Though we publish a list of "players" every year, we alternate between those whose accomplishments are most visible on-stage (the artists, last year) and those who wield their influence behind the curtain (this year). Not only does this allow us to consider twice as many people, but it also puts some temporal distance between the lists. So, the last time we visited this cast of characters, two years ago, we were celebrating the end of the Richard M. Daley years in Chicago, fretting over a nation seemingly in the mood for a Tea Party and contemplating the possibility of a Latter Day Saint in the White House. Today, we've got a dancer in the mayor's office, the most prominent: Mormons are in a chorus line at the Bank of America Theatre and the Tea Cup runneth dry. Call us cock-eyed optimists, but things surely look better from here. And so meet the folks who, today, bring us the best theater, dance, comedy and opera in the nation.

1 Michelle Boone
Commissioner, City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events

With a new mayor who once studied ballet and shows up regularly on the theater and dance circuit with his family, the local arts community had reason to be optimistic when Rahm Emanuel was elected to succeed seemingly mayor-for-life Richard M. Daley. Though Daley's star has been tarnished considerably these last couple years, his record on culture was surprisingly strong, as he emerged as a champion for arts education, especially through his late wife Maggie's pet project, After School Matters, but also in his championing of the North Loop Theatre District, which went from quixotic pipe dream to rock-solid edifice under his watch. And just as Rahm has big slippers to fill, so too his new head of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Michelle Boone, who's occupying the seat that the legendary Lois Weisberg practically invented. A longtime arts administrator in the nonprofit sector (most recently at the Joyce Foundation), Boone's first undertaking was rather formidable, as she led the creation of the city's first cultural plan in a generation. A massive project that incorporated dozens and dozens of public "conversations" and town hall meetings, the plan was certainly expectedly a lightning rod for any and all of those who felt left out under Daley's more insular regime, but now that it's done, the real work begins. Will the Emanuel administration take the torch it's been passed—the nation's most dynamic theater and comedy scenes, a dance community that has soared in the last decade to heretofore unseen heights and an opera that is the envy of the world—and build an even bigger and better fire, or will it allow it to lose its spark? We'll soon know.

2 Lou Raizin
President, Broadway In Chicago

Inspired by the state's tax credits for filmmaking, at the end of 2011, Broadway In Chicago president Lou Raizin succeeded in his quest to get the State of Illinois to pass a potential seven-figure tax credit for shows that either establish long runs in Chicago or that begin their Broadway-bound journeys here. At the end of 2012, his company opened "The Book of Mormon" to box-office records at the Bank of America Theatre, and quickly extended the run into the fall of 2013. And on the Broadway incubation front, his company brought the high-profile Cyndi Lauper-Harvey Fierstein collaboration "Kinky Boots" to Chicago for its world premiere; this spring he'll do the same with the much-anticipated theatrical version of the pre-Broadway "Big Fish." Even in a cash-strapped state like Illinois, few are begrudging this tax break, since long-running Broadway shows in the Loop are magnets for tourism, and pre-Broadway premieres generate national attention, helping firmly establish Chicago as America's theater travel destination second only to New York.

3 Robert Falls
Artistic director, Goodman Theatre

"The Iceman Cometh" was a real game changer for The Goodman and for Chicago. Robert Falls' exhilarating production, which played to full-capacity houses its entire run, announced no Broadway ambitions and, despite a knockdown, drag-out rave from The New York Times' critic Charles Isherwood, none ever materialized. So, with New York off the radar, people came here instead. A lot of people. Audiences from forty-six states and eight countries saw the show, and Chicago became the envy of the nation's theatergoers. The production proved that the idea of this city as a theater tourism destination is most definitely not a pipe dream. And, after nearly thirty years as artistic director, Falls is as risk-taking and edgy as ever. Last season, he gave Spanish director Calixto Bieito his American debut with the expressionist, seductively politicized "Camino Real." And later this year, quite contrarily, the Goodman will collaborate with Disney Theatrical on "The Jungle Book." Falls, an avid tweeter, has kept the eighty-seven-year-old company one of the most diverse and innovative in the nation, and shows no signs of slowing down.

4 Anthony Freud
General director, Lyric Opera

Lyric Opera, already among the top opera companies in the U.S., just got even better. During his first planned full season, the eloquent and astute General Director Anthony Freud has implemented some awesome new reforms. He spearheaded Lyric Unlimited, which enables the company to broaden their programming, spread out into the community and bring back new audiences to Wacker Drive. So far boasting "The Second City Guide to the Opera," an...
irrelevant satire of the operaverse, "Popcorn and Pasquale," a beginner opera buffa for little ones and their parents, and "Cruzar la Cara de la Luna," the world’s first mariachi opera—also to be performed in Pilsen and Waukegan—Freud’s new program is as ambitious as it is joyous and celebratory. Of course, if you’re already among Lyric’s 26,000 existing subscribers, rest assured. Freud’s first season in the Ardis Krainik Theatre has been uniformly terrific. Memorable highlights have included a particularly psychological, mixed-media "Werther" and a gargantuan, bloody, thrillingly-sung new "Elektra." Long live passion, indeed.

