The steady expansion of the performing arts in Chicago continues its marvelous pace, with more and better theater, dance, comedy and opera gracing more and better stages each passing year. The upward progression is so steady that epic undertakings—a new campus at Steppenwolf, a bigger chunk of Navy Pier for Chicago Shakes—seem almost business as usual these days. And that is a marvelous thing. This year we again celebrate the lesser-sung heroes offstage who deal with the less glamorous things like building those new stages, and paying those expanding payrolls without which the stars would have nowhere to shine.

Tragedy has been central to theater since the ancient Greeks first staged it, but the last year has brought a disproportionate volume of real-life tragedy to our community. No doubt, the expanding and maturing performing arts universe means that more members of its community will pass on each year, but the number of those struck down long before their expected hour was overwhelming these last twelve months and struck every corner of performing arts, from theater, to dance, to comedy, to opera. Molly Glynn, Jason Chin, Eric Eatherly, Bernie Yvon, Johan Engels, Julia Neary—and others we’ve unintentionally overlooked—we dim our collective marquee for you. (Brian Hieggelke)

Players was written by Zach Freeman and Sharon Hoyer
With additional contributions by Brian Hieggelke, Alex Huntsberger, Aaron Hunt, Hugh Iglarsh and Loy Webb

All photos by Joe Mazza/Brave-Lux, taken on location at Steppenwolf Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Lyric Opera of Chicago and Brave-Lux Stud
1 Andrew Alexander  
CEO, co-owner, Second City  
A few years ago, we lauded Andrew Alexander’s addition of the UP Comedy Club to the Second City realm on Wells Street. Recent years have prove the wisdom of the decision, with stand-up enjoying a new golden era and the UP Comedy Club boasting performances by known quantities and loca stand-ups alike. More recently he’s annexed an additional 25,000 square feet of an old movie theater space in Pipers Alley for an expansion of thei Training Center. The final line in his Second City bio states that “In his current capacity as CEO and Executive Producer of The Second City, Alexander ensures that Second City’s empire of funny will stay on top.” After four decades of doing just that, he not only knows where the industr is heading, he’s leading it there.

2 Brett Batterson  
Executive director, Auditorium Theatre  
At first glance, Brett Batterson looks like a Chamber of Commerce type, polished, business-like, besuited. But then you notice the footwear, and s his ubiquitous cowboy boots, an outward expression of the artist’s soul within. As a businessman, Batterson oversees one of the institutional jewel of Chicago, the Louis Sullivan-designed 3901-seat masterpiece, the Auditorium Theatre. And as an artist, he ensures that its programming evokes diversity in every sense, both in entities large (Joffrey Ballet) and small, like the many dance and music companies featured in the Made in Chicag series; and in the great cultural breadth of the city, with programming such as the MLK-weekend “Too Hot to Handel” and the astonishingly successful annual residency of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Notably, while other cultural institutions are making hay over tenth, or twenty fifth anniversaries, he’s led the Auditorium in an epic 125th anniversary season this year, making his organization one of the inaugural Fifth Star awardees by the city of Chicago. And this spring, he’ll propel it into a whole new kind of theater, when it becomes the first host of the NFL Draft outside of New York in fifty years.
Roche Schulfer
Executive director, Goodman Theatre

Executive director Roche Schulfer celebrated forty years with the Goodman Theatre last year. But really it’s the Goodman that’s celebrating. During his tenure Schulfer has overseen incredible seasons and the most recent was no exception, with attendance hitting eighty-five percent of capacity, pulling in the fifth consecutive year of positive financial results. And while we’re talking numbers, one Scrooge is not enough for Schulfer. He may be responsible for launching the annual holiday classic “A Christmas Carol” almost four decades ago, but this Christmas he shook things up by collaborating with The Second City to bring in a second Ebenezer in a parodic take on the Dickens classic.

