



Optimist Theatre Shakespeare in the Park 2017 Annual Report

Optimist Theatre did it again! Shakespeare in the Park successfully presented 12 performances of William Shakespeare's beloved comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing* at the beautiful downtown Peck Pavilion in July of 2017.

A Few Highlights....

- ❖ Optimist Theatre entered into a new partnership with the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts and performances were held at the beautiful downtown Peck Pavilion. Audience surveys indicated overwhelming support for this move.
- ❖ A combination of marketing and community outreach initiatives, combined with the much greater visibility of the event, **resulted in a 68% increase in audience size** – from an average of 2,200 people per year to over 3,700 in 2017.
- ❖ A total of **16 community groups** attended *Much Ado About Nothing* primarily at our debut weekday matinee. The overwhelming focus of these community groups were inner-city, youth serving organizations. The matinee also included our first sign language interpreters and thus attracted deaf and hard-of-hearing meet-up groups.
- ❖ Capacity at the Peck Pavilion is 398 seats. Three performances were standing room only and the closing night of *Much Ado About Nothing* welcomed over 500 people.



July 18, 2017 matinee at the Peck Pavilion.

Shakespeare in the Park – A Season of Five Acts

In 2017, Optimist Theatre defined our goals – aka “Acts” – to build upon the successes we’ve achieved since the beginning of Shakespeare in the Park in 2010. They were...



Starring Todd Denning and Kelley Faulkner as Benedick and Beatrice

✦ **Act I: Maintain Our Artistic Integrity**

Our production is understandable...

“I can’t recall ever seeing a better rendition of it (“Much Ado About Nothing”). ... Director Tom Reed has gathered a very Shakespeare-savvy troupe of performers who make the Bard very accessible. Shakespeare’s witty and beautiful words flew off their tongues with ease, which is not always the case with his antiquated language.”

— *Julie McHale, Waukesha Post*

❖ SITP 2017 introduced 22.3% of our audience members (827 people) to outdoor

theatre for the very first time.

‘Behind the Scenes’...

Optimist Theatre was able to increase the number of Actors’ Equity Association contracts to 6. The actors hired under the Equity contract are considered at the top of their craft in the Greater Milwaukee area and beyond. They included James Pickering, Jonathan Wainwright, and Kelley Faulkner. Reviews and audience feedback were positive – both in terms of the performance and the new venue.

There were significant effects of 2017’s move of Shakespeare in the Park to the Peck Pavilion, adjacent to the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. This venue, which is designed for spoken-word theatre, delivered high production values. The built in ability to do on-site props and costume storage, dressing rooms, accessibility, and safety, were joyfully embraced and the artists were able to focus on first and foremost on their performances.

✦ **Act II: Improve Audience Outreach and Diversity**

Our production is free and easy to get to...

“I love taking trips out to APT, but this is right in my backyard! The team at Shakespeare in the Park is fantastic, their productions are always first-rate, tasteful, and professional, and it is the perfect way to spend a summer evening. They also strive to bring many groups in Milwaukee together, and you tend to see a diverse audience in attendance due to the free nature of performances and convenient location.”

— *Amanda Schumacher, Footlights*

- ❖ 16 different community organizations attended SITP, representing individuals ranging from inner-city youth organizations, to senior citizens, to those with physical disabilities.



Getting in on the act at Much Ado

✦ Act II: continued...

'Behind the Scenes'...

New and existing connections with community organizations resulted in 16 youth, elderly, and special needs groups attending a performance. **88% of our audience resides in ZIP codes with an average household income of less than 200% of the poverty rate.**

This success was due in part to the following actions:

- Our partnership with the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, resulting in Shakespeare in the Park (SITP) being incorporated in the community outreach activities and marketing efforts for the Marcus Center's "Live at the Peck" series.
- SITP contracted with a Community Outreach Coordinator, Dr. Barbara Leigh, who has over 43 years of experience in the field. Her focus is on connecting / re-connecting with community groups.
- We had our first weekday matinee. As a result, many community groups were able to attend. They included: Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, Neighborhood House, Pearls for Teen Girls, Adaptive Community Approach, Grand Avenue Club, Feast of Crispin – Veterans with PTSD, Shakespeare in the Prisons Program facilitators, Tudor Oaks Senior Living Community, Milwaukee Catholic Home, WCS Community Improvement and Job Training Organization
- The matinee included our first sign language interpreters and attracted deaf and hard-of-hearing meet-up groups.
- SITP also expanded our "Boots on the Ground Program," which sends people throughout Milwaukee to extend personal invitations and leave door fliers. The focus was on inner-city and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. In 2017, we expanded this program to include the Historic South Side, which encompasses Polonia, Baran Park, and Muskego Way, and northside neighborhoods of Harambee / Riverwest; and Lindsay Heights.