Alexander has been with the Second City for almost forty years (as co-owner for almost thirty of those), and has expanded the brand not only within Chicago but across the country. Last year, Second City unveiled the UP Comedy Club, pushing Second City into the stand-up arena. He’s a member of the Board of Trustees at Columbia College as well as the Board of Directors at the League of Chicago Theaters and has produced or executive-produced more than 200 Second City revues.

7 Ashley Wheater
Artistic director, Joffrey Ballet

In his six years as artistic director of one of the world’s foremost ballet companies, Ashley Wheater has led the continued evolution of the Joffrey Ballet, striking an elegant balance of fresh repertory with pieces by emerging artists, revival of important masterpieces—like last year’s deeply moving production of "The Green Table"—and adding works by big names to the rep. Wheater has excelled at challenging his versatile company and pulling in audiences, and done so by gazing at ballet through the daring American lens crafted by Robert Joffrey.

ranging from the Public in New York to the Kennedy Center in Washington. Yew’s hiring to take over for Dennis Zacek, who, alongside his managing director and wife Marcella McVay, built Victory Gardens into a Regional Theatre Tony Award winner over a more than three-decade tenure, was a real coup for a theater signaling its plan to not only perpetuate its reputation for artistic excellence, but to take it to even higher levels. And artistically, Yew’s shown signs of doing just that, with his lively production of "Oedipus El Rey," both of which not subtly sent out the message that a new era of diversity was also at hand. Worst: Though there are few who wouldn’t argue that the old Victory Gardens was getting a little dusty, falling off the essential list for Chicago’s theater cognoscenti in the waning years of Zacek’s reign, Yew effectively cleaned house in a manner wholly impolitic and shocking for a theater community that had heretofore prided itself on convivial congeniality and collaboration. First, the playwright’s ensemble that had of late formed the backbone of the theater’s mission was unceremoniously forced into "alumni" status; then beloved and well-regarded associate artistic director (and the local favorite for his job when it was open) Sandy Shinner was demoted. The business side was not spared either, as first marketing director John Zinn and then executive director Jan Kallish headed for the exits. At year’s end little seemingly stood of the old Victory Gardens other than its shiny dwellings in the restored biograph theater, where Yew will continue to wage his artistically promising war in a space named after his increasingly diminished predecessors, Zacek and McVay. His fans, cheered by the promise of constructive moves like the enlistment of a new playwrights ensemble headlined by the likes of Tony Sarafo and Philip Dawkins, had better multiply fast as the Victory Gardens Yew inherited was hemorrhaging cash, to the tune of $1.7 million in losses over the two fiscal years ending in 2010 (the most recent tax returns available) with a shrinking budget that put it behind some much younger companies on the rise, like Lookingglass and Writers’.

10 Criss Henderson
Executive director, Victory Gardens Theater

Criss Henderson sure has a lot on his plate. The twenty-three-year Chicago Shakespeare executive director has been talking up the company’s plans for a third CST space, intended to seat at least 500 people. And they’ll need the room because just last spring, the now-defunct Chicago Muse left more than $500,000 to Chicago Shakes to continue developing new musicals. Meanwhile, workhorse programs like CST Family and Team Shakespeare have made it so that twenty-five percent of the company’s patrons are under the age of eighteen, and many young Chicagoans see theater for the very first time on the Pier. In addition to a fine array of Shakespeare, classics, classic-inspired plays and musicals, Henderson co-curates the vital World’s Stage Series. Having formed a treasured bond with the National Theatre of Scotland and bringing back the seismic Beauregard Free Theatre in early February, World’s Stage...
saw two-time Tony Award winning actor Mark Rylance performing his famous turn in “Twelfth Night” for Chicago audiences before Broadway even knew his name.

11 Roche Schuler
Executive director, Goodman Theatre
As theaters around the country scale back, make desperate pleas for bigger audiences or, worst of all, close up shop, Roche Schuler has worked tirelessly to keep the Goodman the treasured city fixture it has been for eighty-seven years. In fact, he’s made tremendous improvements. The 2011-2012 season was the company’s most financially successful to date, achieving ninety-percent capacity for the nine productions, along with record high fundraising totals and a whopping $300,000 gift from the Shubert Foundation. Along with their boundary-pushing, innovative season programming, under Roche’s watch, the thirty-five-year “A Christmas Carol” tradition has continued to thrive and give families a heartwarming, artistically fertile evening at the theater. More than three decades at the helm and a mountain of accolades under his belt, Schuler’s perpetually kind, outgoing demeanor easily conceals that he is among the hardest working people in Chicago theater.

