

Musical mentor

Chicago pianist Robert Irving III got his start with jazz legend Miles Davis. Now Irving is similarly nurturing young Chicago musicians in his Generations band. He talks to Howard Reich.

Chicago Tribune

ON THE TOWN

A cure for the winter blues



It's cold.

And there's snow on the ground. All you want to do is hibernate. We understand. But what if there were a collection of entertainment delights, from Disney on Ice to the deadpan comedic stylings of Steven Wright? If neither of those floats your boat, you can try Chicago's WinterDance or get your mind around some creative music. Check out Do It Now for suggestions. **Page 5**



Chicago sludge

Oozing Wound is a great band with an unfortunate name and a power(ful) trio that looks poised for something or other. Greg Kot talks to the band about music, expectations and a day job.



Open for the holidays

"Newsies" and "Mary Poppins" both did huge business over the holidays, says Chris Jones, in part because they knew the secret to staying open the week after Christmas.

THE THEATER LOOP

BY CHRIS JONES



Memo to theaters: Stay open for the holidays

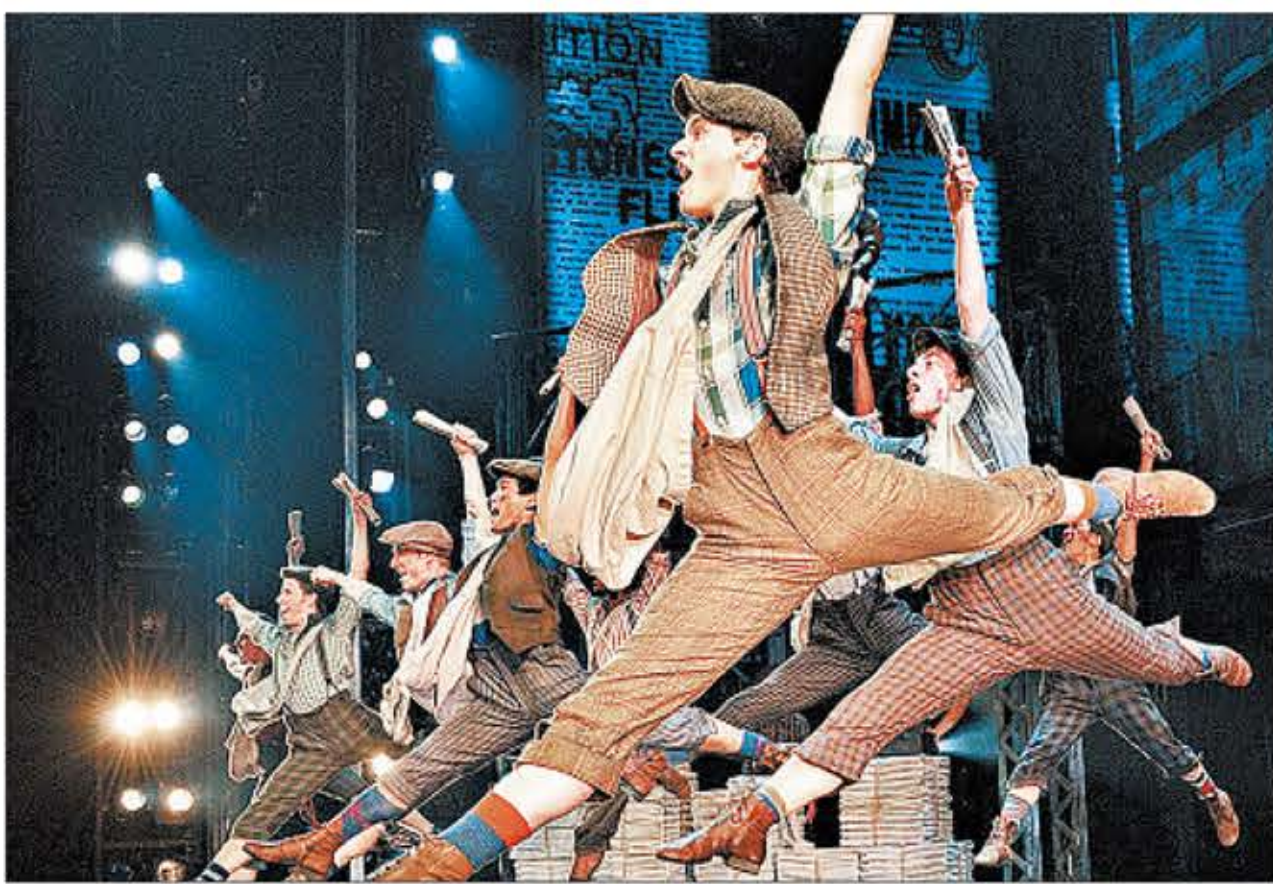
In the business of commercial theater, there is no better week than the one roughly between Christmas and New Year. Just ask Disney. In that week in Chicago, the tour of "Newsies" pulled in \$2,012,723, which is the first time any theatrical attraction in Chicago has broken \$2 million in a week. "Cinderella" also was at close-to-capacity business that week.

