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ENTERTAINMENT

A mix of humor, heartbreak and more make the year in theater memorable

David Lyman Enquirer contributor

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Several tiny, but serious theater groups were launched in 2015. Other ensemble created dozens of new, high-quality opportunities for actors, directors, designers and other professionals. Best of all, stages were abundant with smart and challenging theater. I didn't see everything out there. But here's the best I saw in 2015.

Offbeat: "Andy's House of [Blank]," Know Theatre of Cincinnati. The show began life early in the year as an intriguing playlet in the Know's admirable "Serials" series. Within months, it was a mainstage production, an intelligent, offbeat musical work about an oddball character searching not just for love, but for a way to fit into the world. It's also about the ever-so-smart philosophical ramblings of writers Paul Strickland and Trey Tatum, whose minds and scripts move faster and more deeply than most of us can comprehend. Directed by Bridget Leak, with Strickland, Tatum, Christopher Michael Richardson and Erika Kate Macdonald.

Integrated audience: "August: Osage County," Clifton Performance Space. The idea of staging this sprawling family drama in a theater where a crowd of 50 constitutes a packed house sounded like madness. Fortunately, director Buz Davis did it, anyway. The drama was so close and so intense that it felt like we – the audience – were a fully integrated part of this tale of family self-destruction. Thanks to a cast that included Kevin Crowley, Leah Strasser, Dale Hodges, Carter Bratton and others, it made for a riveting and heart-breaking theatrical experience.

Uncomfortable, yet enlightening: “Buzzer,” Playhouse in the Park (Shelterhouse). Tracey Scott Wilson’s script dives headfirst into all manner of subjects we are squeamish about; race, class, gentrification, drugs. But director Timothy Douglas and his three-person cast (Eric Lynch, Carly Zien, Alex Shaw) never let us squirm away from any of them. The tensions are, at times excruciating. And with a plot that revolves around gentrification of the sort we see all around us in Greater Cincinnati, the play proved both uncomfortable and enlightening.

On the Fringe: “Chemistry,” Cincinnati Fringe Festival. The performance space was a cramped Art Academy classroom. And the set was little more than a bed that took up most of the stage. But the drama that unfolded went from moments of breathless elation to others that were downright harrowing. It was a love story, alright. But love, as we soon learned, would not be enough. The production was put together by a trio of former Playhouse interns; director Katie Lupica and actors Laurie Benning Roberts and Jay Hobson.

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Oldie but memorable: “Death of a Salesman,” Cincinnati Shakespeare Company. How could this show miss? It had a distinguished script by one of America’s greatest playwrights. It had one of the area’s pre-eminent actors, Bruce Cromer, tackling one of the American theater’s most memorable roles, Willy Loman. There were no disappointments in director Brian Isaac Phillips’ production as it charted Miller’s tale of the decline of the American Dream. Justin McCombs (Biff) and Annie Fitzpatrick (Linda Loman) gave particularly memorable performances.

Sweet and tender: “Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune,” New Edgecliff Theatre. This was an unexpectedly tender production of Terrence McNally’s melancholy play directed by Jared Doren and performed by Sara Mackie and Dylan Shelton. She’s cautious, he’s romantic. They’re both middle-aged. You’re never really sure if this relationship will develop into anything long-lasting. McNally’s script is a long and lovely pair of character studies about people in

need of another chance at love. And New Edgecliff's production was tiny, rough-hewn and breathtaking.

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"Luna Gale," Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati. What a way for ETC to launch its 30th anniversary season. Rebecca Gilman's script brutally harsh. But it has moments of levity, too, and genuine affection for its characters. The story follows two young, drug-addicted adults in their struggle to get straight and keep their infant daughter. Like all the plays on this list, its success is a tribute to gifted directing and acting, in this case from director D. Lynn Meyers and a cast that included Annie Fitzpatrick, Molly Israel, Kate Wilford and Patrick E. Phillips.

Very surprising: "Mockingbird," Falcon Theatre. What a wonderful surprise and revelation this production was. Julie Jensen's adaptation of Kathryn Erskine's novel is loving and thoughtful, but doesn't shy away from the often heartbreaking complications of life faced by an 11-year-old girl on the autism spectrum. Generally, when grown-ups play child roles, the result is disaster. But director Ben Raanan artfully guides his cast away from that, especially leading actor Carey Parsons, who gives a performance that is sweet, inspiring and heart-wrenching.

No regrets: "Outside Mullingar," Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati. John Patrick's Shanley's 2014 play is the work of a mature and masterful playwright. And guest director Ed Stern made the most of it, turning ETC's production into sentimental and touching paean about love and loneliness. The humor is every bit as robust as the regrets and resentment. Like so many of these "best" shows, "Mullingar" was built around a superb cast of veteran actors, including Joneal Joplin, Jen Joplin Brian Isaac Phillips and Dale Hodges.

Dignity and rage: "The Other Place," Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati. At the outset, we're not really certain what is unfolding in Sharr White's script. All we know is that Juliana's world is coming apart. Played with equal parts dignity, confusion and rage, Pugh's performance is painful and captivating. Directed by

D. Lynn Meyers, the ensemble included top-notch performances by Michael G. Bath, Kelly Mengelkoch and Billy Chace.

Melencholy success: “Waiting for Godot,” Cincinnati Shakespeare Company. Audiences have puzzled over Samuel Beckett’s script for decades. No need. It’s actually pretty straightforward. And silly. And childish. And, once we really get into the meat of the play, deeply melancholy. Directed by Brian Isaac Phillips, this production was greatly enhanced by a fine, fine cast led by Bruce Cromer and Nick Rose. They played up the clownishness of it all without ever shying away from the idea that life is inherently mundane.