12 Michael Tiknis
President and managing director, Harris Theater
Since its opening in 2003, Millennium Park’s Harris Theater has been the premiere venue for independent dance production in Chicago, hosting the likes of Hubbard Street Dance, most notably, but also groups ranging from River North Dance to Muntu to Luna Negra. But in addition to serving as an essential mid-size rental house optimized for dance, the venue also produces its own event series under the Harris Theater Presents rubric. Last year, they landed the coup of all coups, presenting Paris Opera Ballet’s first-ever Chicago engagement. Since that’s the place that is credited with pretty much inventing ballet as we know it, that’s no small get and the response was, to say the least, enthusiastic.

13 Andrew White
Artistic director and co-founder, Lookingglass Theatre Company
Onstage at the Beacon Theatre in 2011, Regional Theatre Tony Award—Chicago’s fifth—in hand, Andrew White told a national television audience that Lookingglass Theatre Company believes in taking risks, supporting each other and telling the story. If you saw “Eastland” last season or “Metamorphoses” this winter, you’ve seen those optimistic principles in action. Collaborating with Ben Sussman and Andre Pluess, White penned the critically acclaimed musical “Eastland,” creatively chronicling the S.S. Eastland Disaster, which, due to popular demand, extended months past its original closing date. And, in what was perhaps the most unique theatrical event of the year, Lookingglass collaborated with celebrity chef Rick Bayless on “Cascabel,” a boisterous amalgam of theater, food and circus—the hottest, and slickest ticket in town. Capping off a stellar 2012 was a surprisingly rejuvenated remount of “Metamorphoses,” which moves to Washington D.C.’s Arena Stage in February.

14 Steve Traxler
Co-founder and president, Jam Theatricals
While we all know about Broadway in Chicago, fewer realize the local influence on Broadway Outside Chicago. Traxler’s Jam Theatricals manage thirty Broadway subscription markets across the US, and recently took over management, along with SMG, of the 1835-vintage National Theatre in Washington, DC. But it’s in providing a pipeline for major Chicago shows to make the Broadway leap that gets our attention, most recently the acclaimed Steppenwolf production of “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” that’s a critical darling on the Great White Way right now. Traxler’s also got quite a history with another onetime Chicagoan, David Mamet. Not only is Jam a major producer of the hit revival of “Glengarry Glen Ross” starring Al Pacino (they won a Tony Award for the 2005 revival with Liev Schreiber and Alan Alda), but they also had a hand in Mamet’s world premiere of “The Anarchist,” which was one of Broadway’s notable flops last fall. A board member of the Goodman, Traxler’s been connected to “August: Osage County” ever since it left the stage on Halsted for fame and fortune: in fact, he’s a producer of the film version currently in production.

15 Charles Newell
Artistic director, Court Theatre
In his eighteen years as artistic director, Charles Newell has honed and expounded upon Court Theatre’s longstanding mission to present innovative productions of classic plays by incorporating the modern classic, the musical and sublime works of the African-American canon. And audiences and critics alike have adored the result. Newell’s leadership has led to audiences of about 35,000 a year—a strong number given Court’s 250-seat intimate space. He has also established a fortunate relationship with one of America’s greatest living playwrights, Tony Kushner. Last season, Newell directed the second production (the first was Off Broadway) of Kushner’s lightly revised “Angels in America” in a complete, eight-hour marathon.

16 Barbara Gaines
Artistic director, Chicago Shakespeare Theater
On opening nights at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, artistic director Barbara Gaines can be seen weaving through the ecstatic crowds with a unique kind of magnetism, obviously so proud of all she’s accomplished on Navy Pier. If getting the gorgeous theater built thirteen years ago wasn’t enough, she’s expanded their classical theater and musicals audience to thousands of families and children, exposing the young to the magic and possibility of live theater. The rest of the city has the yearly pleasure of viewing diverse seasons of plays and artists not only from Chicago, but other leading classical theaters like the Stratford Festival, The Globe Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Not to mention that the World’s Stage Series is the most exciting importer of international work in Chicago. Gaines has ensured that Chicago Shakes’ role here is vital and impossible to replace.

