Virginia Woolf," "American Buffalo," and new plays that seem to hit the ground already prepared for takeoff ("The Brother/Sister Plays," "Detroit," the upcoming "Sex With Strangers"). Their new-play development and young-adult channels deliver productions that in themselves are the envy of much of the theater world. And Broadway's thirst for the Steppenwolf brand wasn't satiated by the recent one-two Tracy Leits punch: Earlier this month, they announced that "Detroit" was heading east as well. And, just to fill in her spare time, Lavey acts with some regularity, most recently alongside Petersen in "Endgame."

5 BARBARA GAINES
Artistic director, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre

We all knew that Barbara Gaines could bring clarity and contemporary relevance to the wordly world of the Bard, but who knew that as a newbie to the opera world she would take it by storm with a stunning directorial debut of Verdi's "Macbeth" at Lyric Opera. A whole new palette and career have been opened up to her that is likely to expand well beyond Arielistic adaptations of Shakespeare.

6 ANDREW ALEXANDER
Co-chairman, chief executive officer, The Second City

In one of those stories made for TV, the then-young Canadian working in Chicago got to know Second City owner Bernie Sahlin—this was before "Saturday Night Live" made sketch comedy a national sensation—and made a deal to take over the flailing Toronto operation for next to nothing. Before long, Second City Toronto was outrivalling its big brother in Chicago, nurturing the early careers of the likes of Gilda Radner, John Candy and Dan Aykroyd, and launching "SCTV," which had a critically acclaimed run on network television. By 1985, Alexander and his partner Len Stuart bought out the whole operation and he moved to Chicago. Since then, Alexander's continued to develop TV projects for the entity—though one could fairly argue that all television comedy is in some way a Second City product—and has overseen the evolution of the Second City from a "wild and crazy" fermenting pot of creativity into the professional operation that today seems well-established to last into perpetuity as one of Chicago's—and America's-cultural institutions.

7 ASHLEY WHEATER
Artistic director, The Joffrey Ballet

Replacing the founder of a high-profile ballet company is no easy task, but since Ashley Wheater took the reins of the Joffrey in 2007 he has managed to pay due homage to the artists and leadership of Gerald Arpino while breathing new life into the company by bringing works by innovative young choreographers like Edward Liang and Christopher Wheeldon.

8 TRACY LEITS
Actor and playwright, Steppenwolf Theatre Company

How can you not simply hate Tracy Leits at this moment? His "August: Osage County" is just now starting to come down its global cloud-hopping, his "Superior Donuts" leap from Chicago to Broadway and, just to remind us of how good he is, his much earlier "Killer Joe" had an acclaimed and financially successful run at Profiles last year. OK, so the guy can write. But he really rubbed it in our face by showing us that he's one of the city's finest actors as well, literally tearing up the stage in "American Buffalo" and then turning around and delivering an equally acclaimed diametrically opposite turn as George in the current Steppenwolf production of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" If he starts singing, we're throwing in the towel.

9 RENEE FLEMING
Creative consultant, Lyric Opera

Coups come in many forms, but none as soothing and more beautiful in every sense than having superstar soprano Renee Fleming be brought in on a cold, snowy December afternoon to charm the media and Lyric Opera donors with news that in a fiercely competitive opera world, the hard-to-catch diva will be singing loud and clear in Chicago for five years. The musical small print? She will be using her crossover sensibilities to select repertoire not only for herself, but for others, including bringing annual musicals and music of Andre Previn to La Scala West.

10 PHIL REYNOLDS
Executive director, Dance Center of Columbia College

The curator for the Dance Center of Columbia College for more than a decade, Phil Reynolds creates, year after year, compelling, diverse programming for one of the best spaces in Chicago to see dance. Last season featured an interdisciplinary work by Alaskan storyteller/dancer Emily Johnson, a kabuki-contemporary hybrid piece by Yoko Kashiwagi, and a joint presentation with the MCA and Harris that brought the foremost Dutch company in Japan to Chicago, as well as performances by leading local companies Hedwig and Thomas Dance.

11 DAVID CROMER
Director

Though he's logging more nights in New York City these days, David Cromer still has one foot firmly in Chicago. After his production of "Our Town" for The Hypocrites moved to New York in early 2009 and set that city on fire, his star started shining on Broadway. But he still found time last year to return home to direct a riveting production of "A Streetcar Named Desir" for Writers' Theatre, followed shortly thereafter with "Cherrywood" at the Goodman. Now he's back to Broadway with another Tennessee Williams work, "Sweet Bird of Youth" with Nicole Kidman. Will he keep up his dual theatrical citizenship? We're counting on it. Let's hope that the "genius grant" he got last year from another Chicago institution, the MacArthur Foundation, helps.

12 CHARLES NEWELL
Artistic director, Court Theatre

Charles Newell has the University of Chicago's Court Theatre reaching new artistic heights, with acclaimed productions in the recent work of Tony Kushner's "Caroline, Or Change," and the same playwright's adaptation of "The Illusion," both of which he directed, and Sean Graney's madcap takes on "The Mystery of Irma Vep" and "The Comedy of Errors." As behalfs the largest music theater on the South Side, Newell programs a strong series of shows that speak especially well to an African-American audience, most recently director Ron O'J Parson's masterful take on "Home." With the recent hiring of powerhouse regional theater veteran Steve Albert as executive director, look for even better things from Court in coming years.

13 GLENN EDGERTON
Artistic director, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago

Hubbard Street is one of the most highly regarded modern dance companies in the world, thanks in no small part to the leadership of Glenn Edgerton. Edgerton's relationships in the local dance community give the company opportunities to perform works by the likes of Jiri Kylian, William Forsythe, Nacho Duato and Mats Ek. Round out the repertoire with works by stellar resident choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo and you have a creative force to be reckoned with.

14 BRETT BATTERSON
Executive director, Auditorium Theatre of Roosevelt University

On the outside, he looks very much the part of a business man, a demeanor you'd expect from the caretaker of Chicago's Louis Sullivan-designed architectural treasure. But it's the Auditorium Theatre on solid ground, perpetuating its essential role as the home venue for the Joffrey Ballet and delivering regular touring stop of many of the world's major dance companies, whether they be the great Bolshoi from Russia, or the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. But on the inside beats the heart of an artist, and it is that sets Batterson apart. Not only does his artistic soul lead him to edgier programming decisions, like bringing in Batheva, Complexions and Nederlands Dans Theatre—which absolutely blew away everyone who saw it—but he also produces. Under his watch, Auditorium has developed its Hot Handels and "Jazz-Gospel Messiahs" into an annual franchise, he brought opera to the Auditorium for the first time in 47 years, and he's kept "Margaret Garner" in 2008 and this year he's producing the upcoming Miles Davis Festival, which includes a major dance element through a commissioned world premiere from River North Chicago Dance. Finally, he understands that sometimes the best way to experience an architectural masterpiece is to see it in a