Somerville, Mass.-based Megan Sandberg-Zakian spent the end of 2015 helming a diverse production of It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play and workshopping a new play by Eleanor Burgess, a writer she has her eye on, at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., where she’s a Princess Grace Theatre Foundation Fellowship director-in-residence. Looking ahead, she pointed to another play by Burgess, Start Down, which will have its premiere at Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre, Feb. 13–March 6. Sandberg-Zakian describes it as a “smart and engaging” play about “the role of technology in education.” She’ll next helm a production of Danai Gurira’s “heartwrenching Shavian epic about colonial Zimbabwe,” The Convert (AT, Sept. ’13), at Cambridge’s Central Square Theater, Jan. 28–Feb. 28. That will be a homecoming of sorts for the Brown-educated director. Central Square is where she worked some five years as a TCG Future Leaders fellow. After several acclaimed productions, as well as her growing community-building and advocacy résumé, we think we can place Sandberg-Zakian’s leadership firmly in the present.

Los Angeles actor Leon Russom spent some of 2015 recovering from an illness (and vociferously opposing Equity’s changes to the city’s longstanding 99-Seat Plan), but he did make it to the stage for Padraic Duffy’s The Box: An Experiment in Random Narrative at his home company, Sacred Fools Theater. Next he’ll return to the Fools for the premiere of Duffy’s Fast Time, a metatheatrical romp slated to include “many, many, many painted unicorns,” as well as fellow L.A. stage veteran French Stewart. Russom says he’ll then tackle a little something called King Lear for the downtown L.A.-based Loft Ensemble. Outside the Fools, he praises the pay-what-you-want ensemble, Courtyard Theatre Company, “a young company that stepped immediately into the front rank of Los Angeles theatre.” Their next joint: Tennessee Williams’ Vieux Carré.

It’s all musicals, all the time at New Line Theatre in St. Louis (AT, July/Aug. ’14). But these ain’t your grandpa’s showtunes: Artistic director Scott Miller has packed the season, the theatre’s 25th, with the usual edgy mix: In the fall was the murderous satire Heathers, and in March it’s American Idiot, followed in June by Atomic, a brand-new rock musical about the Manhattan Project from Danny Ginges and Philip Foxman. Elsewhere in his city, Miller says, “My local hero is Steve Woolf,” artistic director of the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. “The Rep is really, truly wonderful. It’s incredibly rare that I see a show there that I don’t like, and I see almost every show they produce.” Miller also gave a shoutout to his “other local hero,” Mike Isaacson, who took the reins of the popular St. Louis outdoor summer theatre the Muny in 2012. In Miller’s view, Isaacson has “completely transformed” the organization, bringing in a roster of New York Off-Broadway productions in 22 theatre companies, for 5 seasons, from 2010 to 2015. The study found that female playwrights ranged from 28 percent to 36 percent (depending on the season), female directors from 22 to 40 percent, female set designers from 22 to 36 percent, female lighting designers from 8 to 16 percent, female costume designers from 61 to 79 percent, and female sound designers from 14 to 22 percent. Female stage managers, meanwhile, averaged 70 percent employment. The full report is online at theatrewomen.org/women-count-2015.

NYC: Show some appreciation: When the New York Times announced it would no longer run the names of designers at the end of film and theatre reviews (restricting listings to cast, director, and creators), a large outcry and letter-writing campaign garnered 850 signatures from members of designer unions Local USA 829 and IATSE, and 80 signatures from playwrights. In response, the Times restored the credits. Activism works!

Los Angeles: It’s never too late for revisions. In December, East West Players remounted its critically acclaimed production of Chinglish by David Henry Hwang. This time, though, they changed the ending. Or rather, Hwang did, citing the ways the U.S./China relationship has evolved since the play premiered on Broadway in 2011. Perhaps “world-premiere ending” can be a new marketing gimmick? Visit: eastwestplayers.org/on-the-stage/chinglish-back-by-popular-demand.

Cincinnati: It was time to level up. Cincinnati Shakespeare Company has announced a $17 million capital campaign to build a new theatre, with a 244-seat mainstage (an increase from the current 150 seats); a separate thrust stage; on-site scenic, costume design, and construction shops; a rehearsal and event space; and a classroom for educational programs. Nearly three quarters of the $17 million had been raised at press time. The timeline for construction includes a groundbreaking in early 2016 and a completion date of summer 2017, with the first season in the new space in 2017–18.