17 Renée Fleming
Creative consultant, Lyric Opera
In her role as Lyric Opera Creative Consultant, Renée Fleming could very easily fall back on her impressive international reputation as a world-class soprano, pose for a photo opp or two in front of the skyline, and have an assistant draft an enthusiastic press release a couple times a year. Just having Fleming’s name and face on promotional posters plastered around the Loop is, itself, a boon for Lyric. However, from the frequency in which she appears at the Civic Opera House in person, with focused eagerness and oodles of innovative ideas, you’d hardly even know she doesn’t live out her days in Lakeview. Among her plethora of duties, Fleming performs an integral function as an advisory member of the board of directors. In 2011, she announced a new partnership with the Merit School of Music, sharing Lyric’s enviable resources with the esteemed school. Fleming even did some vocal coaching with the teenage students via Skype from her New York apartment. In January, Fleming co-hosted “The Second City Guide to the Opera” with none other than Sir Patrick Stewart, and, coming up in the spring, she performs the role of Blanche DuBois—a role written for her—in André Previn’s “A Streetcar Named Desire.”

18 David Hawkanson
Executive director, Steppenwolf Theatre
In ten seasons at Steppenwolf, executive director David Hawkanson has overseen some enormous changes to the beloved Chicago institution, while keeping its soul firmly planted in honest, visceral performance. Since 2008, the company has transferred three acclaimed plays to Broadway—“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is wowing audiences and critics right now. They have reconfigured the Garage space as a functional theater, overwhelmingly expanding their artistic programming. In the children and family theater arena, The Steppenwolf for Young Adults program is thriving. The SYA run of “The Book Thief” sold out rapidly to local schools, necessitating added performances for the curious adults. And with the recent purchase of the 18,000 square foot Ethan Allen building next door, Steppenwolf is poised to soon assume the majority of a city block.

19 Deb Clapp
Executive director, League of Chicago Theatres
An avid supporter of theaters big and small, the League of Chicago Theatres executive director Deb Clapp really wants to get folks in seats. So much so that this February, in conjunction with the brand new Choose Chicago
21 David Cromer
Director
Just when we thought David Cromer couldn't ascend any higher, he proved us wrong. The MacArthur Genius director who got his start in Chicago with hits like "Our Town" at The Hypocrites and "Adding Machine" at Next Theatre works so much here, you'd hardly even know it's not his home base anymore. Cromer directed two of Chicago's most talked about productions of 2012. The New York Times' Ben Brantley giddily praised The Goodman's "Sweet Bird of Youth" starring Diane Lane, while the darker, dreamier "Rent" at American Theater Company (a co-production with About Face Theatre) sparked equal parts adoration and fury. But Cromer doesn't limit himself to only Chicago and New York. No, sir. His sensational production of Nina Raine's "Tribes," which closed last week at the Barrow Street Theatre Off Broadway moves to the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in February. And that oh-so-famous staging of "Our Town," now at Huntington Theatre Company, is regaling Massachusetts audiences with its small-town, barebones universality and a breathtaking Act III surprise.

22 Fred Eychaner
President, Alphawood Foundation and board member, Joffrey Ballet
In a city whose performance culture is dominated by its nonprofits, the folks who hold mostly anonymously and behind the scenes to provide funding are an essential cog in its machinery. Perhaps most valuable of all are those who help the small and medium-sized theaters and dance companies—the ones whose boards don't dominate the society pages—stay up and running. Chicago's blessed with many such funders, from the individual angels who populate boards to the foundations like Driehaus, MacArthur, Chicago Community Trust and Alphawood that fund not only the bold-faced names of today, but also the marquees of tomorrow. Though media mogul Fred Eychaner (his company prints Newcity) is known as a spotlight avoider, he puts his own money to work for causes he believes in, whether it's LGBT issues, the election and reelection of President Barack Obama or the arts. On the latter front, he reportedly gave $100 million of his own money to the Alphawood Foundation, which is not only a major donor to the Joffrey Ballet, but also to dozens and dozens of smaller groups, ranging from Breakbone Dance to A Red Orchid Theatre.

23 Tracy Letts
Ensemble member, Steppenwolf Theatre
It takes real power to do what Tracy Letts did last winter at Steppenwolf. When John Mahoney had to bow out of "Penelope" two weeks prior to opening, Letts, an old pro, effortlessly stepped in, giving no impression that he hadn't been attached to the production all along and making no public fuss over the situation. His performance was, as usual, terrific.

24 Lar Lubovitch and Jay Franke
Founders and artistic directors, Chicago Dancing Festival
Each summer, the Chicago Dancing Festival grows in size, scope and ambition. What started as three free nights of dance at the Pritzker Pavilion in 2008 grew over the last five years to a full week of performances, lectures, films and panel discussions at the four biggest dance venues in the city. The biggest free festival dedicated exclusively to dance was the brainchild of Chicago-based dancer Jay Franke and Chicago-born, New York-based, internationally renowned Lar Lubovitch, who continue to collaborate annually on the project, pulling in big names from the coasts to share the stage with some of the finest companies in Chicago.