Lou Raizin
President and co-founder, Broadway In Chicago

Chicago’s profile as a theater destination has increasingly risen over the last few years, and Broadway in Chicago president and co-founder Lou Raizin is one of the people working hardest to make that happen. “The way I think about things,” says Raizin, “Chicago’s number one.” And he shows that through his results, with the five BIC stages—and numerous first-runs, tours and new works that grace them—bringing an annual economic impact of 750 million dollars, and thousands of jobs, to Chicago and Illinois.
5 Anthony Freud
General director, Lyric Opera of Chicago

Anthony Freud guards Lyric Opera’s $70 million budget in one pocket and its artistic contribution in the other. Despite the national decline in subscriber bases, Lyric has remained in the black. This season includes “The Passenger,” a holocaust-themed opera which impressed Freud with “its exploration of both victim and perpetrator.” Freud continues to expand the Lyric Unlimited program, bringing mariachi and klezmer opera to the neighborhoods. This spring, “Carousel” whirls onto the Lyric stage, and the 2015-16 season—the first that Freud is fully curating—will feature the Lyric’s first world premiere in more than a decade. Freud is determined to make Lyric THE great American opera company.

6 David Schmitz
Managing director, Steppenwolf

When three-weeks-at-the-helm managing director tells you “he’s worked for clowns,” he’s not complaining about a pernicious former work environment, he means he worked for clowns. Literally, in an early job after getting his MFA in directing at Roosevelt, he worked on the business side of clowning, with the kind who entertain on the birthday-party circuit. No word on whether that better prepared him for a career on the business side of theater in Chicago, but his ascension to the top administrative post at Steppenwolf, on the eve of an ambitious plan to expand its theatrical “campus,” evidences some serious skills in working with a wide range of personalities. See our extended interview with David Schmitz for more on his past and future at Steppenwolf.
President/CEO, Paramount Theatre in Aurora

Less than four years ago, Paramount Theatre CEO Tim Rater (working with artistic director Jim Corti) asked investors to take a nearly four-million-dollar risk, investing in topnotch, Broadway-caliber musicals in an aging theater in a Chicago suburb. Fast-forward to now and the gamble has more than paid off. “Tim has done something no one has done in Chicago that I can recall ever doing so quickly,” says a theater insider. “He’s created roughly four to five hundred jobs for all of us.” On top of that he’s putting out work so impressive that it’s drawing audiences from Chicago to Aurora rather than vice-versa. Numbers make the turnaround even clearer: Paramount’s most recent production of “Mary Poppins” sold 62,000 tickets over six weeks. That’s almost 10,000 more tickets than their entire 2010-2011 season!

8 Michael Tiknis
President and managing director, Harris Theater for Music and Dance

In ten short years, the Harris Theater has become a central pillar of Chicago’s arts scene, as identifiable as the Auditorium Theatre or the Lyric Opera; it’s now hard to imagine our music, dance and architectural landscape without it. Under the direction of Michael Tiknis, the 1,500-seat theater is home to Music of the Baroque and provides the ideal high-profile, lakefront venue for more than a dozen homegrown dance companies including Hubbard Street, River North, Thodos, Visceral, and Giordano, while pulling in some of the best in contemporary dance and ballet, including Alonzo King LINES from San Francisco, ballet legend Wendy Whelan’s “Restless Creature” and the State Ballet Theatre of Russia. The Eat to the Beat series exposes the downtown lunch crowd to the best in music and dance for five bucks.

9 Robert Falls
Artistic director, Goodman Theatre

Robert Falls has been artistic director at the Goodman Theatre since 1986, a stretch longer than most theater companies have even been in existence. And under Falls’ leadership, the ninety-year-old company has not just stayed fresh and relevant but has become more of both, opening shows that garner nationwide press for the Chicago theater scene and using the Goodman’s New Stages program to introduce new
artists. And he doesn’t bogart his talents: while the Goodman’s ninetieth season was successfully kicking off this past fall, he was opening the Lyric Opera’s sixtie season by directing an ambitious “Don Giovanni.”

10 Criss Henderson
Executive director, Chicago Shakespeare Theater
Longtime Chicago Shakespeare Theater executive director Criss Henderson may believe (as CST’s mission states) that “Shakespeare speaks to everyone” but his company doesn’t thrive on Billy alone, putting on some of the most entertaining works by any playwright, bringing in shows from around the globe with their World’s Stage Series and allowing spectacle to breathe new life into any script. CST actively supports a younger average patron age through deals like their “CST For $20” special, where anyone under thirty-five can purchase a ticket for only twenty dollars, and commissioning dope works like the now internationally popular “Othello: The Remix.” Constantly presenting masterful renditions of Shakespearean classics and his lesser-known works alike certainly doesn’t hurt.