And yet: It's striking how many of Chicago's smaller, nonprofit theaters close their shows right before Christmas.

Theater artists, of course, want and deserve a holiday just like anyone else. And nonprofit theaters are not just about the money that comes in at the box office. Victory Gardens closed "The Testament of Mary" before the holidays, no doubt on the reasonable assumption that holiday theatergoers were looking for lighter fare.

Still, there is a lesson here. They certainly learned it in Aurora, where (according to a report in the Beacon-News) the Paramount Theatre's production of "Mary Poppins" (which played through Jan. 4 and did capacity business in its final week) attracted a truly amazing total of 62,000 theatergoers in its six-week run in the western suburbs.

The ticket prices in Aurora are much cheaper than in Chicago's Loop. Nonetheless, consistent weekly attendance in excess of 10,000 patrons represents heady numbers at any theater, anywhere, including Broadway. Paramount also was smart enough to be up and running on Thanksgiving weekend.



DISNEY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

A touring production of the Disney musical "Newsies" recently wrapped up at the Oriental Theatre in the Loop.

Not coincidentally, "Mary Poppins" is a Disney show, licensed by the Paramount. Maybe I should add a clause to my opening sentence: "Especially when you're doing Disney."

Still, plenty of people around Chicago thought the Paramount would struggle to attract sizable audiences to its home-grown musical productions; a number like 62,000 for a show that already had enjoyed considerable exposure to the Chicago-area market should put an end to that.

The post-Christmas bounce was neither a Chicago nor a Disney phenomenon. In New York, "Wicked" (the show that

held the previous record for a single-week gross in Chicago) managed to haul in a stunning \$2.7 million, meaning that the average (not the top) price paid per ticket was close to \$180. What a difference a week makes: The following week, the one ending Jan. 11, "Wicked" dipped by over a million dollars. So did most of the other shows in New York. "Newsies" would have dipped, too, but I still think the show would have done very well in Chicago. There was plenty of pent-up demand.

All of this discussion about money made is usually avoided in Chicago. Broadway in Chicago



LIZ LAUREN/PARAMOUNT THEATRE

The production of "Mary Poppins" at the Paramount in Aurora attracted 62,000 theatergoers in six weeks.

generally doesn't like quantifying the haul at its box offices and passed my questions on to Disney, even though Broadway in Chicago was benefiting

from the overages, once "Newsies" had returned its guarantees to Disney for that stunning week.

Why is this? It's probably fair to say that there is

more price sensitivity in Chicago. And most Midwesterners don't like to brag.

In New York, though, the grosses are public and widely published and discussed. When shows have banner weeks, the producers like to crow about them, in part because it increases the value of their brand (everybody wants to see a hit!), and the publicity can keep a show running longer. These days, the compensation given to touring Equity actors is often tied to the takings at the box office; that was the case with "Newsies." And while the calculations are complex, I think it's fair to say that, for that week in Chicago, the ensemble members with this show made more money than the minimums on Broadway. I've been among those criticizing the rise of these contracts with lower guaranteed salaries for performers. But when a show makes money like this, there is certainly some profit-sharing.