25 Glenn Edgerton
Artistic director, Hubbard Street Dance Company
When he took over the city's largest homegrown presenter of contemporary dance as only its third-ever artistic director in more than thirty years in 2009, Glenn Edgerton brought a deep appreciation for dance practiced at its very highest level, honed in a career as a dancer and director, most notably with the Joffrey Ballet and Nederlands Dans Theater. Since then, he's expanded the collaborative enterprise of his predecessors, building on partnerships with the CSO and Art Institute and launching a major showcase for new work at the MCA. In addition to showcasing the work of resident choreographer Alejandro Cerrudo in the Hubbard Street repertoire, he's expanded collaborations with some of the world's most interesting dance creators, like Mats Ek and Victor Quijada. All this while overseeing a company of eighteen dancers who perform here and around the world year-round.
26 Lane Alexander  
Co-founder and director of Chicago Human Rhythm Project  
Chicago's king of tap, co-founder and director of Chicago Human Rhythm Project Lane Alexander, has certainly been on his toes as of late. As dance's sole representative on newly elected Mayor Rahm Emanuel's arts and culture transition team, he was an essential voice in putting forth the community's interests at a critical time. And then, last summer, he launched American Rhythm Center at the Fine Arts Building, a shared education, rehearsal, and administrative facility for several arts groups, including his own, as well as Giordano Dance Chicago, Kalaprilaya, Cerqua Rivera Dance Theatre and several others. And then, last month, Alexander choreographed the first-ever tap concert at the Kennedy Center, "JUBAV! Masters of Tap and Percussive Dance." All this in addition to CHRP's regular operations and performances, including the massive Rhythm World summer festival and Global Rhythms production that kicks off the holiday season.

27 Michael Halberstam  
Artistic director and co-founder, Writers' Theatre  
Artistic Director Michael Halberstam co-founded Writers' Theatre twenty years ago, and that risky suburban experiment has proven an enormously popular destination in the sleepy hamlet of Glencoe. The community has embraced the theater, and when Halberstam announced that they will break ground on a whole new Studio Gang-designed building in place of their current Women's Library Club facility, their gracious landlord agreed to rent them the plot on a ninety-nine-year lease for only a dollar per year. That's a measly number compared to the estimated $30 million the building will cost. After twenty years of intelligent, forceful, intimate drama, Writers has also recently woven musicals into their repertoire, and their audience of 35,000 is clamoring for them. "A Minister's Wife" ended up at New York's Lincoln Center, last summer's "A Little Night Music" was a perfect summer romance, and Halberstam helms "Sweet Charity" later this month. He's sure to be doing the Rich Man's Frog come season's end.

28 PJ Powers  
Artistic director and co-founder, TimeLine Theatre  
At a rebellious sixteen years old, TimeLine Theatre Company has been driving like a pro for a while now. In 2011, the American Theatre Wing called them "one of the nation's top 10 most promising emerging professional theatres" and in 2010, the Wall Street Journal's Terry Teachout named TimeLine "Company of the Year." The many accolades are thanks, in no small part, to co-founder and artistic direc-

30 Charna Halpern  
Producer and co-founder, IO  
Working with the legendary Del Close, Charna Halpern began promoting and teaching the longform improvisational structure known as the Harold more than thirty years ago. Located just down the street from Wrigley Field, IO Chicago (formerly ImprovOlympic) has since become a hotbed of improvisational impressiveness, with last year's three new additions to the "Saturday Night Live" cast serving as only the latest examples of alumni from IO moving up in the comedy world. Halpern has witnessed over 5,000 students progress through IO's classes, penned seminal works on improvisation and helped particle physicists in Switzerland work together, but she still dedicates the majority of her time to IO, overseeing over twenty-five Improv and sketch shows a week on IO's two stages. And sometime in the next year, IO will be leaving its longtime Wrigleyville environs for a new home in the Clybourn Corridor, where it will move more double in size.

31 Onye Ozuzu  
Choir, Department of Dance, Columbia College  
Academic appointments rarely create much of a stir, but Columbia College's recent well-publicized budget upheavals, which have precipitated the downsizing or demise of some longstanding public-facing cultural entities, has made this appointment far more noteworthy than might otherwise be expected. For Ozuzu, the domain includes the vital arts presenter The Dance Center of Columbia College which, until the fifteen-year leadership of executive director Phil Reynolds, has become one of the nation's strongest proponents of challenging contemporary dance. Ozuzu, who came to Chicago a similar position at the University of Colorado, is also an accomplished performer and choreographer, specializing in African-based contemporary techniques, a field likely to generate tremendous interest in these parts.

