

SCENE STEALERS

Stage newbies with real talent are showing their stuff in local theaters--sneak a chance to see them now before they're gone

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If you're a young actor, there's no better town to learn your craft. The huge Chicago theater scene is marked by opportunity, openness, dedication and an abiding interest in youth. And there are relatively few of the pesky distractions--fame, agents, lots of money--that an impressionable young actor encounters in New York or Los Angeles. As a result, Chicago stages are littered with emerging talents--mostly hoping to make their mark here and then, in the grand Chicago tradition, move on to coastal careers.

Here are five new names we think are worth watching. These aren't pretty faces headed for a soap opera, they're actors with serious talent.

Name: KELLY O'SULLIVAN

Age: 22

Vulnerable and guileless, Kelly O'Sullivan was nothing short of stunning in the Profiles Theatre's 2005 production of Rebecca Gilman's "The Glory of Living," wherein she played the central role of Lisa, an easily manipulated young woman who commits a series of murders for the sexual pleasure of her heinous husband.

And that was no flash in the pan--O'Sullivan is just as good in her current role as the geeky Reenie in the American Theatre Company's superb production of William Inge's "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs." O'Sullivan, a recent graduate of Northwestern University and the School at Steppenwolf Conservatory Program, is eerily able to get under the skin of a young woman torn apart by the failings of her parents and her own total lack of self-confidence. You never get the sense that she's merely playing a part--she inhabits those hellish teenage neuroses with such self-deprecating intensity that you find yourself worrying whether or not she'll come out the other side. So far, so good.

See O'Sullivan Live: In "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," through Nov. 12 at American Theater Company, 1909 W. Byron St.; \$30-35; 773-929-1031.

Name: MATT SAX

Age: 22

Not only can this baby-faced talent already carry his own solo show--the hit "Clay" at the funky Lookingglass Theater Studio--but he knows how to inhabit that precarious but potentially lucrative nexus between theater, beat poetry and hip-hop. Sax is a prodigiously powerful writer--his emotional "Clay" tells the story of a boy from a broken home who finds solace in rapping--but he's also no slouch as a performer. At different times, he's like a kinder, gentler version of Eminem (with some added irony) or a younger incarnation of Anna Deavere Smith. And yet you also sense that Sax is a decent, legitimate stage actor who could do "Hamlet" quite well, if the fancy took him. Sax is vulnerable, hip, smart and compelling, and he's being widely touted around town as headed for a major career. Major players such as Frank Galati are already tooting his horn.

See Sax live: In "Clay," through Nov. 19 at Lookingglass Theatre Company, Chase Studio Theatre, 821 N. Michigan Ave.; \$25-\$30; 312-337-0665.

Name: ALANA ARENAS

Age: 25

This DePaul University graduate is the riveting emotional core of the smash-hit, sold-out production of Lydia Diamond's adaptation of "The Bluest Eye" at the Steppenwolf Theatre. The people at Steppenwolf are used to emotionally raw actors--but the likes of artistic director Martha Lavey say that the wide-open Arenas is something else altogether. There's a notable simplicity to Arenas' work--she's never manipulative or cute. But she's also capable of dazzling physical acting. In "Bluest Eye," you just have to watch the moment where her character enters a store owned by a hostile white man--and has to reach up to the counter to put down her money. Arenas shows us a slew of different emotions--fear, hope, sadness--all at once. It's impossible to watch Arenas in "The Bluest Eye" and remain unmoved by a remarkable young actress. She--and her show--are headed to New York next month, where opportunity surely awaits.

See Arenas live: In "The Bluest Eye," through Saturday at Steppenwolf Upstairs Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.; \$20; 312-335-1650.

Name: CORA VANDER BROEK

Age: 28

There's a moment in the Griffin Theatre Company's revival of Sidney Kingsley's "Dead End" where Cora Vander Broek's anxious character, Drina, finally realizes that her delinquent brother has been lost to the mean streets. All at once, this fine actress lets out the kind of howl of despair that makes you want to wrap her up in a blanket and plunk her down for a long vacation at the Four Seasons. Vander Broek, who graduated from Northwestern College in Iowa, has been plodding away for quite awhile now in numerous little Chicago shows--with "The Book of Days" at Raven Theatre and "Being 11" at the Serendipity Theatre standing out among many others--and she seems to improve every ensemble in which she finds herself. The daughter of American missionaries, Vander Broek grew up mostly in Central America. Funny, self-aware, self-effacing, passionate and unflinchingly honest, no Chicago fringe actress more deserves a shot at the big time.

See Vander Broek Live: In "Dead End," through Nov. 12 at Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave., \$15-24; 773-327-5252.

Name: ERICA ELAM

Age: 27

Anyone who saw Erica Elam in the Piven Theatre's 2003 production of "Abingdon Square" (a portrait of a lousy marriage) wasn't about to quickly forget what they saw. Elam avoided all of the cliches of wifely frustration, instead offering a beguiling blend of malevolence and neediness. An uncommonly elegant and understated actress whose work is typified by a certain refined-yet-complex dignity, Elam is constantly surprising. You could imagine her, say, in a movie such as "Ethan Frome" or any period depiction of the throbbing inner belly of small-town America. Jessica Thebus directed Elam in that memorable Piven outing--which perhaps explains how Elam landed a plum role in Thebus' current Northlight revival of "Inherit the Wind." Empathetic, vulnerable, tightly wrapped and surely camera-ready, she does not disappoint her ever-growing theater audiences.

See Elam Live: In "Inherit the Wind," through Nov. 12 at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, Skokie; \$34-56; 847-673-6300.