



## Optimist Theatre Shakespeare in the Park 2018 Annual Report

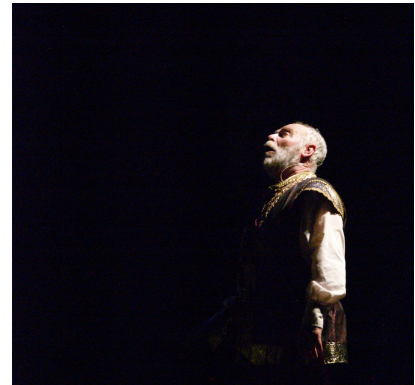
### The Optimist Theatre Mission

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.

Optimist Theatre's expression of this mission is Milwaukee's annual free Shakespeare in the Park. In 2018, our 9<sup>th</sup> season, we presented William Shakespeare's masterful tragedy...

### *King Lear...*

- 12 performances – including one weekday matinee for youth and senior groups;
- Over 3,000 audience members, which included 12 community groups – well exceeding attendance projections; and
- At the beautiful, centrally located Peck Pavilion on the grounds of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts.



### How Did We Do?

**"I've never felt the topical allegorical nature of Shakespeare's Lear unfold quite so profoundly as I did last night in this amazing production.** An aging leader descending into madness while his family uses him for their own personal gain and the terrible consequences their Machiavellian actions unleash on the state. This is the 'Game of Thrones' to see. Thanks to all who keep live local theater alive in our city. "

Carole Barrowman,  
Alverno College English Professor and Author

**King Lear inspired 12 standing ovations.**

## Shakespeare in the Park Mission Goals

Optimist Theatre is driven by six overarching mission goals. We craft our annual goals based on furthering our 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; and
- To add to our community’s cultural footprint, helping to make Milwaukee an attractive place for entrepreneurs, professionals and businesses.

### How are we doing?

“We are lucky to have great theater like this in Milwaukee and have so much respect for all the people who work hard to bring it to us.”

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## 2018: A Season of Five Acts

These mission goals are turned into action each season by crafting five ‘Acts’. As Optimist Theatre accomplishes, learns and evolves, these Acts reflect that growth from year to year. In 2018, our Five Acts were...

### Act I – Artistic Integrity

Craft a gathering of theatre professionals working at the top of their craft to create a production of “King Lear” that is clear, imaginative, and engaging.

#### Results:

Milwaukee theatre legend Mr. James Pickering fulfilled a life-long bucket-list role and...



❖ **King Lear had standing ovations every performance.**

## In the words of our audience:

From Lisa...

"Reasons we attended Shakespeare in the Park: **James Pickering in the cast**; It's Shakespeare; It's outdoors & it's summer in Wisconsin; Real bathrooms; Venue has good seating, stage-nice not to have to bring chairs; Vendors available for drink/food; Free theatre. Thank you for making Shakespeare available to everyone. We saw people stop at they were walking by and listen for awhile and some stayed."

From Gretchen...

"A Russian national that I sponsored in country asked if I would be interested in joining her because she **had never seen a live play** and neither her husband nor adult son were interested. I have never attended a Shakespeare drama, only his comedies, so I was hesitant but it was free so I would have gone merely to keep her company BUT THEN my 15 year-old granddaughter was visiting from Wausau and she loves Shakespeare. **The production was mesmerizing!!!!** We all LOVED it and were sad when it ended. It will now become a tradition! Thank you to everyone involved in the production. "

From Nancy...

"I especially appreciated King Lear at the Peck Pavillion. The setting, venue, and of course the actors and the production were excellent. I really appreciated the color-coded costumes made it much easier to follow. I need that and it increased my enjoyment of the play. Thank you, I'm looking forward to "The Comedy of Errors."



From Lisa...