11 Sean Graney
Founding artistic director, The Hypocrites
After spending almost twenty years gleefully carpet-bombing classic plays with his dark, irreverent promenade style, you might think that Sean Graney would be petering out. And yet 2014 saw his most ambitious works to date: “All Our Tragic,” a twelve-hour opus encompassing all thirty-two surviving Greek tragedies, and “The Gilbert & Sullivan Rep,” a musical trilogy that drags the duo’s operettas off their pedestals and
down into the (family-friendly) mosh pit. But perhaps it shouldn’t be so surprising. Graney’s a necromancer after all, taking the corpses of dead texts and making them dance anew. Yes, his style is literally death-defying.

12 Peter Taub  
Director of performance programs, Museum of Contemporary Art  
Under Peter Taub’s direction, the MCA Stage presents the best in avant-garde and experimental performance year after year. Taub always puts together a refreshingly eclectic season and all genres are welcome. Last year the MCA brought back New York-based experimental theater company Elevator Repair Service, presented Sandra Bernhard’s one-woman show, housed a revival of the legendary contemporary dance piece “Rosas Danst Rosas” and presented Mikhail Baryshnikov’s theatrical production of two Chekhov short stories. Taub is highly influential in Chicago’s dance scene well, serving on the Chicago Dancemakers Forum consortium. He makes plenty of space on the MCA calendar for local artists like The Seldoms and eighth blackbird, and the dozen musicians, dancers and performance artists who starred in the David Bowie Variety Hour, presented as part of the wildly popular “David Bowie Is” exhibition last fall.

13 Anna Shapiro  
Incoming artistic director, Steppenwolf Theatre  
It’s telling that Anna Shapiro’s connection to Steppenwolf dates back to 1995, when she served as the original director of the New Plays Lab, for that’s the year that the woman whose metaphorically big shoes she’ll be stepping into, Martha Lavey, began her nineteen-year run as a transformative and stabilizing artistic director. Shapiro’s a rising star, currently directing “This Is Our Youth” on Broadway after charting on the national consciousness and winning a Tony, and many other awards, for “August: Osage County,” so it was a big get for Steppenwolf to get her to settle down in this new role, even if she was already an ensemble member and thus “family.” After a long line of actors running the company, Shapiro brings a director’s perspective to the artistic directorship. Beyond that, we’ll have to see what kind of course she charts for the ensemble when she starts in her new role next season.
Once an arts organization reaches a certain size and level of prominence, it can be tough to keep things fresh, experimental and playful. But Glenn Edgerton continues to uphold Hubbard Street’s internationally recognized standard of excellence while nudging at its boundaries. Hubbard Street’s impressive repertory from the most recognized contemporary choreographers continues to grow; and their imaginative collaboration with The Second City last year was a resounding success that demonstrated both the versatility of the company and the delightful results when two major players step outside their comfort zones to collaborate.

Charna Halpern has more than established herself in Chicago (and the rest of the country) as an improvisational force to be reckoned with. And when the Wrigleyville building that her beloved IO Theater had been housed in since the mid-nineties was slated for demolition a few years ago, rather than scraping together a new location, she doubled down, remodeling a 40,000-square-foot warehouse space near the North/Clybourn Red Line stop and relocating there. “[Moving] was going to be expensive anyway,” she said. “So I figured what the hell, I might as well go bigger.” Bigger it is, with four cabaret stages and a huge bar area in place of the previous two stages, making room for more students, more improv and more funny.

14 Glenn Edgerton
Artistic Director, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago

15 Charna Halpern
Producer and co-founder, IO

Co-founder and owner of iO, co-author of improv bible “Truth in Comedy” and comedy taste-maker (the list of iO alumni that you know is headshakingly long) Charna Halpern has more than established herself in Chicago (and the rest of the country) as an improvisational force to be reckoned with. And when the Wrigleyville building that her beloved IO Theater had been housed in since the mid-nineties was slated for demolition a few years ago, rather than scraping together a new location, she doubled down, remodeling a 40,000-square-foot warehouse space near the North/Clybourn Red Line stop and relocating there. “[Moving] was going to be expensive anyway,” she said. “So I figured what the hell, I might as well go bigger.” Bigger it is, with four cabaret stages and a huge bar area in place of the previous two stages, making room for more students, more improv and more funny.
Martha Lavey  
Artistic director, Steppenwolf Theatre