Candace Thomas and Di'Monte Henning as Hero and Claudio.

✦ Act III: Work Toward Diversity in Our Cast and Crew

Our casting celebrates diversity...

"There is certainly plenty for a 2017 audience to appreciate in this solid reading of one of the Bard's most nimble comedies. ... Former Milwaukee Rep interns Di'Monte Henning (Claudio) and Candace Thomas (Hero) show why they are two of the most talented recent additions to the city's roster of actors."

— **Paul Kosidowski, *MilwaukeeMag.com***

❖ Ethnicities of non-Caucasian audience members came in at 22.8% total (845 people) – which included 8.2% attendance by people of African-American descent – up from 6% in 2016 and 5% in 2015.

'Behind the Scenes'...

The ethnic diversity of our cast increased over 2016. African-American actors played two lead roles – Di'Monte Henning as Claudio and Candace Thomas as Hero – Latino actor David Flores had the lead role of Leonato and Lebanese-born actor Mohammed ElBsat played Borachio. In addition, Mexican-born actress Alejandra Gonzales and Bividian Murguila, whose family immigrated from India, were featured.

✦ Act IV: Improve Audience Safety and Comfort

Our production is accessible...

“All of us — from fourteen to eighty-two years of age — thoroughly enjoyed *Much Ado About Nothing*. We watched, captured by the story and the characters; we laughed; and we were moved and entertained each in our own way. That's the beauty of Shakespeare's plays. And it's our great fortune to have Shakespeare in the Park giving us that gift each summer *for free*, making Shakespeare accessible to families and to others who might not otherwise be exposed to the Bard.”

— *Mary Krawczyk, blogger*

- ❖ 59.2% of our audience members (2,196 people) attended SITP for the first time.

'Behind the Scenes'...

Optimist Theatre greatly surpassed our safety, comfort and accessibility objectives by moving to the Peck Pavilion. The performance space and backstage facilities at the Peck Pavilion were safer, more comfortable, and more convenient for the cast and crew. Seating and amenities at the Peck provided much greater comfort and safety for our audience, especially the elderly and those with disabilities. The Peck is also easily accessible by public transportation and is located downtown, where people from all parts of the city feel safe.

✦ Act V: Develop Individual and Institutional Giving

Our new home is a joy...

“Although opening night at the Marcus Center’s roofed but unwallled Peck Pavilion saw rainstorms and chilly winds, the audience maintained good spirits. ‘With *Much Ado*,’ Optimist has deservedly hit home with its loyal Milwaukee audience yet again.”

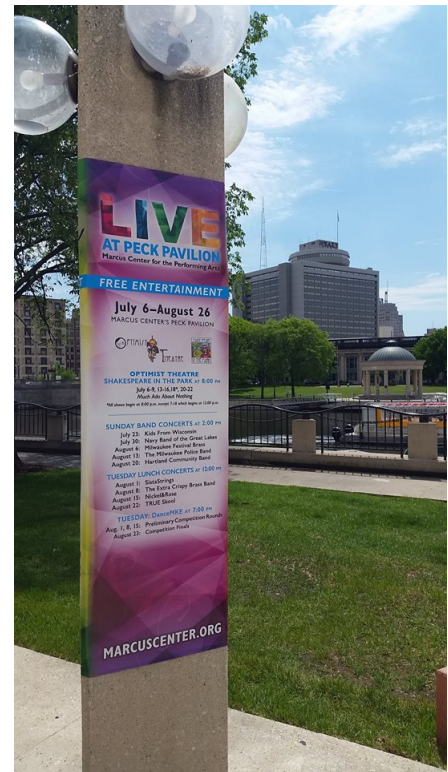
— *Selena Milewski, Shepherd Express*

- ❖ **SITP Attendance increased by 68%** from an average of 2,200 people per year to 3,710 in 2017.

