

With the venerable Goodman Theatre opening a new \$20 million theater complex in once-dormant downtown Chicago, with the Lyric Opera boasting its eleventh consecutive sell-out season, with Shakespeare Repertory unveiling a new seven-story lakefront theater complex dedicated to the Bard's works, with the reopening of the Oriental and Palace theaters—once condemned Kung Fu movie houses now converted into legitimate stages—with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's concert facility now redesigned to the tune of \$72 million, with the Art Institute of Chicago routinely selling out retrospectives of the works of French Impressionists, and with a new 16 1/2 acre complex now under construction downtown slated to house the Joffrey Ballet, Hubbard Street Dance and the Grant Park Music festival, one would hardly suspect that the Chicago arts scene would be experiencing any sort of crisis.

And to an outsider, there would seem to be little reason to fret. After all, the city boasts more than 200 theater companies, approximately 100 art galleries and six full-time revival and art-house cinemas. There are also hundreds upon hundreds of music venues from posh, high-dollar classical music auditoriums like downtown's Symphony Center to rugged urban blues and jazz outposts like the Checkerboard Lounge and the New Apartment Lounge on the deep South Side.

But long-time observers of the Chicago arts scene are cautious not to get too excited about recent infusions of cash. For with that big money has come a noticeable leeriness to take the sort of risks that launched Chicago's Steppenwolf and Goodman theatres and brought artists like imagist painter Ed Paschke, playwright David Mamet, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, seminal jazz innovator AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) as well as independent films like "Hoop Dreams" to national prominence. "Every generation, the most successful artists here graduate from being energetic amateurs to being so-called professionals, and the reward for that is getting to slap AT&T on your art," observes Tony Fitzpatrick, the prominent Chicago artist whose work will be featured in a solo exhibition this spring at the city's vaunted Museum of Contemporary Art.

The increasing reliance on corporate funds has, according to Lawrence Bommer, theater critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Reader* and *Windy City Times*, made arts organizations "less willing to take risks and to anticipate, however subconsciously, what would please

their corporate overseers. Of course, they'll deny it but then murderers do too."

Take, for example, the New Goodman Theatre set to open in fall 2000. The original Goodman was an artistic launchpad for actors Karl Malden and Geraldine Page and playwright David Mamet, whose Tony-Award-winning "Glengarry Glen Ross" premiered there when the theater was at its creative apex during the '80s and was home to such other notable playwrights as Shel Silverstein, Mike Nichols, Elaine May and August Wilson. But the new Goodman will come at the expense of the theater's old purportedly outdated space, long thought to be one of the best in the country. The Harris and Selwyn, two abandoned movie palaces, were quietly gutted and redesigned for the New Goodman, which has lately developed a taste for sure-fire revivals of classic works and artists with instant name recognition like Spalding Gray.

More often than not, the mainstream arts organizations' dealings seem to belong most comfortably on the local papers' real estate and society pages. The Organic Theater, once home to Chicago-bred, Hollywood-schooled success stories like Stuart Gordon and Joe Mantegna, was overtaken recently by another theater company, which sold the space to a bank for a cool \$1.5 million. That company has since high-tailed it to the near north suburbs. The Steppenwolf Theater, which still is the occasional home for such local talent as John Malkovich and Laurie Metcalf, now seems to be primarily a space for the few Tony and Obie-winning hits like Patrick Marber's "Closer" and Martin McDonagh's "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" that won't automatically click with the tour-bus crowd. The Lyric Opera, which began its triumphant march toward financial solvency in the '80s with a prominent billboard campaign that featured then Chicago Bears head coach Mike Ditka in a Valkyries costume, continues to employ a middlebrow PR attack, advertising Georges Bizet's "Carmen" with the tagline, "She's sexy, she's dangerous, and she changes lovers as often as she changes her lipstick." The eight-opera season from the company that regularly showcases world-class talent on the order of Catherine Malfitano and Placido Domingo now features only one world premiere.

More so then ever, the place to find innovation in the arts is not in such popular mainstream productions as Blue Man Group, the crowd-pleasing stylings of Hubbard Street Dance, the Museum of Contemporary Art's cur-

rent retrospective of the works of Roy Lichtenstein, or the forthcoming production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" starring bubblegum teen star Debbie Gibson. Though downtown Chicago now forms the epicenter of hubbub and financial activity in the arts, whatever innovative work there is to be seen can be found not in the center but at the margins.

