Off Broadway

New York's stages are in a slump. Now all America's liveliest drama is in Chicago. Michael Billington finds out why

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Going with the wind: Moonlight and Magnolias at the Goodman

For the poet Carl Sandburg it was the "City of the Big Shoulders". Architect Daniel Burnham called it "the Paris of the Prairies". That mix of raw energy and refined aestheticism makes Chicago one of the world's great cities - and the current theatre capital of America.

Since the late 1960s, when the Off-Loop theatre movement - defined by the city's elevated railway - got under way, Chicago theatre has witnessed an astonishing boom. Today its reputation is bound up with a handful of iconic names: David Mamet, John Malkovich, the Steppenwolf Company and Second City revue, which spawned Mike Nichols, Elaine May, John Belushi and Bill Murray. No fewer than 156 theatre companies, predominantly non-profit, operate in the city. And while New York, with its suffocating commercialism, seems increasingly hidebound, it is to Chicago that the true theatregoer now avidly looks.

Article continues

In the course of a six-day, eight-play trip, I found that everyone has his or her theory as to why Chicago now dominates American theatre. Some say it's because of the city's location. Situated midway between Broadway and Hollywood, it is free from the insane commercial pressures of both. As Bob Falls, who runs the thriving Goodman Theatre, says: "There's no such thing as success or failure in Chicago."

Others stress Mayor Richard Daley's enlightened policy of offering tax incentives to downtown theatres. But on one thing everyone is agreed: the pivotal role played by Richard Christiansen, the Chicago Tribune's recently retired drama critic, in offering discriminating support to new companies. No one ever erected a statue to a critic, but if they did, it might be to Christiansen.

I suspect that Chicago's theatre boom also stems from the pioneering spirit of the place. Architecturally, it has been in the avant garde since the days of Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe; if you take one of the city's river trips, you realise the breathtaking beauty and symphonic harmony of its buildings. Theatrically, it has benefited from the absence of an imposing multipurpose arts centre, the kind of edifice-complex that can suck the cultural life out of a city. Everything in Chicago theatre started small and, like Topsy, has just growed and growed. In that organic development lies the key to the current boom.

Steppenwolf is a case in point. Founded by three actors in 1974 in a church basement, it is now a world-class ensemble situated in a handsome new theatre. Initially famous for its visceral, in-your-face acting style, it has lately acquired a relaxed maturity - a fact brought home to me by Anna D Shapiro's stunning production of Robert Anderson's I Never Sang for My Father. I saw the play in London in 1968 and thought it a pallid addition to the filial guilt school of American drama: son looks back at unresolved relationship with despotic dad. What I had not expected here was the total transformation wrought by Kevin Anderson and John Mahoney, two of Steppenwolf's distinguished alumni.

As the son who loves his mother but is cowed by his testy father, Anderson displays a brooding stillness that is the antithesis of the early Steppenwolf style. I shall not easily forget the moment when Anderson, quizzed about his sex life by his mother, shyly ducks her glance and denies his embarrassment with rueful hesitancy. And British-born Mahoney (better known here for his role in Frasier) unforgettably makes the father a trim, pseudo-military martinet ashamed to admit his dependence on his son. This is acting worth crossing continents to see.

If Steppenwolf is essentially an actors' theatre, the nearby Victory Gardens is primarily a writers' theatre. Founded in 1974, it has staged 250 plays, of which more than half were world premieres, and, under the directorship of Dennis Zacek, it has created its own 12-strong playwrights' ensemble. I caught a joyous piece by one of the dozen, Lonnie Carter, entitled The Romance of Magno Rubio: a well-researched study of Filipino immigrant culture written, surprisingly, by a Caucasian dramatist.

Admittedly Carter is working from a short story by Carlos Bulosan about a migrant worker in 1930s California who forms a doomed epistolary relationship with an exploitative Arkansas woman. It could easily be mawkish: semiliterate peasant tricked by mercenary pen pal. But what gives it verbal vibrancy is

Carter's use of hip-hop rhyme: "Magno Rubio, four-foot six-inches tall, Magno Rubio, dark as a coconut ball." Appropriately for a piece about the importance of ethnic solidarity in "the United Snakes of America", it is acted with fervour in Loy Arcenas's humming production: we get song, bamboo-stick work dances and hilariously silhouetted female impersonation in what might be an upbeat Cannery Row.