32 Kelly Leonard  
Producer and executive vice president, Second City  
On top of overseeing all of Second City's live performances, Leonard has also produced numerous numbers and set up many a business venture (including the 2005 deal wi...
Norwegian Cruise Lines that now finds seven Second City ensembles aboard NCL ships) over the years. Last year he helped lead a surprising collaboration between The Second City and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, which resulted in January 5th’s “The Second City Guide to the Opera,” a sold-out show at the Civic Opera House featuring Patrick Stewart and soprano Renee Fleming that proved so popular a revival with performances throughout the month of June was announced only a few days later. The revival will include some on-stage seating, with libations and table service available throughout the show, presumably so audience members can toast comic innovation.

33 Christopher Clinton Conway
Executive director, Joffrey Ballet
Two words: Joffrey Tower. Christopher Clinton Conway joined Joffrey Ballet in the fall of 2005 and dove into the largest capital campaign in its history. Now, its name reigns above State Street in a shiny building that houses its offices and the 20,000-square-foot Joffrey Academy of Dance, a hard-to-imagine outcome for a company that a mere decade earlier moved to Chicago from New York in a last-ditch effort to avoid its likely demise. Today, he presides over one of the city’s cultural pillars, an organization with a budget near fifteen million dollars a year, a full season of performances at the Auditorium Theatre and a global reputation for innovation in ballet.

34 Peter Taub
Director of performances,
Museum of Contemporary Art
Peter Taub has built the Museum of Contemporary Art into a titanic presence of the experimental theater, dance and music scene in Chicago. Audiences might best remember 2008’s marathon “Gaza,” the New York-based Elevator Repair Service’s six-hour, enlightening “Great Gatsby” non-adaptation, but in 2012, Taub made the bold and risky move of bringing controversial monologist Mike Daisey to the Edlis Neeson stage less than a year after he’d been chastised on “This American Life” for journalistic failings in “The Agony and The Ecstasy of Steve Jobs.” In April, MCA will host a highly-anticipated run of the sensational Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company’s “Untitled Feminist Show.” Taub simply knows what’s hot, and he brings it here.

35 Rachel Rockwell
Director and choreographer
When The Tribune’s Chris Jones named Rachel Rockwell the Chicagoan of the Year in theater, he led the article with “Rachel Rockwell brings out the best in child actors.” A bold-faced truth if there ever was one, the director-choreographer’s productions of “Annie” at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora and “The Sound of Music” at Drury Lane Oakbrook elicited excited turns from her precocious performers. But Rockwell is not only adept at crafting theater that includes child actors, she’s a master of entertainment for young people and their families.

“Disney’s Beauty and The Beast” last summer at Chicago Shakespeare was a delightful, unexpectedly moving treat for kids and adults alike. Shortly thereafter, Rockwell directed the first-time outing of CST’s Shakespeare in The Parks program, which kicked off with “The Taming of the Shrew.” “Shrew” toured to eleven different outdoor locations, playing for free to anyone with a lawn chair and a love of classic comedy. Rockwell also just as effortlessly helms darker, more mature fare like “Sweeney Todd” or TimeLine’s “Enron.”

36 Brian Posen
Founder and executive producer, Chicago SketchFest; artistic director, Stage 773
From teaching at Second City, Steppenwolf and Columbia to directing and acting in award-winning shows, it’s hard to find a specific genre or title to multi-faceted Posen down. As artistic director of Stage 773, which opened on Belmont in 2010 and was dramatically remodeled in 2011 as a four-theater complex, Posen has his hands in more artistic arenas than ever before. But despite all his accomplishments, it may be the Chicago Sketch Comedy Festival that provides his most impressive credential. This year, the twelfth annual Chicago SketchFest, now the largest sketch-comedy festival in the nation, put on 169 shows with 145 groups and almost 10,000 audience members. That’s a lot of funny.

37 Mary Zimmerman
Director and playwright
Two seasons after enticing crowds with "Candide"’s Voltairean wit at the Goodman, D.C.’s Shakespeare Theatre Company and Boston’s Huntington Theatre, director Mary Zimmerman made a literal splash in 2012 with the remount of her emotionally rich, aesthetically triumphant "Metamorphoses" at Lookingglass. "Metamorphoses" moves, along with most of its cast, to Arena Stage in February, but Zimmerman still has a wide year in store for Chicago. She directs the stage production of Disney’s "The Jungle Book," at the Goodman where Zimmerman is an artistic associate, and if the show proves anything like Disney Theatrical’s other mondo properties, this “Book” will have another chapter.