"Let me share a story with you. Two years ago, King Lear was the main focus of my son's CommArts class freshman year. Lucky for him, Grandma used to teach Shakespeare to high schoolers. In fact, her proudest years were spent teaching Shakespeare to troubled youth at an alternative high school in Denver (imagine gang members acting out Shakespeare on stage). Grandma worked with my son long distance from Albuquerque during the school year to help him understand and analyze King Lear. My son did exceedingly well in that class, thanks to Grandma. Sadly, and unexpectedly, Grandma passed away in the spring of his sophomore year (last year). **When you announced King Lear for this year's SITP, my heart skipped a beat, knowing my son needed to see it performed live, so that his experience and memories of Grandma would come full circle. It was a very special night.** Thank you for all you do!"

From Katie

"Shakespeare in the Park was highly recommended by a friend so we went. I enjoyed it so much. The acting was fabulous. I plan on attending again in 2019. Thank you for this marvelous opportunity to experience **top notch art.**"

## Act II: Partnership with the Marcus Center

Optimist Theatre's new status as Resident Partner includes access to community outreach, marketing and production support. New in 2018, we enriched that partnership with a joint grant from Milwaukee Public Schools Arts Interns program.

### Results...

- ❖ **Audience size for Shakespeare in the Park has increased an average of 53% during the last 2 seasons at the Peck Pavilion. *King Lear* exceeded audience count projections by 25%.**

### In the words of our audience:

From Jim...

"The Peck Pavilion offers comfortable seating, great sound, and a beautiful setting in downtown Milwaukee. For the Sunday night performance we attended there was (free) adequate parking on the area's streets. And talking about free, the performance was FREE. Go see this play!"

From Candice...

"I've loved Shakespeare since introduced in high school so love to see live performances. I have gone to Spring Green but that is pretty far away. I have season tickets to the Rep, Chamber and Renaissance Theater in Milwaukee but did not realize we had Shakespeare in the park until one day I found the performance on the river park. I was excited to see that your troupe at the Peck pavilion and attended as soon as I knew about it. I thought the performance was top notch and looking forward to next years' productions. "



From Stephen...

"I live in the immediate area (an easy walk to the Pavilion) and had heard many high compliments of Shakespeare in the Park. Two other friends (who had to drive to attend) were interested, so we gladly made an evening of it. I attend performances such as Shakespeare in the Park and performances with the MSO simply because it would be silly not to take advantage of performances of such excellent talent when they are literally down the street."

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## Act III: Diversity through Meaningful Engagement

Shakespeare in the Park's cast and audience need to reflect the population of Milwaukee. It's important that we create an integrated experience in a segregated city.

### Results...

- ❖ **Shakespeare in the Park touched lives across boundaries. An average of 60% of our audience comes from zip codes with less than 200% of the poverty level.**
- ❖ **12 community groups attended the play.**
- ❖ **King Lear was directed by nationally known actress and director, Ms. Lisa Gaye Dixon. Ms. Dixon brought her experience as a woman of color to every aspect of the**



**production.**

In the words of our audience:

From Lisa...

"I want to respond to your question from both a personal and professional point of view. I attended King Lear because I am an avid fan of Shakespeare; and, growing up in NYC I benefited every year from amazing performances of Shakespeare in the Park (Central Park, of course). This was my first experience of Shakespeare in an outside venue in Milwaukee — and I was totally enthralled with the performance. Wearing my professional hat, I am the **VP for administration at Bader Philanthropies**, a supporter, and was so relieved and excited to see such a diverse and large audience for the performance I attended. I spoke with my colleague, Jeff Rosen, who also attended, and we both felt this is a great thing for Milwaukee. Thanks for your efforts."

From Heather...

"My children and I studied King Lear this year in our homeschool fine arts group and they loved seeing the parts they played acted out on stage. Even my 6 year old had a line in the scenes they did and when he heard it he lit up! **Thank you for offering such a wonderful show in a great venue for an unbelievable price!** We drove up from the Beloit area and had a wonderful day in Milwaukee that began with lunch by the river."

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## **Act IV: Deepen our audiences' connections with the timeless themes of Shakespeare's plays.**

Shakespeare in the Park debuted a brand new educational outreach program entitled *Shakespeare Inspires: Stories From the City*.