When the announcement issued forth last fall that Martha Lavey was stepping down, in a coordinated move with then-executive director David Hawkanson, the news was surprising only in that word had not leaked that such a monumental change was in the works. But the whole thing had such an orderly succession quality to it, with Hawkanson giving way to his ten-years-at-Steppenwolf lieutenant David Schmitz, and Lavey stepping aside for longtime ensemble member and collaborator Anna Shapiro. Orderliness is expected from Steppenwolf these days, at least as a substantial arts organization, where public conflict is confined to the stage. But this was not the case when Lavey took the helm back in 1995. That same year Steppenwolf’s then-chief rival for local attention and national heat, Remains Theatre Ensemble, failed under the weight of the ensemble model, unable to sustain itself after founders like William Petersen and Gary Cole left town to pursue growing film and television careers. Steppenwolf was subject to similar strains and its board allegedly forced out longtime artistic director Randall Arney, with managing director Stephen Eich leaving shortly thereafter. Into the breach stepped Lavey, under whose leadership Steppenwolf has matured into a highly functioning, well-funded organization still connected to its founders and ensemble, with many of its famous actors returning on a regular basis to take its stage. Likewise, the company has become a leading international “brand” in theater, with a regular presence on Broadway and at the Tony Awards for many of its productions. Though all credit can’t be Lavey’s alone, it’s hard to imagine their spectacular success story without her, and her low-key, calming maternal presence.

Greg Cameron  
Executive director, Joffrey Ballet

The new executive director of Chicago’s most prominent dance company brings an impressive resume spanning multiple art forms to the post; Cameron formerly held senior positions at WTTW/WFMT, the Art Institute and the MCA, and worked for the Department of Cultural Affairs. Connections like those certainly come in handy building endowments and seeking out donors. What’s next for the Joffrey? Cameron envisions the company, its name resplendent above State Street, as a cultural magnet for international tourism.
18 Michael Halberstam
Artistic director and co-founder, Writers Theatre

Founding a vibrant theater company outside of the Chicago city limits can be a risky business. Maintaining that vibrancy is even more iffy. But with construction recently begun on a new thirty-one-million-dollar theater center in Glencoe, Writers Theatre is moving into its twenties in style, under Michael Halberstam’s leadership, bringing its 35,000 annual patrons along for a ride. And Halberstam himself is still everywhere, directing for Writers as well as on both coasts. This spring he’s directing an adaptation of “A Doll’s House” for the young Definition Theatre company.

19 Eileen LaCario
Vice president, Broadway In Chicago

Eileen LaCario has absolutely no problem saying that Chicago theater audiences are the best around. This is why in her post as vice president of Broadway in Chicago she continuously fights to get shows to Chicago first, before they hit Broadway or go on national tour. Additionally, LaCario has opened/re-opened some of Chicago’s finest theaters including the Royal George Theatre, the Cadillac Palace Theatre and the Oriental Theatre just to name a few. Chicago is increasingly known as one of the top theater cities around, and LaCario is a big part of the reason why.

20 Deb Clapp
Executive director, The League of Chicago Theatres

When Deb Clapp first arrived in Chicago she knew very little about its theater community. Now it’s virtually impossible to have a conversation about Chicago theater without mentioning her name. As executive director of The League of Chicago Theatres, she has made a significant impact by relentlessly marketing, supporting and advocating for small and large theaters around the city. Clapp was also instrumental in developing Chicago Theatre Week which is now entering its third year. Its overwhelming success has led it to expand to a ten-day celebration of seeing great shows at affordable prices.
21 Steve Traxler
Co-founder and president, Jam Theatricals
Jam Theatricals may be responsible for Broadway engagements and subscription series in almost thirty cities across the country, but its heart (and its offices) can be found in Chicago. With seven Tony Awards under their belts (including one in 2013 for producing the Chicago breakout “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”), Steve Traxler and company keep Chicago on the map, no matter where they’re producing. Next up on Broadway is Chicagoan David Mamet’s new play “China Doll” starring Al Pacino. Looks like Traxler has his eye on that eighth Tony. 22 Kelly Leonard
Producer, executive vice president, Second City
After the success of “The Second City Guide to the Opera” (a collaboration with Lyric Opera) Leonard oversaw additional notable collaborations in Chicago’s upper echelons of culture, mixing Second City comedy with Hubbard Street Dance (“The Art of Falling”) and The Goodman Theatre (the Dickensian parody “Twist Your Dickens, Or Scrooge You,” which sold so well that it was extended before it even opened). If you’re not impressed yet, wait ’til February third when Harper Collins will release, “Yes, And,” a book on improvisation and creativity he’s co-written with Second City Communications CEO Tom Yorton.