38 Jeremy Wechsler
Artistic director, Theater Wit
Though Jeremy Wechsler’s a fine director—his perennial “Santaland Diaries” shows little sign of losing steam—it’s his entrepreneurial spirit in constructing and operating Theater Wit, the three-theater building in Lakeview, that makes him an essential part of the city’s performing-arts community. With a mix of resident companies like Stage Left, Bohemian Theatre Ensemble and The Inconvenience, and rent-a-rooms ranging from Griffin to Shattered Globe, Wit has become an essential venue for the city’s many companies that operate without a permanent home base. And Wechsler...
Innovative membership program, which allows unlimited theatergoing to any of the building’s shows for a monthly fee (think Netflix), has the potential to reinvent and cross-pollinate theater-going in a major new way.

39 **Chris Jones**
Chief theater critic, Chicago Tribune

In his second decade after taking up the mammoth Chicago Tribune mantle, theater critic Chris Jones’ influence hasn’t yet begun to fade. In fact, it’s growing. In print and on the Tribune’s high traffic “Theater Loop” blog, the wise-cracking Brit covers the major Equity houses and community-center basements with equal aplomb and unrivaled eagerness. A four-star review from Jones can turn a meagerly successful run at a hole-in-the-wall theater into a mega-hit overnight, sold-out extensions and transfers galore. Unbeknownst to many, Chris is not only Chicago’s critic either. His reviews of Broadway shows are often reprinted across much of the Tribune chain of papers, as far away as Florida. Plus, at about 250 shows a year, Jones still covers more performances than just about every other print critic in Chicago. And he does it all with the most disarming wink you’ll ever witness.

40 **Andreas Mitisek**
General director, Chicago Opera Theater

Andreas Mitisek recently succeeded Brian Dickie as general director of the Chicago Opera Theater, and if Dickie was known for putting up groundbreaking modern work like the robot opera, “Death and The Powers,” Mitisek goes one step further. Several steps, actually. He has a reputation for leaving the opera house and staging works outdoors, in empty swimming pools and furniture warehouses as the general director of Long Beach Opera, a post he still retains. Mitisek is also a widely-praised administrator, having raised subscriptions at LBO by 500 percent and doubling its budget to $1.3 million during his nine-year tenure. With some accumulated debt and an operating budget of about $2.5 million, the brand new general director is expected to repeat his magic here in Chicago.

41 **Henry Godinez**
Artistic associate, Goodman Theatre

The sixth biennial Latino Theatre Festival, again curated by Goodman artistic associate Henry Godinez, is making a big structural alteration. Rather than the whole thing being sequestered into a single time frame, the works—ranging from Cuba’s Teatro Buendía to the local Albany Park Theater Project—will be presented over several months, ensuring that as wide an audience as possible will have the opportunity to take in all of the festival. Godinez’s big score? The world premiere of 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winner Quiara Alegría Hudes’ “The Happiest Song Plays Last” in April. Honored in 2008 as the Latino Professional of The Year by the Chicago Latino Network, Godinez, the co-founder and former artistic director of Teatro Vista, has had a decades-long career as a director, staging the world premieres of plays by the likes of José Rivera, Luis Alfaro and Regina Taylor.

42 **Stuart Oken**
CEO and producer, Elephant Eye Theatrical

Broadway producers living in Chicago, hundreds of miles from New York, are a rare breed. But Stuart Oken of Elephant Eye Theatrical has a long history here. A graduate of the University of Illinois, Oken built the Apollo Theater Center—the present-day home of “Million Dollar Quartet”—in 1978. He operated the theater for thirteen years before handing over the reigns to Michael Leavitt (his current partner at Elephant Eye) in 1991. From there, he served as the executive vice president of Disney Theatrical during its “Lion King” and “Beauty and The Beast” heyday, playing a major creative role in the gestation of those tit shows. Founded in 2005, the biggest project to date for Oken and Leavitt’s Elephant Eye Theatrical has been “The Addams Family.” Though the show was poorly received by critics in Chicago and New York, Broadway audiences flocked to the star power of Nathan Lane and Bebe Neuwirth. The show didn’t recoup on Broadway, but a reconfigured touring production that has been faring well critically and at the box office should keep Oken’s fingers snapping.