That's great if you're a "Newsie." Or if you own a business in the Loop.

This weekend, Paramount opens "Tommy." The calendar doesn't offer any help this time, and the material is more challenging. Tim Rater, who runs the Paramount, says he knows he won't replicate ticket sales for "Mary Poppins." But in an interview Monday, he said he was hoping to reach 40,000 people, which would be more than double the numbers that came to the Paramount's first home-grown show, "My Fair Lady," in 2011.

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CHRIS JONES RECOMMENDS

"Airline Highway"

★★★½
Lisa D'Amour's fascinating drama is a romantic treatment of a New Orleans motel's colorful loners and outliers and the spontaneous families that spring up among those let down by real relatives. Directed at Steppenwolf Theatre Company by Joe Mantello with kindness, restraint and sudden bursts of energy, it is a fine match for an ensemble-oriented group of distinguished Chicago actors who imbue these characters with spunk, spirit and vulnerability. Few playwrights have the acute sense of American place you find in D'Amour's beautiful writing. *Through Feb. 14 at Steppenwolf Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.; \$20-\$86 at 312-335-1650 or steppenwolf.org*

"Blue Man Group"

★★★★
When "Blue Man Group" first opened in Chicago in 1997, most of the attention went to the drumming, the swallowing of marshmallows and the wordless communication from the baldheaded blue dudes. In the latest version of the show at the Briar Street Theatre, a trio of giant "GiPads" descend from above, one per Blue Man, representatives of the new technological moment. *Open run at the Briar Street Theatre, 3133 N. Halsted St.; \$49-\$69 at ticketmaster.com*

"H.M.S. Pinafore"

★★★
When it comes to cheating the gray skies of winter, only Santa has a bigger bag of tricks than Sean Graney and The Hypocrites. This time, Graney has turned to the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta "H.M.S. Pinafore." The theme is a pajama party on a nautical-themed playground. Longtime readers will know that I loved both "Pirates of Penzance"

and "The Mikado" (which are also in production again in the Hypocrites' new home at the Den Theatre). And while "H.M.S. Pinafore" is, to my mind, a notch under its two predecessors, there's nothing here to change my mind about the brilliance of the Great Graney Gilbert-and-Sullivan experimentation. *Through Feb. 7 at the Den Theatre, 1329 N. Milwaukee Ave.; \$36-\$50 at 773-525-5991 or the-hypocrites.com*

"The Humans"

★★★★
Stephen Karam's kind, deeply moving new play, which you and yours do not want to miss, is benefiting from one of those great, unflashy, only-possible-in-Chicago ensemble productions at the American Theater Company, under the direction of PJ Paparelli. Clearly drawn from personal experience, "The Humans" is composed entirely of a single 90-minute scene set during a Thanksgiving dinner in New York, wherein a young woman has invited her working-class family from Scranton, Pa., to the downtown apartment she shares with the trust-fund guy she dates. *Through Feb. 1 at American Theater Company, 1909 W. Byron St.; \$43-\$48 at 773-409-4125 or atcweb.org*

"Lookingglass Alice"

★★★★
A lot of shows around this time of year try to be distinctive and appeal to more than one generation. But "Lookingglass Alice" does that far better than most, especially now. David Catlin's adaptation of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" is joyous and smart, playful and wise. It is a reminder that when you believe six impossible things before breakfast, like Alice, you have a better day. And remarkably, the cast over

the years has remained pretty much the same. Lauren Hirte, who still plays Alice, originated the role in 2005. *Through Feb. 15 at Lookingglass Theatre in the Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave.; \$45-\$85 at 312-337-0666 or lookingglasstheatre.org*

"Million Dollar Quartet"

★★★★½
One night in Memphis, Tenn., has turned into a long Chicago run for "Million Dollar Quartet." It's all based on an actual moment in 1956 when Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash showed up at Sam Phillips' Sun Studios for a jam session. The show contains two dozen iconic rock 'n' roll numbers performed by a young cast of actor-musicians. *Open run at the Apollo Theater, 2540 N. Lincoln Ave.; \$25-\$85 at 773-935-6100 and apollochicago.com*