23 Charles Newell
Artistic director, Court Theatre
After twenty years as Court Theatre’s artistic director, it’s amazing that Charles Newell still has the power to amaze. But with a constant stream of new, newly revised, newly translated or newly adapted works crossing his stage he makes it seem easy, mixing the classic with the fresh for impressive results that both sell tickets and earn respect. The world-premiere adaptation of “Native Son” is only the most recent example.

24 Mick Napier
Artistic director and founder, The Annoyance
Early last year, The Annoyance Theatre—which has been making (decidedly dark) waves in the Chicago comedy scene through both training and performance since the late eighties—relocated from a small space at Lawrence and Broadway to the heart of Lakeview, opening a new two-theater comedy center with a large bar area. During that same time, artistic director and founder Mick Napier directed both the Second City mainstage show “Depraved New World” and a revue at The Annoyance called “Invisible World” while also executive-producing a sketch comedy pilot for NBC. He’s also getting ready to release a new book on long-form improvisation.

25 Lar Lubovitch and Jay Franke
Founders and artistic directors, Chicago Dancing Festival
Although Lar Lubovitch has spent most of his adult life and established his career in New York, he didn’t forget his hometown. Lubovitch, along wit
Chicago-based dancer Jay Franke, has made a tremendous impact on dance accessibility in our city with the creation of the Chicago Dancing Festival: a week of free performances at the Auditorium Theatre, Harris Theater, Pritzker Pavilion and MCA. More than 70,000 people have attended the festival since 2007, seeing greatest hits from our hometown artists and big name companies from across the US and abroad.

26 PJ Powers
Artistic director, co-founder, TimeLine Theatre Company
Under PJ Powers’ considered but adventurous leadership, TimeLine Theatre has blossomed into one of the most successful storefront companies in the city. From their homegrown hit “To Master The Art,” to last season’s revival of “The Normal Heart” starring David Cromer, TimeLine produces plays “inspired by history” that consistently appeal to present-day audiences. Powers partially credits his success to his background as an actor: “I think that it’s been good to us and good for me in that I’m mostly looking at our work from a broader perspective and not having my head entrenched in one or two shows.”

27 Lane Alexander
Co-founder and artistic director, Chicago Human Rhythm Project
Chicago is a world capital for tap and percussive dance, thanks to the Chicago Human Rhythm Project and Lane Alexander. CHRP draws hundreds of dancers from around the globe to teach, learn, perform and jam at the annual Rhythm World festival and Chicago audiences are steadily introduce to unfamiliar rhythmic dance styles by companies sought out by CHRP, many of whom had never performed in the U.S. before. Alexander continue to be a strong voice for arts advocacy and policy, helping found the American Rhythm Center in the Fine Arts building and having served on Rahm Emanuel’s transition team for arts and culture policy. With Alexander leading the way, tap and percussive dance have a growing presence in Chicago’s performance scene.
After catching her mischievously throwing rocks, a Chicago Park District drama instructor gave young Jackie Taylor the choice between being taken to the police station or drama courses. Taylor chose the latter and hasn’t looked back since. More than thirty-five years ago, she set out to create theater company with the lofty mission of eradicating racism. That theater has now become a nineteen-million-dollar Chicago cultural institution. And while the wall of racism may not be entirely destroyed in Taylor’s lifetime, the Black Ensemble Theater Cultural Center will continue the dismantling process long after she is gone.

You might think that being the founder and executive producer of the nation’s largest sketch comedy festival (the Chicago Sketch Comedy Festival which has been running since 2002 and hosts 168 groups over eight days this month) would be a full-time job. But for Brian Posen—who serves as the head of Beginning Improvisation at Second City, an instructor at Columbia College Chicago and the founder and director of “Cupid Has a Heart On” (the longest running musical comedy in Chicago)—it’s just one of many hats he wears, including artistic director of the four-theater Stage 773 complex on Belmont, which, when not running its own productions, has been providing various Chicago groups with performance space since 2010.