Invention is still the watchword at many of the city's physically and intellectually rigorous off-Loop theaters, such as A Red Orchid Theatre, Lookingglass and National Pastime Theatre, as well as the woefully underfunded African-American theater companies on the city's south side, most notably the Chicago Theatre Company. Though continuing to fall victim to gentrification, the near-West Side community known as Wicker Park, with Ten-in-One Gallery, Beret International Gallery and the annual Around the Coyote arts festival continues to support a more vibrant arts scene than the city's pricier River North galleries. Chicago's small but thriving independent film scene includes such indie film and revival houses as the Music Box Theater, the Film Center of the Art Institute and Chicago Filmmakers and a half-dozen film festivals ranging from the Chicago Polish Film Festival to the Chicago Underground Film Festival. The city continues to be a capital for blues and avant-garde jazz, most notably at the south Loop eclectic music venue the Hothouse. And, although the Joffrey and Hubbard Street are the only local dance companies that can pay their dancers decent wages, there is a visible storefront scene, which includes such dance companies as Zephyr and Muntu.

But the scramble for funds is tougher than ever, and even some of the avant-gardistes are showing a distressing penchant for tried-and-true, unadventurous material. The American Blues Theater mainstreamed its name to the American Theatre Company, and despite its continued commitment to new material, found its biggest hit ever last season with a revival of "The Threepenny Opera." That production made more money last season than all its other shows combined. ATC's new season includes such warhorses as Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" and David Mamet's "American Buffalo." And Defiant Theatre, which made its reputation on smart, edgy material like Caryl Churchill's "The Skriker" has begun changing its focus slightly as well.

"We have never been the least bit interested

CHICAGO METROPOLITAN
AREA POPULATION:
8,599,774

TOP FIVE CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS
(BASED ON ATTENDANCE)

1. Navy Pier Convention Center
2. Art Institute of Chicago
3. Field Museum of Natural History
4. Chicago Cultural Center
5. Chicago Children's Museum

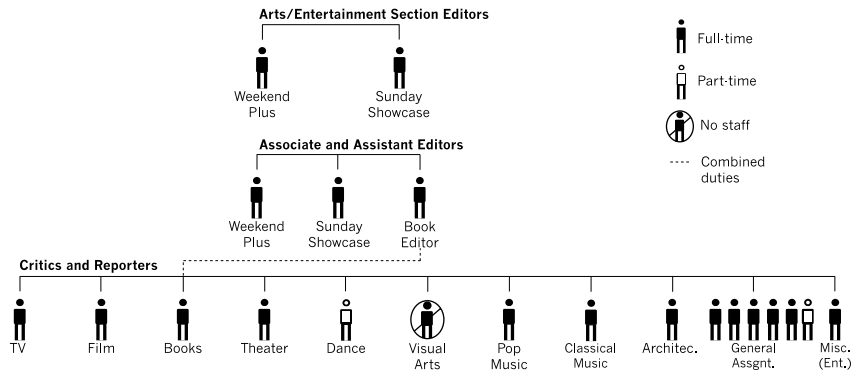
The *Chicago Sun-Times* is proud of the fact that unlike the *Chicago Tribune*, it still runs overnight reviews. "We make a lot of hay over the fact that we operate like a real newspaper," crows features editor John Barron. "We'll have the critic there, and he will have until 11 to file a review. The *Chicago Tribune* seems to have completely ceded that to us."

The *Sun-Times'* Pulitzer Prize-winning critic, Roger Ebert, and its celebrity columnist, Bill Zwecker, frequently get front-page play in the Hollinger International-owned publication. The paper concentrates its arts and culture coverage in the Monday to Saturday "Showcase" section. It also sprinkles features throughout the paper. "By the time you get to our section, a lot of the lifestyle stuff has peeled away, and our section is pretty much stripped down to nothing but arts and entertainment," notes *Sun-Times* Managing Editor Joycelyn Wynnecke.