"Pericles"

★★★★
This is quite a substantial production of William Shakespeare's late-in-life play "Pericles," anchored by the superb Canadian actor Ben Carlson. Carlson is an excellent Pericles because we care about what happens to him, what life throws in his way and how people treat him, which is the point of the play. If you're a Shakespeare-specialist type, you'll find everything in this production, directed by David Bell, smart and provocative and much upon which to chew. If you think of yourself as more of a regular person looking for something of meaning, this is the kind of show that makes you more appreciative of those you love. *Through Jan. 18 at the Chicago Shakespeare Courtyard Theater on Navy Pier, 800 E. Grand Ave.; \$48-\$78 at 312-595-5600 or chicagoshakes.com*



TODD ROSENBERG PHOTO

HOTTEST TICKET

"Panic On Cloud 9"

★★★
Superior amusement at The Second City usually arrives riding on the back of panic. In one of the best sketches in "Panic on Cloud 9," the formidable young star John Hartman picks up the phone to tell his contacts, ex-lovers and others that he has the Ebola virus. "I'm the guy who sat next to you on that flight to Syracuse," he goes, his face screwed up in a mix of agony and stoic determination. "Yes, the one who kept sneezing." Featuring newcomer Paul Jurewicz, who will surely attract a lot of new invitations in coming weeks, this is an especially richly acted revue from a young and mostly new cast making deeper connections. *Open run on the Second City Mainstage, 1616 N. Wells St.; \$23-\$48 at 312-237-3992 or secondcity.com*

THEATER OPENINGS

FRIDAY

"The Table": A bitter little Bunraku puppet named Moses can't stop kvetching in this comedy from the U.K.'s Blind Summit Theatre, part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. *Through Jan. 25 at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, 800 E. Grand Ave.; chicagoshakes.com.*

SATURDAY

"The Book of Merman": In this musical parody of a musical parody from Pride Films and Plays, two young Mormons ring the doorbell of Broadway legend Ethel Merman. *Through Feb. 15 at Mary's Attic, 5400 N. Clark St.; 800-838-3006 or pridefilmsandplays.com.*

"Tommy": Jim Corti directs The Who's rock opera about the travails of a blind and deaf boy becoming a pinball wizard. *Through Feb. 15 at the Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd. in Aurora; paramountaurora.com.*

SUNDAY

"The Rose Tattoo": A widow, removed from society, is forced to confront her late husband's past in Tennessee Williams' drama, performed by Shattered Globe Theatre. *Through Feb. 28 at Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.; theaterwit.org.*

MONDAY

"Mr. Burns, a post-electric play": A nuclear disaster has occurred, and all that remains of world culture is the "Cape Feare" episode of "The Simpsons" in this new comedy. *Through March 1 at Theater Wit, 1229 W. Belmont Ave.; theaterwit.org.*

TUESDAY

"Plastic Revolution": The New Colony performs a new musical about an unexpected subject — Tupperware. *Through Feb. 22 at The Den Theatre, 1333 N. Milwaukee Ave.; thenewcolony.org.*

"Stomp": The 24-year-old percussion-based performance piece returns to Chicago for the first time since 2010. *Through Jan. 25 at Bank of America Theatre, 18 W. Monroe St.; 800-775-2000 or broadwayinchicago.com.*

THURSDAY

"The Life and Sort of Death of Eric Argyle": In this Irish dramedy, a fellow wakes up after dying in a car crash and is made to replay scenes from his life. *Through Feb. 28 at Steep Theatre, 1115 W. Berwyn Ave.; 866-811-4111 or steeptheatre.com.*

"West Side Story": The Sharks and Jets brawl and leap, while star-crossed lovers Tony and Maria desperately try to rise above their situation in this classic musical, directed by Rachel Rockwell. *At Drury Lane Theatre, 100 Drury Lane in Oakbrook Terrace; 630-530-0111 or drurylaneoakbrook.com.*