on the popular novel and film) created by Elton John, Shaina Taub, and Paul Rudnick, which will bow in Chicago next summer en route to Broadway. But she still seems surprised that her career path has followed this trajectory.

Reminiscing about our time studying with the late [Sheldon Patinkin](#) at Columbia College, Shapiro asks, "Do you ever remember us talking about our career? Did you ever remember

us sitting around and figuring out the arc of anything?” She credits the relative economic viability of the Chicago theatre scene in the late 1980s and early '90s with helping her hone her craft. She and Cromer joined forces to run the storefront company Big Game Theater, which operated for a few years in the Rogers Park neighborhood, on Chicago's far North Side, before she left to earn her MFA at Yale.

“People like David and I were absolutely raised up to just find the things we liked,” Shapiro says. “So we thought the task was not to have a career. We thought the task was to like and understand the stories that you were telling well enough that you could tell them. So other people would want to see that.” And if everyone was able to pitch in money from their office temp or restaurant jobs, then renting a space to make those stories come alive was possible. As Shapiro notes, in Chicago “it's still not impossible. It just looks more and more impossible every other place. And that's as much economics as it is the culture of how we value theatre and young theatre artists.”

But going solo as a director or running your own company can take a toll. In [a recent joint interview with Cromer published in *Demo*](#), the Columbia College alumni magazine, Shapiro notes that her decision to go to grad school and seek institutional opportunities came in part because she “didn't have the stamina to be a freelance director like David did. I still don't.” Early on, Shapiro made her mark by working on new plays with writers like Bruce Norris and, later, Tracy Letts, whose *August: Osage County* earned her a Tony Award, and she agrees with Falls that such associations offer a solid route to success for emerging directors.

But she also notes that, as an artistic director of what is still primarily an acting-ensemble-based company, she's often juggling competing agendas. “I need someone who can work with my ensemble members,” Shapiro says. “I have directors I have advocated for, put them in the room with our company members, and they have come up short in the eyes of our company members, whereas the playwright is fine with them.” Yet she also recognizes that keeping the institution going means fostering “this incredibly wonderful up-and-coming generation who understand that they can affect culture through mission.”

That means embracing aesthetic diversity as well and breaking away from the still-dominant school of realism. Shapiro notes that Northwestern's directing program has expanded its lens. "Graduate education is knowledge creation," she says. "That's my mantra. Are we creating the pedagogical community where knowledge creation is possible? It's not possible if the only directing professor is an American realist. What we immediately did was to expand that faculty to include people with very, very different approaches to directing plays. And actually even different ideas of what is a play."



Lili-Anne Brown, right, directs "The Color Purple" at Drury Lane Theatre.

Crossroads

Lili-Anne Brown's career as a director covers many bases. She began as an acting major at Northwestern, but switched to the performance studies department (home to Frank

Galati and Mary Zimmerman) because, as she bluntly puts it, “Racism happened.” As the only Black woman in her theatre department class, she wasn’t getting cast, and even had one professor tell her she’d never make it professionally and wouldn’t earn more than a C in any class he taught.

Since then, she’s run a theatre company (the now-defunct Bailiwick Chicago) and worked consistently as an award-winning freelance director. This fall she directed *The Color Purple* at the suburban [Drury Lane Theatre](#) (one of the flagship musical-theatre outposts in the Chicago area). Last spring she staged [Ike Holter’s](#) *Lottery Day*—the final installment in his seven-play “Rightlynd” saga, about a fictional ward in Chicago battling gentrification and other issues—at the Goodman’s Owen space. (She returns to the Goodman next spring for *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*.) Her relationship with Holter seems to underscore the idea that finding a simpatico playwright can be a good path for a director: She directed Holter’s *Put Your House in Order* at California’s La Jolla Playhouse earlier this year.

Yet, though she remains committed to living in Chicago (she grew up on the South Side), Brown feels that now is the time for her to “hit the regionals. I’m really focused on getting out of town and being influenced by people who I consider masters who are running institutions and doing great things.” Though Brown is directing at larger houses and has made her mark with both musicals and new plays, she notes the difficulty in getting producers interested in hiring her for developing new musicals, particularly in LORT and commercial houses. “Tell me who the Black lady musical directors on Broadway are. Name them.”