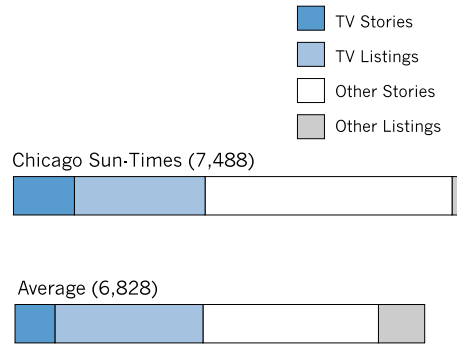
Friday the *Sun-Times* issues "Weekend Plus," a tabloid section devoted to arts and entertainment, with coverage of everything from movies and local dining to activities and museums. The "Sunday Showcase" runs up to two dozen pages with long takes on the arts, and on Sunday there is also a stand-alone TV guide. In general, the newspaper is picture-heavy, with three-quarters of its articles illustrated with a photo or a graphic. Throughout the week the paper also relies heavily on syndicates, getting copy from the *London Telegraph*, which is also owned by Hollinger.

As with the *Tribune*, the *Sun-Times* has plenty of arts and culture coverage. In our study, the paper was ranked second in column inches devoted to stories in the daily Arts & Living section following the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In its mix of stories, the *Sun-Times* virtually ignores books, while movies got a heavier proportion of coverage than our 15-paper average. Overall, the paper would appear to be stronger in its coverage of performing arts, especially theater, dance and radio, if it originated in any city other than Chicago, where the *Tribune* is as strong or stronger.

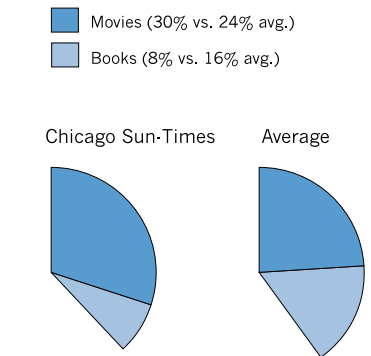
In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



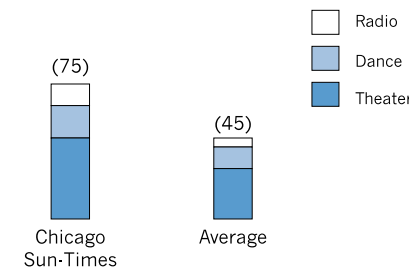
1. Daily Arts and Living Section



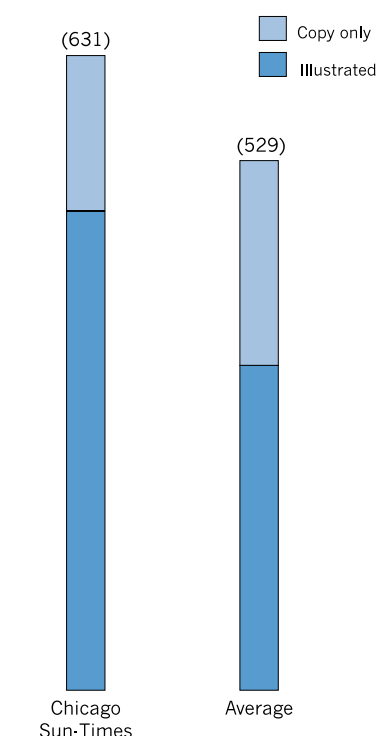
2. Movies and Books



3. Theater, Dance and Radio



4. Pictures



Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at www.najp.org.)

1. Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture stories in the daily Arts & Living section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
2. Proportion of editorial space assigned to all arts and culture stories, listings excluded, devoted to movies and books compared with the 15-newspaper average
3. Number of stories on theater, dance and radio compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles
4. Number of stories illustrated with pictures or graphics, listings excluded, as opposed to copy-only stories compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles

in corporate or NEA sponsorship because if you're pursuing that stuff, then you're answerable to them," Defiant's artistic director Christopher Johnson observes. But for their next production, the U.S. premiere of "Burning Desires," a retelling of the Joan of Arc story set in the 1950s, the company is finalizing its negotiations to enlist its first major corporate sponsor, Camel

ARTS COVERAGE IN CHICAGO: A CRITICAL VIEW

Given the breadth and history of the Chicago arts scene, the paucity of smart, in-depth arts coverage in the city is somewhat distressing. "Excellence and media coverage are strangers," says Bailiwick Repertory artistic director David Zak. "Most reviewers admit to being Siskel & Ebert thumbs-up, thumbs-down consumer reporters. And, as for commentary, and other media coverage: Where is it?"

