



Off the Beaten Path

Philadelphia's alternative theater companies present creative, thought-provoking works.

Philadelphia's theater scene has grown dramatically in the last 20 years, with a plethora of small companies staging some of the coolest shows in the city.

In fact, Philly is the fourth largest theater city in the U.S. Many small to midsize companies found their start in the annual Philadelphia Fringe Festival, and developed their own unique niche, from high-energy musicals to contemporary Celtic works. But they have two important things in common: They produce high-quality, critically acclaimed theater, and they proudly call Philadelphia home. Now, a consortium of edgy, independent companies calling themselves Off-Broad Street, along with the independent company Theatre Exile, are working to promote the city's alternative theater scene. Intrigued? Read on to find out more about these trailblazing performers.

■ **11TH HOUR THEATRE COMPANY**

In just six seasons, 11th Hour Theatre Company has established a reputation for producing small-scale musicals that pack a big emotional punch. Productions like *Bomb-itty of Errors*, an "ad-rap-tation" of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and *The World Goes 'Round*, have earned the young company 27 Barrymore Award nominations, Philadelphia's equivalent to the Tony Awards.



PHOTOS BY EGOPO CLASSIC THEATER, 11TH HOUR THEATRE COMPANY, THEATRE EXILE AND MICHAEL ALTON



Next up: *The Marvelous Wonderettes*, which transports the audience to the 1958 Springfield High School prom, with classic hits of the '50s and '60s including "Mr. Sandman," "Son of a Preacher Man," and "Respect!" *The Marvelous Wonderettes* runs June 1 through June 24 at the Adrienne Theater. 11thhourtheatrecompany.org

■ **AZUKA THEATRE**

For 13 years, Azuka Theatre has produced captivating stories from unexpected perspectives, from *The Long Christmas Ride Home* where past and present collide in the back of the family sedan on a snowy Christmas eve, to the world premiere of *the terrible girls*, a dark Southern comedy about three friends struggling with secrets.

This season, Azuka inaugurated Philadelphia's newest theater space — the intimate Off Broad Street Theatre in the First Baptist Church at 17th and Sansom streets — with *Act a Lady*, exploring identity and gender.



From June 15 to July 1, the theater presents *Hazard County*, which uses iconic 1980s TV series *The Dukes of Hazzard* to discuss stereotypes about the South and the impact of the media and of pop culture. azukatheatre.org

■ **EGOPO CLASSIC THEATER**

EgoPo Classic Theater, now in its 19th year, has called San Francisco, New York, and New Orleans home before settling in Philadelphia seven years ago following Hurricane Katrina. Nationally renowned for innovative stagings of great classic plays, the company's visionary designs, dynamic acting, and fierce imagination have made them a breakout hit in Philadelphia.

EgoPo is the only company in Philadelphia to produce yearlong festivals dedicated to a single genre or playwright, bringing audiences into a deeper connection with the works. Past festivals have included Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams, Jewish Classic Theater, and Expressionism. For the 2012–2013 season, EgoPo will present The American Vaudeville Festival with shows examining the American icons Jesse James, Harry Houdini, and the fictional Uncle Tom.

■ **BRAT PRODUCTIONS**

Since launching *EYE-95* in the first Philadelphia Fringe Festival in 1996, Brat Productions has become a prominent player in Philly's alternative theater scene. Written by founding Brat artistic director Madi Distefano, the Southern punk musical featured Frito-Pie, puppets, cheerleaders, and a full rockabilly band. Brat has continued to make theater with a gritty rock 'n' roll aesthetic ever since.

The company's sweaty 24-hour marathon production of Ionesco's absurdist classic *The* →



Left page, top: 11th Hour Theatre Company's *Bomb-itty of Errors*. This page, from left: Theatre Exile's *A Behanding in Spokane*, Flashpoint Theatre Company's *Slip/Shot*, EgoPo Classic Theater's *Artaud Unbound*. Left page, bottom: Brat Productions' *Naked Cocktail*



Top, clockwise from left: artistic directors Joe Canuso, Kevin Glaccum, Tom Reing, Madi Distefano, Michael O'Brien, Peter Reynolds, Lane Savadove
Bottom: Azuka Theatre's *Hope Street*

Bald Soprano has become legendary among devoted local fans, but the company has also toured internationally, garnering critical acclaim and awards as far away as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Brat Productions will return to the Philly Fringe Festival with two original rock spectacles this September.

■ **FLASHPOINT THEATRE COMPANY**

In 2003, five friends from Drew University settled in Philadelphia and established Flashpoint Theatre Company, a home for socially provocative theater. Nine years later, many of its founders have moved on to new projects, but Flashpoint's reputation for bold, avant-garde theater continues to grow under the leadership of artistic director Thom Weaver.

This season, the company staged *The Fat Cat Killers*, a dark revenge comedy for the current economic downturn, and the distressingly timely, critically acclaimed *Slip/Shot* by Philadelphia playwright Jacqueline Goldfinger, which details the aftermath of a white cop's accidental shooting of a black teenager.

■ **INIS NUA THEATRE COMPANY**

Inis Nua Theatre Company celebrates the rich storytelling cultures of Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. Pronounced in-ish-new-ah, which translates to "new island," the company imports provocative, contemporary theater from the British Isles directly to Philadelphia, having produced five American premieres in its eight-year history.

Its American debut of *Dublin by Lamplight*, a commedia dell'arte rendering of the tragedies of 1904 Dublin, took the company off-Broadway last year. For the 2011–12 sea-

son, Inis Nua established itself off-Broad Street, with performances of Irish plays *Little Gem* and *The Wabworth Farces* at the Off Broadway Theatre. inisnuatheatre.org

■ **MAUCKINGBIRD THEATRE COMPANY**

Founded by artistic director Peter Reynolds and managing director Lindsay Mauck, Mauckingbird Theater Company produces gay-themed shows exploring classic literature and musical genres — and, the critics rave, "simply good theater."

Mauckingbird's acclaimed past produc-



PHOTOS BY INIS NUA THEATRE COMPANY; MAUCKINGBIRD THEATRE COMPANY; BRAT PRODUCTIONS; AZUKA THEATRE AND PLATE PHOTOGRAPHY



Top: Brat Productions' *Eternal Glammation*
Above left: Mauckingbird Theatre Company's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Above right: Inis Nua Theatre Company's *Little Gem*

tions include *Shakespeare's R & J*, an all-male version of *Romeo and Juliet*, and a lesbian adaptation of *Hedda Gabler*. The company has also produced a repertory of two one-man shows about influential gay writers Truman Capote and James Baldwin; a gender-bending interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and regional premieres of *[title of show]* and *The Temperamentals*. mauckingbird.org

■ **THEATRE EXILE**

Some of the words that have been used to describe Theatre Exile: "ferce," "sexy," "mind-blowing," "unnerving," and "unlike

any show you've ever seen."

For 15 years, the company has presented Philadelphia with theater that artistic director Joe Canuso admits is "more interested in illuminating questions than providing easy answers." He's referring to productions such as the Philadelphia premieres of the unsettling love story *Blackbird*, the macabre Broadway hit *A Behanding in Spokane*, and the volatile dark comedy *Killer Joe*. It's theater, Canuso says, that reflects Philadelphia as unpretentious, emotionally honest, and "dependably unpredictable." theatrexile.org