'Behind the Scenes'...

Individual giving increased in 2 significant ways: Memberships – which offer fans extra levels of engagement with the company – are up 59% over 2016. General donations are up 35% over 2016.

Institutional giving for the 2017 season production, which includes grants and foundation support, increased 51% over 2016.



Outdoor signage up year round and the heavily foot-trafficked Peck Pavilion.



2018 and Beyond Some Thoughts on “What’s Next?”

Optimist Theatre Mission...

We believe that the theatrical arts broaden and enrich those parts of our minds and spirits that are most essentially human. Optimist Theatre is driven to reach artists and audiences across the economic, ethnic, and experiential landscape. We educate, entertain, and inspire through creative works of artistic integrity.

Mission Goals...

- *To create theater that is imaginative, dynamic and of the highest professional caliber*
- *To celebrate the talents of the artists who create our work, to encourage creative collaboration within the company and to treat our colleagues with dignity and respect*
- *To serve as a “gateway” theater, bringing new audiences to the arts*
- *To create art that is accessible, financially, geographically, and culturally, to all people in our community, and to celebrate diversity in hiring, casting and marketing*
- *To be financially responsible, maximizing in-kind and volunteer contributions and implementing innovative, aggressive grass-roots fundraising campaigns*
- *To add to our community’s cultural footprint, helping to make Milwaukee an attractive place for entrepreneurs, professionals and businesses.*

A re-cap of a successful season always raises the question, “Where do we go from here?” We view our long-term vision in five parts, following the five-act structure of Shakespeare’s plays.

✦ **Act I: Artistic Integrity and Impact**

2018 will mark our 9th season and the return of Milwaukee theatre legend James Pickering, this time in the title role of *King Lear*. July of 2018 will witness 12 productions of Shakespeare’s beloved tragedy. *King Lear* will be directed by visiting artist Lisa Gaye Dixon, who brings a wealth of theatre expertise, a national reputation, and her perspective as a woman of color to the play.

Shakespeare in the Park is steadily gaining a reputation within the acting community as a highly desirable performance opportunity. Our auditions are attended by a deep bench of highly skilled veteran actors as well as young professionals seeking an important credential for their resume. Creative and accessible productions, as well as strategic partnerships with respected theatre companies, will help make a leap forward in Optimist Theatre’s standing within the community.

Future Impact... An excellent production is the foundation for everything we do. Our community and education outreach efforts are meaningless if our productions don’t speak to the humanity of our audience.

✦ **Act II: Audience Outreach and Diversity**

Our partnership with the Marcus Center wasn't finalized until April of 2017. As a result, we had limited time for deep integration of our respective community outreach and marketing efforts. Now that we know already that Shakespeare in the Park will be at the Peck in 2018, work with the Marcus Center is already underway.

The Marcus Center's Community Outreach and Diversity department has committed to our first joint grant application – the MPS Arts Partners Program. This program will enable both Optimist Theatre and the Marcus Center to employ a small cadre of MPS students who would work on community outreach for both organizations – thus creating a deep integration of our efforts.

Dr. Barbara Leigh, Optimist Theatre's Community Outreach Coordinator, works year-round making connections with groups to attend Shakespeare in the Park performances summer performances and to participate in our new educational outreach program, "Shakespeare in the City."

Future Impact... Relationship building takes time and thoughtful effort. Rich connections with the people of the greater Milwaukee area are a cornerstone of the long-term mission goal of crafting an event that is for all our diverse citizenry.



✦ **Act III: Diversity in our Cast and Crew**

Milwaukee boasts a vibrant theatre community. Using the success of our collaboration with the Bronzeville Arts Ensemble as an example, we will reach out to other performing arts organizations with an aim to partner on initiatives that will further our diversity efforts. We are stronger working together toward common goals.

By listening to artists of color who work with us, we learn that true diversity requires thoughtful and meaningful efforts. Quotas are not the answer. Every production will provide different inclusion opportunities and challenges. Other conversations yielded some surprising insights regarding the perception of diversity among people of color. There is a strong focus on highlighting the impact of a high profile actor of color versus simply tallying numbers of non-Caucasians in a cast.