Overall, the Chicago critical voice is an odd mixture of provincial boosterism and hypercritical naysaying, the former usually reserved for a rather large group of local favorites such as theater directors Mary Zimmerman and Frank Galati and Lookingglass Theater Company, the latter often directed at a small number of critics' pet peeves who include architect Helmut Jahn, Chicago Symphony Orchestra music director Daniel Barenboim and singer-songwriter Liz Phair.

After the era of Chicago's famous arts critic Claudia Cassidy, who is often credited with jumpstarting the career of Tennessee Williams by being the lone early supporter of "The Glass Menagerie," the heyday of arts coverage in Chicago, at least as far as volume is concerned, was probably the late '80s and early '90s. Then, the *Chicago Tribune* devoted much of its back page to arts coverage, and the *Chicago Reader*, the city's oldest alternative paper, would publish upwards of ten long essay-style reviews, each clocking in at about 1,000 words.

A huge cry went up in the city's arts community when the *Tribune* decided to replace the arts page and its overnight reviews with spilled news articles from page one. Arts organizations sent petitions to the *Tribune* asking the editorial staff to reconsider, but they did not. And,

cigarettes, whose product may be sold before curtain and at intermission. It's a strategy that Johnson justifies on the basis of the fact that the script calls for chain-smoking and 25 of Defiant's 30 company members are smokers. The production may likely be the first example of something that could possibly become the next trend started in Chicago: product placement in the high arts.

when the *Reader* similarly decided approximately five years ago that ad revenue could not justify spending as much space on arts coverage, the Joseph Jefferson Awards committee—a pale imitation of the Tony Awards—tried yet failed to dissuade the weekly from downsizing its theater coverage by awarding the *Reader* with an honorary plaque for longtime service to the arts community.

For a city with an arts community that compares to New York, its dailies do a hit-or-miss job of covering the arts. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* seem to embrace a decidedly middlebrow tone, not surprising given that many of the city's full-time arts critics have backgrounds in general assignment reporting as opposed to experience in arts and arts criticism; before he became a nationally known film critic, the late Gene Siskel was a *Tribune* sportswriter. When the *Tribune* recently ran a series of behind-the-scenes columns about how the critics do their jobs (a laudable concept that suffered from a somewhat dumbed-down "how-to" approach), the paper's classical music critic Jon Von Rhein reported that his first editor's request was for him to "give me some adjectives to describe Georg Solti's conducting that a beer-swilling slob like me can understand."

The *Tribune* turns out a fairly weighty "Friday" section, which offers a variety of short features and personality profiles along with comprehensive listings. On a daily basis, though, the *Tribune's* thin "Tempo" section is the paper's main outpost for arts coverage featuring a handful of reviews and a feature story, which are dwarfed by the section's movie listings, TV guide, cartoons and columns from such stalwarts as Bob Greene and "Dear Abby."

Fortunately, the Sunday "Arts & Entertainment" section, a slim, ad- and graphics-heavy section, showcases several of the *Tribune's* highly reputed staff critics. Among these are Blair

*"If stuff wasn't
being covered,
there would be
a hue and cry."*

Joycelyn Wynnecke
Managing Editor
Chicago Sun-Times

Chicago Tribune

Ensclosed in one of city's greatest buildings, architect Raymond Hood's heavily confectioned Gothic tower, the *Chicago Tribune* has been a leading voice in the city since Joseph Medill founded it in 1847. As the second city's main paper, it covers a city alive with a dizzying array of arts, from the internationally renowned Lyric Opera to the Checkerboard Lounge.

The paper's arts competition comes not only from the other daily, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the city's two alternative paper's, *The Reader* and *New City*, but also from *The New York Times*. Fortunately for the *Tribune*, it can boast of several renowned staffers, from its Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic, Blair Kamin and long-time theater critic, Richard Christiansen, to art critic, Alan Artner.

