

THEATER

Now Playing in Chicago: ‘Game’ Shows

By ERIK PIEPENBURG AUG. 4, 2016

CHICAGO — When it comes to games, this city’s not playing.

Blame it on Midwestern bingo culture. Or maybe it’s a long tradition of immersive, unpretentious theatergoing involving cold beer and ornery nuns. Whatever. Whether card, video or board, Chicago is a thriving hub for theater based on or inspired by games. In many cases, shows *are* games.

Yes, New York has its game shows, too. “The Last Word,” a new musical inspired by Scrabble, just ended a run in the New York Musical Festival. “Paradiso: Chapter 1,” an escape-room production, recently opened to good reviews. And a musical inspired by Monopoly, now in development, has Broadway in its sights.

But it’s in Chicago where play’s the thing.

The Last Defender

BASED ON ’80s video games

AGES 15 and over

WHERE Chopin Theater, 1543 West Division Street

THROUGH Closes Aug. 6 (with plans to return later this year at a new space)

A mix of time-crunching escape room and interactive video game, “The Last Defender” has become a hit for the House Theater (in the Chopin’s basement) since it opened earlier this year. An audience of between eight and 16 players puts on

orange jumpsuits and collaborates in teams to solve puzzles and answer riddles to prevent a nuclear disaster. Gen X nostalgia-seekers will get a kick out of the set, which looks like a missile control room out of the recent Netflix series “Stranger Things.”

Nathan Allen, the House’s artistic director, said that while the show was inspired in part by classic save-the-world arcade games like *Missile Command*, there’s more to the 90-minute piece than brain games and robot voices.

“Narratively, it actually came out of an interest in gun violence in Chicago, and exploring those themes without doing a play about gun violence,” said Mr. Allen, who wrote and directed the show. “I found common themes in this argument I hear regularly from the N.R.A. that if everyone was armed, everyone would be safe. I look around at my city, and I think that’s ridiculous.”

Mr. Allen said he hoped the show involved play on a more “narrative-moral level,” in which players are protagonists beyond just the created world.

“I don’t know how often somebody leaves the game thinking about Chicago violence,” he said. “But they’ll leave thinking about weapons and escalation and the idea that more weapons don’t make anybody safe.”

Horrible Fun

BASED ON Cards Against Humanity

AGES 18 and over

WHERE Under the Gun Theater, 956 West Newport Avenue

THROUGH Open Run

In the game *Cards Against Humanity*, a raunchy riff on *Apples to Apples*, players match question-and-answer cards to come up with humorously offensive combinations.

Under the Gun Theater, part of Chicago’s rich improv scene, uses the game as inspiration in this bare-bones late-night show. (It was originally called “Comedy

Against Humanity,” but the makers of Cards Against Humanity complained and the theater changed the name.) Two teams perform improvised scenes based on card combinations provided by audience members, who get onstage. A card czar, who hosts the show, awards points based on the funniest material. The audience member who offers the winning phrase match gets a tchotchke-style prize like a beer cozy.

Angie McMahon, the director of “Horrible Fun,” said Cards Against Humanity matches well with improv because it keeps the audience from feeling the need to be funny.

“The audience is protected because the jokes have been pre-written for them,” she said. “They don’t have to think of something funny. They can say the combination is funny, and it gives them a premise to an improv scene.”

Although the show is advertised as “dirty, ridiculous, offensive and horrible,” its keener improvisers know that going gross goes only so far. Ms. McMahon’s advice? “The cards are dirty enough, so let’s play smart,” she said.

Dating and Dragons

BASED ON Dungeons & Dragons

AGES 13 and up “depending on the kid”

WHERE Factory Theater, 1623 West Howard Street

THROUGH Aug. 13

For the playwright Mike Ooi, a breakup and a round of Dungeons & Dragons, the fantasy role-playing game that caused a “moral panic” in the ’80s, was all he needed to write his romantic comedy “Dating and Dragons.”

“When I started seeing the two together, I thought about rules,” Mr. Ooi said. “In the game, there are rules about how the world works and what you can and can’t do, and how you figure out how a character succeeds or fails. In dating there are rules, too, but the rules of Dungeons & Dragons are concrete. You can fudge them here and there, but the rules of dating are all over the place.”

Unlike its interactive peers, “Dating and Dragons” is a traditional stage play. An avid gamer named Jack falls for a woman but is stymied by his inability to master the rules of dating. Avatars, including a barbaric orc with an ax and a cloaked shape-shifter act out the role-playing games played by the stage characters.

For Mr. Ooi, the parallels between Dungeons & Dragons and theater come down to a fondness for shared storytelling.

“In a play, you have someone write, and you all agree on a set of rules to construct a world, including the audience, and what the rules are,” he said. “With D&D, it’s the same thing. You get a master who’s like the author, and you have players and they are the actors. The dungeon master either creates a world or presents one to the players, and they create the story together.”

Bible Bingo: An Act of Charity in Two Acts

BASED ON Bingo

AGES 10 and up

WHERE Royal George Theater, 1641 North Halsted Street

THROUGH Open run

Now in its fifth year, “Bible Bingo” is a solo interactive comedy about Mrs. Mary Margaret O’Brien, a former nun who heads the fictitious bingo fund-raising department of the local archdiocese. (In this run she’s at Our Lady of Good Fortune parish.) The show features improv, Broadway show-tune singalongs, onstage audience-participation quizzes about the Bible and, yes, bingo. Prizes include glow-in-the-dark rosaries and Jesus car fresheners that smell like olive trees.

The show was written by Vicki Quade, an author of the Catholic-themed comedy “Late Nite Catechism,” which ran for seven years Off Broadway beginning in 1996. Ms. Quade said she was initially unsure if bingo would translate as a theater event.

“I was worried that it might be too gamey, like a game show,” she said. “But it works as theater in that you bring in all the religious comedy, about concepts of

heaven and hell and who's there. When you start to get people to talk about it, that's when the theatricality comes out. It becomes an experience."

Any fears died quickly once a certain group started attending.

"Nuns love bingo and religion and the prizes," Ms. Quade said. "When I go to the door and say goodbye to the audience, I go back to my desk and all my holy cards are gone."

We Gotta Bingo

BASED ON Bingo

AGES All ages

WHERE Chicago Theaterworks, 1113 West Belmont Avenue

THROUGH Open run

There have never been any fights at "We Gotta Bingo," according to Bill Collins, who conceived the show. Which is a surprise, considering it's an interactive dinner theater experience set at a German beer hall where the polka band is loud, the beer flows freely and the lasagna servings are large. And bingo players, especially in Chicago, are not to be messed with, a trait that makes for an unpredictable night of theater.

"You start rooting for your numbers, and it becomes competitive," said Mr. Collins, the managing director of Actors Theater in St. Paul, where the show originated in 2005. "The psychology is perfect."

Irish and Italian sensibilities permeate "We Gotta Bingo," which calls to mind the broad ethnic humor played interactively in "Tony n' Tina's Wedding." Like the shared experience of a wedding, Mr. Collins said bingo is "pretty universal," a reason his show draws more than just Catholics with memories of parish fundraisers. Still, "We Gotta Bingo," he said, is "not a New York show."

"It's Midwestern," he said. "In Chicago, people are very in touch with their ethnicities and their parishes and all those tribes. Chicagoans are adventurous and

willing to laugh at themselves and take risks on what a lot of other people might say, ‘Oh, a show about bingo sounds too cheesy.’”

A version of this article appears in print on August 7, 2016, on page AR6 of the New York edition with the headline: Stages Where Play Is the Point.