Future Impact... This mission goal goes hand in hand with developing our audience diversity. A blended audience with the vast array of life experiences and perspectives represented by our citizenry must connect on an instinctive level with the people they see telling Shakespeare's stories.




✦ **Act IV: Audience Experience with the Venue**

2017 allowed Shakespeare in the Park to fully gauge the production equipment and facilities provided via our partnership with the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts. Sound, lights, security, personnel and facilities are substantial. Now that we've had an opportunity to put all of these resources into play, specific areas of improvement have been identified. We are working with the Marcus Center to "fill in the gaps" in a variety of ways.

As we deepen our partnership with the Marcus Center, we are considering co-investing in sound and lighting equipment that better serves the needs of live theatre.

Future Impact... Shakespeare in the Park is not your typical event. It's outdoors. It's public. It's free. Embracing the venue is key to the quality of the production. Our partnership with the Marcus Center promises to grow, enhancing the work of both organizations and making Shakespeare in the Park at the Peck Pavilion a keystone in Milwaukee's cultural and festival makeup.



✦ **Act V: Individual and Institutional Giving and Foundation Support**

Our year-round grant writer now has over a year under her belt and is a great keeper of the master calendar of major grant applications. In addition, she's researching more and more smaller funds that are able to grant \$1,000 to \$5,000. These add up significantly.

We are partnering with other individuals on specialty-focused grant applications. Our Community Outreach Coordinator has a great deal of experience with the MPS Partnership for the Arts and Humanities Program and is participating in crafting the grant application. If successful, this will be the first time Optimist Theatre has secured this grant and it would be a great boost in developing the new educational outreach program, "Shakespeare in the City."

The Executive Director is focusing on developing relationships with individuals capable of making substantial gifts to Shakespeare in the Park. Identification of these individuals come from a wide variety of sources, including introductions from members of the Board of Directors.

We are initiating a wide-spread effort to connect with Milwaukee-area businesses about sponsorships. The visibility afforded by producing at the Peck Pavilion and our expanding fan base can combine into an attractive business sponsorship.

Future Impact... The wisdom of generations of fundraisers speaks loudly and clearly. At some point, foundation support must become less and less of the base funds for producing. A foundation may commit to the long-term creation of a worthy experience but the smart money (pun intended) is to assume that it is finite. In order to grow to the funding level required to become the size organization that is required to truly support the potential of Shakespeare in the Park, it will take personal investment. The long-term goal of that investment is for the funding base to be 80% individual giving and 20% foundation support.

Optimist Theatre can only achieve this lofty goal by wisely managing the visionary investments made by foundations like Herzfeld, Bader, Brico, Bradley and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. It is our promise, responsibility and honor to do so.

"... WE FEW, WE HAPPY FEW, WE BAND OF BROTHERS—FOR WHOEVER SHEDS HIS BLOOD WITH ME TODAY SHALL BE MY BROTHER. HOWEVER HUMBLE HIS BIRTH, THIS DAY SHALL GRANT HIM NOBILITY."

HENRY V
ACT 4, SCENE 3

Income and Expense Statement - Balance Sheet
As of December 31, 2017

ASSETS	
Current assets – cash	\$27,422.00
Pledges & grants receivable	\$3,450.00
Prepaid expenses	\$0.00
Props, Costumes	\$4,500.00
House and Stage Crew Supplies	\$3,000.00
General Production Equipment	\$2,000.00
Scenic Supplies	\$2,500.00
Other assets	\$0.00
TOTAL ASSETS	\$42,872.00
LIABILITIES	
Accounts payable	\$0.00
Notes payable	\$0.00
TOTAL LIABILITIES	\$0.00
TOTAL ASSETS MINUS LIABILITIES	\$42,872.00

CASH ASSETS - Unrestricted	
Operations	\$26,872.00
Reserve	\$4,000.00
Total unrestricted cash assets	\$30,872.00
CASH ASSETS - Temporarily Restricted	
Restricted cash assets	\$0.00
Total temporarily restricted cash assets	\$0.00