After producer Michael Cullen shepherded the physical and managerial refurbishment of the shuttered historic Mercury Theater in the nineties, Walter Stearns left his longtime post atop Porchlight to take over and reboot it in 2011. Under Stearns’ leadership, the Mercury soon began to selfproduce. He directed Mercury’s 2014 “Avenue Q,” which was extended until it was forced to close for the annual “The Christmas Schooner.” “You should never have to close a hit show,” Stearns once remarked, chafing under the restrictions of producing in rented venues. Now he only closes on hit to make room for the next.
With Heather Hartley at the helm, the organization founded to build dance audiences in Chicago—initially through mailing lists and the websites seechicagodance.com and takechicagodance.com—has grown from a marketing project into a rich resource for presentation, discussion and logistical support for the Chicago dance community. In 2013, Audience Architects hosted a six-part discussion series on diversity and inclusion in the Chicago dance scene. The ongoing “Dance: A Moving Canvas” series gives audiences a look into the choreographic process through presentation and moderated discussion. With Hartley’s guidance, Audience Architects is building not just dance audiences, but informed, engaged dance audiences.

Helming Chicago’s Theater Wit, while overseeing the care of the community gift that is the company’s physical plant, with its three black boxes that are lent to Chicago’s many homeless, yet vibrant storefront theaters, and partnering with its resident companies, Wechsler clearly understand the needs of Chicago theater, and has the foresight to create answers instead of adding to the wringing of hands. Theater Wit’s 2015-16 season continues with plays both hilarious, wise and witty, and the company continues to offer its unique Membership and FlexPass programs, allowing more theater-goers to see more theater for less. As Jeremy Wechsler dreamed, Theater Wit has become a “Theater Hub.”
33 Gwendolyn Whiteside
Producing artistic director, American Blues Theater

A member of American Blues Theater since 1998, Gwendolyn Whiteside became producing artistic director in 2010 and has been pushing the company to new heights ever since, masterfully working on stage and behind the scenes with equal aplomb and nearly doubling the size of ABT’s ensemble along the way. Last year, the remount of “Hank Williams: Lost Highway” became a hit again, winning critical acclaim (and three Jeff Awards). ABT also co-produced the world premiere of “Native Son” at Court and broke their own box-office records with their annual holiday show “It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!” in which Whiteside co-starred. We can only assume she was planning the next banner season during the other actors’ lines.

34 Jacqueline Russell
Founder and artistic director, Chicago Children’s Theatre

The Chicago Children’s Theatre is celebrating its tenth season in a big way, welcoming five million dollars in new state funding with plans to transform a former West Loop police station into a new two-stage home. Since its creation, founder Jacqueline Russell has been steadily walking the tightrope of building the theater’s prestige while maintaining its central vision (which includes “inclusion and accessibility”). In April, the company will open a show whose description would be welcome at any theater in town: a world-premiere adaptation of “Alice in Wonderland” by top-notch Chicago artists Rachel Rockwell and Michael Mahler. Now that’s children’s theater for the whole family.
35 Brian Loevner
Producer, Chicago Commercial Collective
Previously the managing director of Chicago Dramatists (and currently a management consultant for the Chicago Fringe Festival and a board memb for Collaboration), Loevner currently dedicates the majority of his time to Chicago Commercial Collective (CCC), which not only gives proven hits like “5 Lesbians Eating a Quiche” and “To Master the Art” second lives on Chicago stages, but strives to encourage independent local and out of town producers to produce in Chicago. Success stories include the recent “Dee Snider’s Rock and Roll Christmas Tale” at Broadway Playhouse and the upcoming “First Date” at the Royal George. But, more impressively, CCC has crafted a little thing called “The Off Loop Tour” which packages eleven productions from Chicago non-profits (including hits like “Honeybuns” and “Methtacular!”) and markets them to universities and arts cente—they are actively booking Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 now.

36 Timothy J. Evans
Executive director, Northlight and partner, Steppenwolf Films
After more than twenty years at Steppenwolf, Timothy J. Evans stepped into the executive director position at Northlight, overseeing five mainstage productions a year there while also maintaining a partnership with Gary Sinise, Terry Kinney and Jeff Perry through Steppenwolf Films. In 2013 he co-founded the Three Oaks Theater Festival, which brings Chicago theater to Harbor County, Michigan. This past summer, in its second year, the festival had already expanded.