### Results

- ❖ **First time grants were secured from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, Milwaukee Public Schools Partnership for the Arts and Humanities and the Green Bay Packers Foundation.**
- ❖ **Workshops were held with Urban Underground, Sojourner Truth House, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the Lincoln Center for the Arts.**

In the words of our audience...

From Daisy at the Boys and Girls Club...

I really enjoyed seeing the activity where the whole group was broken down into smaller groups. It gave every single student a chance to participate, instead of having the same students participate when their were activities for the group as a whole. Their ability to showcase a problem with a solution I think was a big takeaway for the students. I hope they remember this activity if they were to ever cross those situations (which hopefully not).

## Act V: Develop Individual and Institutional Giving

Shakespeare in the Park is free to see but far from free to produce. Currently, 80% of our funding comes from philanthropic foundations and government grants. In order to take SITP into the future, personal giving must increase and reliance upon foundations must decrease.

Approximately 4% of the individuals in our audience enables the other 96% to attend. According to audience surveys, it's very important that Shakespeare in the Park continues to be offered free of charge. In order to achieve the integrated community experience desired, financial barriers must be nil. Shakespeare in the Park must be available to families who would not otherwise be able to afford to attend.



### Results...

- ❖ **ROI from donations at the performances in 2017 was \$1.40 per audience member. In 2018, that grew to \$1.71 per audience member.**
- ❖ **19% of overall company budget covered by individual and business sponsorships**

### In the words of our audience...

From Ted...

"My children have been or are still involved in theater and we enjoy the experience. When we get a chance to attend a live performance, we tend to try to make it. **Purchasing tickets for four people tends to be expensive**, so when I am offered a chance to attend a show for little to no cost, I make an extra effort to attend."

From Nancy...

"Whatever it's costing you for the Peck Pavilion, it's worth it. **So beautiful. But what I like about it the most is the way it reminds me that, after 400 years, Shakespeare is still so very much alive. ...** Doing Shakespeare in the heart of the city is brave and relevant."

## What else is our audience saying?

Optimist Theatre staff does a great job of gathering and evaluating results from our efforts. The primary resource is audience surveys where we collect a deep pool of demographic data such as age, ethnicity, and zip codes. The most poignant feedback, however, comes directly from our audience. What were their personal experiences? After *King Lear* closed, we polled them with a simple question.

### “What made you decide to go to Shakespeare in the Park?”

The response was overwhelming. We’re honored to share those responses within the Five Acts above and the following quotes. Please enjoy these words directly from the Shakespeare in the Park audience.

#### **Thelma introduced her grandsons to Shakespeare...**

“King Lear” is a great play that I’ve seen before...and here was an opportunity to see it free, and to introduce my two grandsons, visiting from California, to exciting theater. I felt that this is exactly the right way to introduce Shakespeare to an audience brought in by the lure of a night of free entertainment.”

#### **Patricia thought it was all magical...**

“Where do I begin? I love Shakespeare! I love free Shakespeare! But most of all, I love free Shakespeare at the Peck Pavilion! The Peck was the deciding factor for me. I have been going to the Peck Pavilion for more than 20 years. It’s one of my favorite Milwaukee venues. It’s the perfect urban outdoor theater. It’s easily accessible by mass transit and freeway, with plenty of parking and numerous restaurants and pubs within walking distance. I like that it is a permanent, but open-aired structure, with comfortable seats and a roof, in a beautiful river park setting with its own tiny forest. Magical.”

#### **Elisabeth took a chance and is now hooked...**

“We came because it was free, we love Shakespeare and it was a beautiful day. However we didn’t know anything about your company and so we weren’t sure what we were getting into. Turns out we loved it!!! A fantastic production, great acting, nice people to help us to our seats. It was a moving experience. We are hooked and will be back for Comedy of Errors and will bring friends and spread the word. Thank you!”