43 **Brian Loeven**
Managing director, Chicago Dramatists, and partner, Chicago Commercial Collective

As if running the business operations of Chicago Dramatists, the city’s leading play-
45 PJ Paparelli
Artistic director, American Theater Company

This season at American Theater Company, artistic director PJ Paparelli has taken on the mammoth effort of bringing in more than a thousand area students to see the theater’s production of “Columbus,” which he has revised with original co-author Stephen Karam, based on new interviews held in Littleton, Colorado. For a company of ATC’s size, few if any outreach efforts come close, and in the wake of recent national tragedies, none are nearly as urgent. In the spring, working in the same model that lead “The Original Grease” to huge success, ATC will also play host to the sixties rock musical “Ha! Paparelli will direct and co-creator James Rado will restore original material to the show that hasn’t been unearthed in forty-five years. Expect audiences young and old to join the tribe.

46 Heather Hartley
Executive director, Audience Architects

As artists scramble for funding in an ever-scarcer fiscal environment, Audience Architects—the nonprofit behind seechicago.dance.com and takechicago.dance.com—created an innovative model for filling seats and generating revenue. The two sites are comprehensive catalogs of everything dance in the city, including reviews, discount tickets and deals on classes—and veteran dance professional Hartley is at the helm, making dance more visible and accessible citywide. Last year, the organization held convenings of the dance community, in part to galvanize the art form’s role in the city’s evolving cultural plan. In 2013, the organization will expand the mission to include building bridges between artists and venues in a new partnership with the Illinois Presenters Network.

47 Joe Jahraus
Artistic director and co-founder, Profiles Theatre

In 2012, the twenty-five-year-old Profiles Theatre expanded from one truly intimate Alley Stage to a veritable North Broadway compound. The company, founded by co-artistic director Joe Jahraus, acquired the former National Pastime Theatre space, which has since become Profiles’ Main Stage. The new space is wide enough to allow a full-sized taxi to sit on the floor during their current revival of “Hellcab” and tall enough to facilitate a two-story cabin set in its inaugural production of Neil LaBute’s “In A Forest, Dark and Deep.” But the Main Stage still retains the tension and close proximity to the audience that so informs the company’s identity, as evidenced by their marvelous production of Richard Nelson’s “Sweet and Sad” Jahraus directed last year. Profiles also maintains a strong, ongoing relationship with playwright and Resident Artist, Neil LaBute. It was recently announced that the company will present the world premiere of a revised edition of LaBute’s “In The Company of Men,” the play that begot the film of the same name.

48 Halena Kays
Artistic director, The Hypocrites

When The Hypocrites announced in 2011 that Halena Kays would succeed Seas Graney as artistic director—the first such transition in the company’s sixteen-year history—the fit seemed natural. She’d co-created the joyous and cool Barrel of Monkeys, a popular educational theater environment for children. And last season, for the Neo-Futurists she directed the critically lauded “Burning Bluebeard,” a one-act in which clowns expressionistically recreate the tragic frouzoius Theater fire. The Hypocrites are on top of the world with sold-out runs of popular shows at the Chopin Theatre, and the huge announcement that Sean Graney and Kevin O’Donnell’s rejiggered “The Pirates of Penzance” will close the preeminent American Repertory Theater’s mainstage season in May in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Kays, one of ten recipients of a 3Arts Award grant last year, has also spread her enormously talented wings to act as co-curator of Theater on the Lake in 2013.

49 Suzy Grant
Program manager, Chicago Dancemakers Forum

Growing ranks of talented experimental and contemporary dancers include “Chicago Dancemakers Forum lab artist” in their bio. The CDF hands out four grants each year to incubate and present emerging talent at Links Hall, providing those precious commodities of money, space and publicity in an ever-more-scarce fiscal environment for the arts. Suzy Grant is a natural fit to guide the CDF; she’s a tireless proponent of contemporary dance who’s done it all and worked with just about everyone—production management for Khecari, projects coordination for the Chicago Moving Company, public relations for a half dozen small companies and dancing with a half dozen more.

50 Cathy Taylor
Founder and president, Cathy Taylor Public Relations

While most six-year-olds are struggling to keep their lemonade stand afloat, the six-year-old Cathy Taylor Public Relations has impressively grown to handle publicity for many of the major theaters in the city, including the Tony Award-winning Lookingglass, Chicago Shakespeare and Victory Gardens. Whether the cast of Black Ensemble’s “The Other Cinderella” is performing live on WGN or recent Chicago Shakespeare actor (and Star Wars Emperor Palpatine) Ian McDiarmid is being interviewed by the Tribune, Cathy or vice president Schoenly Hixson can likely be found hovering nearby, in total control of the situation but always keeping the atmosphere pleasant and light. Despite her firm’s formidable roster of clients, each receives concentrated, individualized attention. From an outsider’s perspective, one would never realize that theaters as artistically divergent as A Red Orchid and Court don’t have their own in-house publicist. That’s where Cathy Taylor comes in. Pay no attention to the publicist behind the curtain!