37 Michael Weber
Artistic director, Porchlight Music Theatre
Michael Weber had already made his mark on the Chicago musical theater scene when he was named artistic director of Porchlight Music Theatre in 2011. Since then he’s expanded and enhanced the brand, reaching newbies by creating The School at Porchlight with writing, appreciation and performance divisions and diehards by launching the popular “Porchlight Revisits...” series, while maintaining the company’s quality: Porchlight’s most recent season took home four Jeff Awards.

38 Andreas Mitisek
General director, Chicago Opera Theater
Andreas Mitisek took the reins of Chicago Opera Theater in 2012 and turned its programming on its head. “COT is the place to take an adventurous journey and discover new and rarely performed opera, or opera imagined in new and different ways,” he explains. He conducts, directs, designs and is guiding COT through perilous financial times. 2015 will see two works by living composers. “Each opera is surrounded by additional events to deepen the experience of the performance. They are collaborations with other organizations, and range from movies based on the same story, meetings with the composer, concerts and others.”
39 Chris Jones
Chief theater critic, Chicago Tribune
In case you didn’t know, the most well-known critic in town is also a TV and radio personality (CBS-2 and WGN, respectively), college professor (DePaul University’s vaunted Theatre School), author (2013’s “Bigger, Brighter, Louder”) and recently became the director of the National Critics Institute. And still, despite occasional jaunts to cover Broadway, you’ll still find him on most nights in the audience of a Chicago theater, whether it’s to cover a major touring company, one of our local powerhouses or an upcoming storefront.

40 Onye Ozuzu
Chair, Dance department of Columbia College
As chair of the Dance department of Columbia College, Onye Ozuzu helps guide one of the most influential dance institutions in the city; the Dance Center teaching body is comprised of Chicago’s top contemporary and experimental dance makers. Ozuzu’s interest in movement as technology an her specialty in forms outside the institutional cannon of ballet and modern sets a forward-thinking tone for Columbia College’s dance department and resonates with the cutting-edge performances at the Dance Center—curated by longtime director Phil Reynolds—which last year included performances by Cloud Gate Theatre of Taiwan, Compagnie Kafig, Peter Carpenter, Same Planet Different World, and Khecari.

41 TJ Jagodowski & Dave Pasquesi
Directors, The Mission Theater at iO
“Trust us, this is all made up,” this Chicago duo are known to remark before presenting their legendary improvised Wednesday night show, “TJ&Dave.” Though that show is still running, the duo has made up a lot more recently, moving behind the scenes with the movement of iO to the new Mission Theater space (which opened in August of last year) to direct the long-form improvisation group “Tone” on Wednesdays as well as the new iO resident ensemble sketch revue “Trap” on Fridays and Saturdays. “We started an ensemble comedy theater in Chicago, “ says Dave Pasquesi proudly. “This is a town with plenty of theater and improvisation, but not many comedy theaters. We have a non-equity theater that employs actors.” And they’re now going into rehearsals for their second revue.
Willa J. Taylor
Director of education and community engagement, Goodman Theatre
Willa J. Taylor has served as a linguist in the US Navy and opened her own gourmet catering company. But since 2007 she’s been bringing her unique set of skills (no, not linguistics or cooking) to the Goodman’s education and community-engagement offerings, heading, among other things, the Goodman’s General Theater Studies summer program which helped eighty-one students in 2014, many from underserved communities, delve into their own creativity. If that’s not a big enough number for you, more than 2,800 students participated in the 2013-2014 Student Subscription Series which offered Goodman productions at no charge.

Ryan Martin
Artistic director, Den Theatre
Wicker Park’s The Den Theatre is quickly becoming a hip and influential hub for the Chicago itinerant storefront scene, shifting its center of gravit from the Red Line toward the Blue. Originally opening as a twisty warren of five theaters with a vast, lushly appointed lobby space, The Den recently added a 200-seat black box on the ground floor unlike anything else available. The man behind all this is Ryan Martin, the Den’s artistic director. His vision for a theater complex-cum-Wicker Park bar points toward the future of live theater: part hangout, part high-art, and all mixed up together.