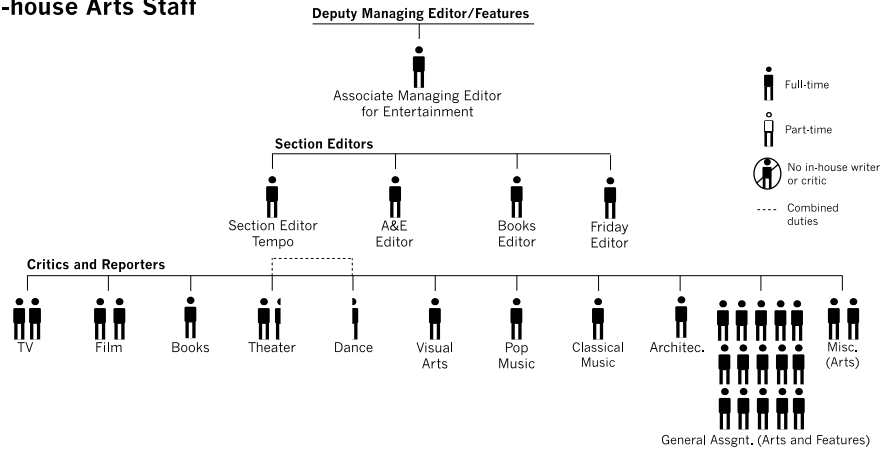
During the week, the *Tribune's* "Tempo" section runs a handful of arts pieces, hefty movie listings, a TV guide as well as gossip news. But what makes the *Tribune* unique in our study is that a good deal of its arts coverage is located in the general news section. On Friday, the paper offers assorted features and profiles as well as extensive listings. Sunday it has the "Arts & Entertainment" section, which lavishes space on some of its best writers. A number of years ago the *Tribune* stopped running overnight reviews. Such pieces are now only available on the *Tribune's* web site.

The *Tribune* leads all newspapers in the study in coverage of performing arts. It had the most stories on theater and the third-most on opera and dance. In general, the paper is very review-heavy, running more reviews than any paper in our study, averaging eight such pieces a day. Many of the *Tribune's* reviews, especially those covering Chicago's wide-ranging music scene, were filed by freelancers who made such a heavy turnout possible. The *Tribune* was also the only paper in our study to publish more freelance stories than syndicated ones.

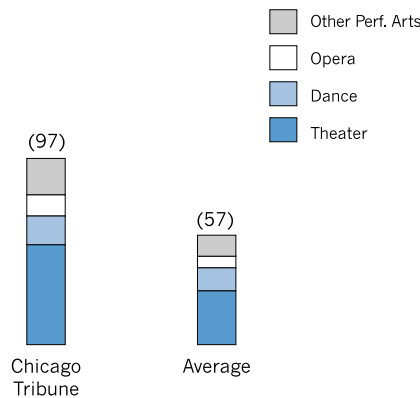
The *Tribune* likewise beat all other publications in the study when it comes to the number of column inches it devotes to arts and culture stories, running a staggering 11,000 a month. On the other hand, it had the lowest percentage of listings of any of the papers.

Owner: Tribune Co. Daily Circulation: 594,953 Sunday Circulation: 1,023,736

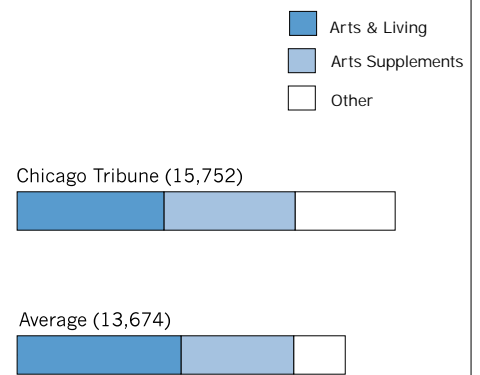
In-house Arts Staff



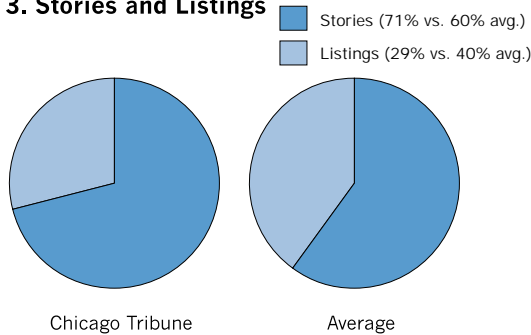
1. Performing Arts



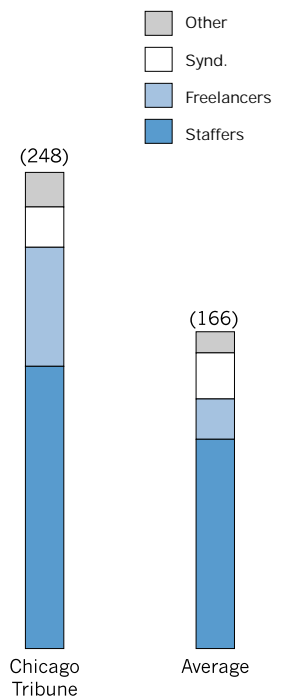
2. Sections



3. Stories and Listings



4. Reviews



Notes (All data for October 1998. Comprehensive data available at www.najp.org.)