—Dee Tran

NEWS IN BRIEF
City talent (Dan Knechtges, Rob Ruggiero, Rob McClure, John Tartaglia) to beef up its musical-theatre bona fides. Miller wants us to know about one other promising development: A frequent actor at his theatre, Anna Skidis, started the city's first Latino theatre company, Theatre Nuevo, with a show last summer called This Is Not Funny. The company currently seeks play submissions for their next production, Orgullo: a Pride of One Acts. The deadline is Feb. 1, and the e-mail is theatrenuevo@gmail.com.

Congo Square Theatre artistic director Samuel Roberson has women on his mind—female theatre artists, that is. The theme for his theatre’s season, focusing on works by women of color, is “Power of Her.” Running Jan. 8–Feb. 7 is the Chicago premiere of Pearl Cleage’s What I Learned in Paris, a play “centered around the election of the first black mayor of Atlanta,” Roberson says. In June, Chicago native Harry Lennix will direct the world premiere of Lektahia Dalco’s Small Oak Tree Runs Red, which links lynching riots in 1918 Georgia to recurrent contemporary cases of police brutality. The distaff emphasis came about, Roberson admits, when he realized “how, even as a young leader of color, I was unaware of the male-dominated voice of American theatre...If I want to be a champion of change, I need to be an example as well as a leader in the fight to end disparity.” Accordingly, all his other calls were for work by XX-chromosome theatre folk: the local premiere of Dominique Morisseau’s Sunken Baby at Timeline Theatre, Jan. 21–April 10; the Chicago Inclusion Project started by Emjoy Gavino to promote non-traditional casting; and the work of Kristiana Rae Colón, a freelance playwright and activist who started Let Us Breathe, a collective led chiefly by artists looking for ways to use art as a means of “protest and disruption.”

The idyllic mountain town of Creede, Colo., about 250 miles southwest of Denver, is pretty sleepy in the dead of winter, and so too is its local theatre, Creede Repertory Theatre. But this year things are heating up, notes artistic director Jessica Jackson, who’s producing the theatre’s first winter run of its decade-old summertime “cult hit” Boontown Improv Comedy. “Creede Rep is partnering with local organizations to create economic opportunity for our community in what is still called ‘the off-season,’” says Jackson. That means programming Boontown in conjunction with such winter festivals as “chocolate competitions, log-throwing, ice sculpting, weird bands, and curling; in case you were curious what people do up here at 9,000 feet.” Asked what excites her outside her theatre’s walls, Jackson namechecks a popular resident-theatre nightspot: “The more I experience theatre sitting down, the more I yearn for club theatre and its merging of nightlife and performance. I want to go hang out at Oberon at ART for a couple of nights.” (Us too.)

Though based in L.A., director Mark Valdez has his eye on the whole country—an occupational benefit of having been the head of the Network of Ensemble Theaters for eight years. His next project is DJ Latinitad’s Latino Dance Party at Mixed Blood in Minneapolis, for which 12 Latino artists across disciplines were commissioned with the prompt: What does it mean to be Latino/a in the present-day U.S.? Contributors cite Mexican, Cuban, Chilean, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Guatemalan descent, and an equally diverse slate of media: dance, theatre, music, visual arts, hip-hop, and poetry. “We are curating their responses into a performance that takes the form of a dance party, DJ and all,” Valdez effuses. His list of projects to look out for is similarly wide-ranging, from New Orleans, where Juncbug Productions will premiere Gomela/return: Movement of our Mother Tongue, a multidisciplinary performance about African-American history through a Gulf Coast prism, to Philadelphia, where Team Sunshine Performance Corporation will launch the second iteration of a planned 24-year endeavor called The Sincerity Project, begun in 2014, in which the company will biannually revisit “notions of sincerity, not to be confused with honesty or truth, as the company ages”; and his home base of L.A., where Nancy Keystone and her Critical Mass Performance Group will debut Ameryka, a devised work that “explores our dream of democracy through the influences of film, graphic arts, Poland, Thomas Jefferson, and jazz,” at a studio Site01 Studio in Burbank. DJ not included.—Rob Weinert-Kendt