Shoshona Currier
Director of Performing Arts, DCASE
The Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events is by far the largest-scale purveyor of free and affordable arts presentation in the city, and Currier helms the performing arts arm, programming theater, music and dance for the Pritzker Pavilion and the Storefront Theater, as well as organizing events like SummerDance (so popular that WinterDance has now kicked off at venues in the city) and the World Music Festival. Currier also serves on the consortium of the Chicago Dancemakers Forum.

45 Jennifer Beltran Winkin  
Manager, UP Comedy Club  
Formerly a manager of Gotham Comedy Club in New York, Jennifer Beltran Winkin was tapped to manage the UP Comedy Club after it opened in 2011 and has since been responsible for booking everyone at UP, from local comedians to big names like Bob Odenkirk, Nick Kroll and Maria Bamford. But getting big names isn’t what lands Winkin on this list: what does is promoting Chicago’s own, making sure that even these shows by touring comedians are emceed by local comics as often as possible, giving them exposure when audiences are sure to be at their largest. Though U is only three years old (and the Second City brand certainly doesn’t hurt), Winkin has made it both a solid touring venue and a great place for new comedians to get their feet wet. “Being kind in this business goes a long way,” Winkin says. With her help, Chicago’s comedians will too.

46 Roell Schmidt  
Executive director, Links Hall  
Roell Schmidt, director of Links since 2009, led the organization from its cramped space in the eponymous building in Wrigleyville to a more spacious, comfortable home in Constellation (formerly the Viaduct Theater) almost two years ago, when Schmidt met musician and Constellation founder Mike Reed on the city’s Cultural Advisory Council. The new digs have proven a more suitable space for the city’s most fertile incubator of experimental performance: welcoming and intimate, with minimal décor and ample room to play.
As a founding member (and executive director) of Oracle Productions, Brad Jayhan-Little has overseen a revolutionary demonstration of the way theater can be paid for in this city (or anywhere, really). In 2010, Oracle launched their Public Access Theatre and Free Art For All campaigns, funding their productions not with ticket sales but with sponsors and donations. Several seasons (and thousands of tickets) later, the model is more than working: Oracle shows don’t just sell out because the tickets are free, they’re also known to be original and topnotch. But don’t take our word for it: they won five Jeff Awards last year.

Venetia Stifler
Executive and artistic director, Ruth Page Center for the Arts
More than forty years ago, dance icon Ruth Page built one of our city’s great gems for artistic production and incubation, providing pre-professional training for young dancers and rehearsal and presentation space for small to mid-sized dance and theater companies. When Page passed away in 1991, the direction of the Center was uncertain. Enter Venetia Stifler who, since 2000, has kept Page’s vision strong and growing; under Stifler’s guidance, the Center currently houses seven Artist-in-Residence organizations, including River North Dance, ShawChicago Theater Company, American Blues Theater, and Stifler’s own CDI/Concert Dance, and trains the next generation of dancers via the Ruth Page Civic Ballet.

Sean Taylor
Central Regional Director, Actors’ Equity Association
For the last fourteen months, attorney Sean Taylor has been the man in charge of Actors’ Equity Association’s vast central region. Four thousand Midwestern actors and stage managers depend on him and his staff. “Entertainment is the most highly unionized private-sector industry in the country,” says Taylor. “Nobody gets rich here, but members earn enough to pay the bills, and are protected, too. In return,
theater owners—and audiences—know they’re going to get quality and consistency.” Pointing to 2014’s two-percent-increase in work weeks, Taylor describes live theatre as a growth industry. As with every union, Equity’s leading role is to protect its dues-paying members. But it also serves a quality-control function, according to Taylor: “Our standards ensure that our members are happy—and a happy actor is a good actor.”

50 Diane Hires
Chair, Jeff Committee

“It is a privilege to represent a tremendously dedicated group of fifty-five theater enthusiasts,” Diane Hires says humbly. As chair of the Joseph Jefferson Committee—the body whose members evaluate more than 250 theatrical productions a year and whose mission since 1968 has been “celebrating excellence in Chicago theatre”—for the last three years she has both enlarged and strengthened the membership of the committee while also improving the production values of both the Equity and Non-Equity Awards events (as close as Chicago gets to its own Tony Awards). Last summer Jane Lynch announced the 2013-2014 equity nominees, her familiar name lending an even greater air of prestige to the announcement. Hires is already anticipating producing the second Equity Nominations Announcement this August: here’s to drawing attention to Chicago artists.