- Number of stories on the performing arts compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles
- Volume of coverage devoted to arts and culture stories and listings by type of section compared with the 15-newspaper average with the number in parentheses indicating total coverage in column inches
- Percentage of coverage devoted to stories and listings compared to the 15-newspaper average
- Number of reviews written by in-house staff, freelancers and syndicated wire services compared with the 15-newspaper average, with the number in parentheses indicating the total number of articles

Kamin, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic who blends scholarship with a snappy, highly readable style; 22-year veteran Richard Christiansen, the *Tribune's* theater critic who has long been a champion of off-Loop theater; and art critic Alan Artner, whose clear mastery of his subject matter sometimes suffers because of his convoluted writing style. Overnight reviews can only be found on the *Tribune's* web site.

The *Chicago Sun-Times's* arts section does a better job with overnight reviews of concerts and plays, several of which appear daily. But though the paper's staff theater critic Hedy Weiss, film critic Roger Ebert and pop music writer Jim DeRogatis are fine writers and critics, there is a fanzine quality to much of the pop music writing, and much of the dance and classical music writing seems to pander to middlebrow tastes. The ad-heavy Friday and Sunday sections are dominated by puff pieces about who's coming through town, many picked up from national wire services. Feature articles and criticism that put the city's arts scene in context are rare.

Literary coverage consists of Sunday book reviews in small sections in the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*. The *Tribune* also sponsors the Heartland Awards for fiction and nonfiction.

From the standpoint of comprehensiveness, the *Reader* continues to be the leader in the Chicago media with a large stable of arts critics and features writers as well as one of the country's most thoughtful and intelligent film critics, Jonathan Rosenbaum. Though it tends to be a trifle surly or overly self-impressed in tone, the *Reader* also continues to be the only publication that offers insightful, critically astute commentary on film, theater, dance and art. The *Reader's* competitor *New City*, another free weekly with shorter articles and a snappier tone, is noticeably less polished and instead of concise criticism, it offers what is best described as an annotated series of listings.

Chicago's third largest daily, the *Daily Herald*, which is based in northwest Arlington Heights and caters to a suburban audience, features sporadic arts coverage during the week and a smattering of reviews on Fridays. The city's

largest African-American owned paper, *The Chicago Defender*, offers largely boosterish coverage of the arts. The city has several gay papers, including the brand new *Free Press*, *Gay Chicago*, *Outlines*, and the most respected of these, *Windy City Times*, all of which regularly feature arts reviews and feature stories.

An overall problem with print media coverage of the arts is that few of the major publications pay living wages to arts critics and feature writers. Most employ freelancers who write for four or five publications at a time, making reviews and arts features in many publications interchangeable. The only periodicals that cover the arts scene in any regular fashion are the monthly *Chicago Magazine*, which has at least one article about the local arts scene per issue, and *New Art Examiner*, a Chicago-based national publication which covers Chicago art galleries better than any publication in the city or the country.

When it comes to arts coverage, local TV and radio stations do a less than stellar job of covering the scenes. CLTV, a cable TV outfit owned by the Tribune Company, runs occasional reviews of arts exhibitions, concerts and touring theatrical productions. The segments tend toward a cow-town-ish oohing and ahing over the fact that Chicago has an arts scene that can compete with New York's. Two PBS TV programs, "Absolute Artistry" on WYCC, Channel 20, and "Wild Chicago" on WTTW, Channel 11 have a similarly provincial and unprofessional feel to them, spending much of their air time asking artists basically two questions: "What do you do?" and "What's your phone number?" so viewers can find out where they can see the show. Another WTTW show, "Artbeat," is a slicker, smarter arts round-up.

Though a number of Chicago radio stations pay lip service to covering the local arts scene, the only one that does it with regularity is the local National Public Radio affiliate WBEZ, which features semi-regular book, music and literary critics on its morning radio show 848 as well as smart film commentary from Milos Stehlilik of Facets Multimedia.

"I would like to see arts and entertainment covered with the same passion people use to cover sports. We do not want to dumb it down, but we want a lively discussion."

Tim Bannon
Arts and Entertainment
Section Editor
The Chicago Tribune