She notes that seeing *The Band’s Visit*—directed by Cromer and starring her Northwestern classmate Katrina Lenk—gave her inspiration. “When I saw that show [on Broadway] it felt like a Chicago show. The simplicity of it and the focus on emotion and storytelling and the point of view were really interesting to me, and for the first time I felt like I actually could do it.”



Ian Damont Martin with the cast and crew of Directors Haven 2019. (Photo by Austin D. Oie)

Haven for Directors

Mentoring new talent isn't something just the city's larger theatres do. Indeed in late October, for the fifth year running, [Haven](#) (formerly Haven Theatre) hosted "[Director's Haven](#)," a program geared toward providing more opportunities to early-career directors. It's led by Haven's new artistic director, Ian Damont Martin. This year's directors were Lauren Katz, Aaron Mays, and AJ Schwartz, each of whom staged a full 35- to 40-minute play of their choice running back to back in performance.

Martin, who also works with Enrich Chicago to lead anti-racism trainings for arts organizations, counts himself a beneficiary of Director's Haven. In the program's third year, he staged [Amiri Baraka's *The Toilet*](#). He describes the goal of the Director's Haven with a sim-

ple question: “How can we make sure that you can focus exclusively as much on the path of directing as possible?” By taking away all the administrative tasks that can cloud the job for many early-career directors in Chicago’s DIY storefront scene (everything from negotiating rental agreements to writing press releases to running box office), the program allows directors to focus on making their shows the best they can be. Haven also makes sure to invite “producers in the industry in Chicago, artistic directors, people who have the potential to give these emerging directors jobs or further opportunities.”

One of the tools Martin hopes that directors bring to the projects is “language about space-making. It’s the opposite of a red herring for me when I hear a director say, ‘I don’t have all the answers and I’m going to be looking for them in the community of the room.’” He adds, “As a producer, I have a responsibility, even if I’m not in the room every day while we’re putting up a show, to set up expectations at the beginning, when we’re all sitting at the table, to say, ‘This is how we’re going to work together. How do you feel about that?’”

There are many paths to that table in Chicago, from graduate school to starting a company to working freelance with the hundreds of existing theatres in the area. And training programs run by theatres themselves are also on the uptick: Midsommer Flight, which produces free outdoor Shakespeare in the summer months, just announced a new “Directors Flight” program focused on training directors in classical work.

And unlike in New York City and at many theatres across the country, where creative producers increasingly hold sway (from Roundabout and Lincoln Center to Baltimore Center Stage and Berkeley Rep), Chicago’s theatres, large and small, tend to be run by artistic directors who direct frequently at their own venues and elsewhere. In addition to Falls at the Goodman, there’s Shapiro at Steppenwolf, Yew at Victory Gardens, Damont Martin at Haven, Barbara Gaines at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Michael Halberstam at Writers Theatre, Ann Filmer at 16th Street Theater, Megan Carney at About Face Theatre, Anthony Moseley at Collaboraction, Hutch Pimentel at First Floor Theatre, Heidi Stillman at Lookingglass, BJ Jones at Northlight, Cody Estle at Raven Theatre, Nick Sandys at Remy Bumppo, Jonathan L. Green at Sideshow, and Ricardo Gutierrez at Teatro Vista. (The ensemble Theatre Oobleck, whose ensemble-created work pointedly eschews an “oversee-

ing director,” may be the exception that proves the rule.)

Having a director at the helm is certainly not a prerequisite for making a great theatre, of course; the late [Martha Lavey](#), who was artistic director at Steppenwolf from 1995 to 2015, was an actor who never staged a play. She helped steer the company further into the direction of staging new plays and encouraging other Steppenwolf actors, including Amy Morton, to try their hand at directing.

Falls notes that at one time, his neighborhood in Evanston, just north of Chicago, was home to four Tony-winning directors: himself, Galati, Zimmerman, and Shapiro. “The only other place I think that could happen would be the Upper West Side.”

He also cites the epigram to Mark Larson’s recent oral history of Chicago theatre, *Ensemble*, a quote from Morton: “In Chicago, we weren’t going to get rich, and we weren’t going to get famous. So we just got good.” Increasingly, directors are finding that Chicago is the good place.

Kerry Reid is a critic and journalist in Chicago, where she serves as theatre and dance editor for the *Chicago Reader*.

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