Overall solution

Cryptic clues for the entries in each row and column are given in order. They may be entered into the grid, skipping spaces where across and down clues would otherwise conflict (or, in the bottom row and rightmost column, where unchecked squares would result,) to give the pattern below, in a mechanism taken with apologies from Cox and Rathvon’s “Asteroids”.

When this is done, the unclued entry PLAY THE GAME dead center in the grid and the characteristic glider shapes at the lower left and upper right corners hint that the pattern of blank/black squares should be evolved according to the rules of Conway’s Game of Life. In the next step, the black squares spell out the answer LANCED, as shown.
Cryptic clue explanations

Across:

1. Songbird haphazardly rinses pea – anag. RINSES PEA → PASSERINE
   Each half of one might be skinny? – dipPER
   Immediately, like a wire service – AS + AP
2. Government department put in the ground around Rio – INTE(RIO)R
   Director’s innards are on the right page – diRECTOR
3. Burn these artistic letters – theSE ARtistic
   Arthropod cut in half by subatomic particle – scorPION
   For starters, Orville risked death in an airport in Chicago – initialism O + R + D
   That woman’s in the resistance – tHE Resistance
4. Consul nastily grips forearms – consUL NAStily
   What it’ll cost you to talk about the golden ratio – homophone PHI → FEE
5. Dame I misrepresented in books and movies, for example – anag. DAME I → MEDIA
   Ray gun fouls up stable stats package – anag. STABLE + R → BLASTER
6. Brits shutter Parisian museum – double def. LOUVRE
   Hardy girl upends pattern-matching game with initial satisfaction – SET reversed + S → TESS
   Make one happy by turning over half a leaf and stirring tea – LEaf reversed + anag. TEA → ELATE
7. Swaddling one more with watered silk – MO(I)RE
   Console one in Wisconsin – W(I)I
   I fell out of lubricated luminescent object – OILED - I → OLED
8. When a well-sheltered spot gets rolled over a lot . . . that’s a moray – LEE reversed → EEL
   (Robin’s note: I am so sorry.)
   Ypsilanti is home to Greek character – yPSIlanti
9. Spoon, boy, with the French – LAD + LE
   Copes with 500 imperfect ales – D + anag. ALES → DEALS
   Losing energy, cease to box – CEASE - E → CASE
10. Topless Ligeti’s wild sex party – gyORGY
    A couple of irises give atmosphere – A + IR
    Small dog’s memorial marker – S + LAB
    Water flows through it in measured amount . . . – double def. GILL
11. . . . except in the dark, with no sparks starting – sUNLESS
    Ian: so busy he, oddly, was a longtime senator – IaN sO bUsY hE
12. “Emile”, or, “Overload: Between one end and the other” – Z + OL + A
    Pathological tact bars a short introduction – anag. TACT BARS → ABSTRACT
13. Father backs up into personification of chaos – SIRE reversed → ERIS
    Homer’s wife allowed, in return, to cable – MARGE + LET reversed → TELEGRAM
14. Shuts up in suspense – susPENSe
    Observe bishop’s domain – double def. SEE
    Hand out impure old ecstasy – anag. OLD + E → DOLE
15. A long trip from intoxicating soy dyes – anag. SOY DYES → ODYSSEY
    Try a pair of vices, say – vicES + SAY
Down:

1. Violent lump keeps me thoroughly beat – anag. LUMP → PUM(ME)L
   Wild zoo preserves caribou tail in anise liquor – anag. ZOO + cariboU → O(U)ZO

2. Pathway from an atoll – A + ISLE
   Old king Ned got an education – LEAR + NED

3. Type of con discombobulates one – anag. ONE → NEO
   Go drolly, all tangled up with a banner – anag. GO DROLLY → OLD GLORY

4. Tragically undo pants – no no, that’s comedy – anag. UNDO PANTS - NO → STAND UP
   We’re told a tall tale that’s caustic – homophone LIE → LYE
   In the beginning, Lloyd is punched smack in the kisser – initialism L + I + P + S

5. Reviles horribly, like a toady – anag. REVILES → SERVILE
   Incompletely evaluate backsides – ASSESs

6. Gorilla turns over pollution monitor – APE reversed → EPA
   Bombard with energy from twisted, dire tiara – anag. DIRE TIARA → IRRADIATE

7. Overheard certain grains are in bread baking step – homophone RYES → RISE
   “Aye aye, sir” has it – aYE Sir
   You might be expected to press this key article by the end of Saturday – AN + Y

8. Headless buccaneer is beside himself – pIRATE
   Endeavors to eat bear’s head for clans – TRI(B)ES

9. Knight’s word on award for mythical mourner – NI + OBE
   Psychopathic slasher cuts off own foot—what a pain – anag. SLASHEr → HASSLE

10. Excellent son runs amok for ages and ages – E + anag. SON → EONS
    Next to a water supply, a lawman in good health – WELL + NESS


12. Make a mistake in admitting Republican to emergency room – E(R)R
    John Galt’s assertion is backed up on continent – “A IS A” reversal
    Cube dweller: excellent for comic Victor – BORG + E

13. In medias res, judge exchanges coupons – RE(DEEM)S
    Shepherds’ hand protectors – double def. GUARDS

14. One revolutionary’s pain – A + CHE
    Shrub is not very bright, we hear – homophone SLOW → SLOE
    Italian valediction given by heads of Central Intelligence Agency offices – initialism C + I + A + O

15. Instruction to keep stent, excising bit of nose – STEnT
    Provider of wool hat in Alabama upset by drama’s conclusion – A + A(CAP)L reversed → ALPACA

16. A steer careens through rock formations – anag. A STEER → ARETES
    Foxy and canny, shaking off spy’s lead craftily – SLY + sLY

17. Study an opening – double def. PORE
    Pass on low grade web browser – D + IE
    Offer to help with part of Hamlet memorization – hamLET MEmorization