#### **Dru followed us from Kadish Park and was delighted...**

“I’m so glad that you asked why my husband and I came to King Lear last summer. Quite simply, we share a love for all that is Shakespeare, therefore we try to take in as much Shakespeare as Milwaukee allows in a given year. We started coming to Shakespeare-in-the Park several years ago when you produced your plays outdoors on the hill overlooking the city. That was one magnificent view, but we understand your need for bigger productions, a larger stage, more lighting and sound, etc. Therefore, we were delighted when your company was able to secure the larger, yet still outdoor, stage at the PAC. We do look forward to your outdoor productions of Shakespeare every year and applaud your efforts.”



**Rock shared his own Five Acts...**

“Thank you for all the work you do for making Shakespeare in the Park happen. Here are some things that come to my mind as it pertains to your question:

1. It's one of the things I absolutely love about Milwaukee. In a way, it democratizes art, without keeping it only for a select few who can afford to go to a theater, but it's for everyone who enjoys a great play.
2. I love that it often brings together a wide variety of people. It's a community experience for me. I have been attending for 4 years now, and each time it's been with a different group of friends. It's a summer tradition for me now that I hope to keep.
3. I love and appreciate the hard work all the actors, staff / crew / behind the scenes people put into realizing this. I have never come away from a show un-entertained or un-impressed. At the end of the day, everything else aside, we go to a play to be entertained in some way, and y'all are thoroughly successful in that.
4. I love that there's a Matinee show. I have never attended one, but I like the idea that there is an option for people whose work schedule or other commitments prevent them from attending the evening shows. Again, it's about SITP being accessible, and I like that.
5. Ron Scot Fry - I mean, what can I say, dude's awesome, & always love running into him.”





# 2019 and Beyond “What’s Next?”

## 5-Year Plan

At the end of each season, Optimist Theatre hosts a series of re-cap meetings. “What worked?” “What didn’t work?” “What can we do better?” The ‘rubber hits the road’ with the re-cap question, “Where do we go from here?”

Optimist Theatre’s approach to Shakespeare in the Park reaches far into the future. In other words, we’re in it for the long haul. This program deserves to be carefully crafted now so that it will live and thrive far into the future.



**2019 will mark our milestone 10<sup>th</sup> season** and will be celebrated by 13 performances of Shakespeare’s wildly hilarious gem *The Comedy of Errors*.

Moving forward with the Optimist Theatre 5-Year Plan, our Five Acts will focus on the following areas.

### ◆ **Act I: Artistic Integrity and Impact**

An excellent production is the foundation for everything we do. All of our outreach and fundraising efforts are meaningless if our productions don’t speak to the humanity of our audience. When an audience member leaves the theatre, it’s vital that their reflection includes the thought that, although it was free to attend, the quality and impact of their experience ranks up there with theatres that charge a substantial ticket price.

Milwaukee boasts a vibrant theatre community. By producing acclaimed productions like *King Lear*, more A-List actors are interested in working on Shakespeare in the Park. This is evidenced by our ongoing associations with James Pickering, Jonathan Wainwright, Malkia Stampley, and others. 2019 will mark a new height of reputation by casting Ms. Deborah Staples in *The Comedy of Errors*.

When a cast member or crewmember wraps production, it’s vital that their reflection includes pride in a job well done. Optimist Theatre actively seeks to challenge our team to push the boundaries in their skills and knowledge.

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### ◆ **Act II: Community Outreach and Diversity**

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 attracts, reflects and embraces our diverse citizenry.

Diversity: Dr. Barbara Leigh, Optimist Theatre’s Community Outreach Coordinator, works year-round making connections with groups to attend Shakespeare in the Park summer performances and to participate in our new educational outreach program, *Shakespeare Inspires: Stories from the City*.

Our partnership with the Marcus Center’s Community Engagement and Diversity department is also engaging year-round by encouraging their community partners to host Shakespeare in the Park speakers.

### ◆ **Act III: Cast and Crew Diversity**

The cast and crew of Shakespeare in the Park must reflect the ethnic and cultural population of Milwaukee. It takes a focused and dedicated effort to make inroads into the non-Caucasian artistic community. Thanks to our partnership and mentoring by the Bronzeville Arts Ensemble and mentoring by individual professional artists, we hope that 2019 may mark some of our greatest inroads into diverse casting.

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. Recent 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.

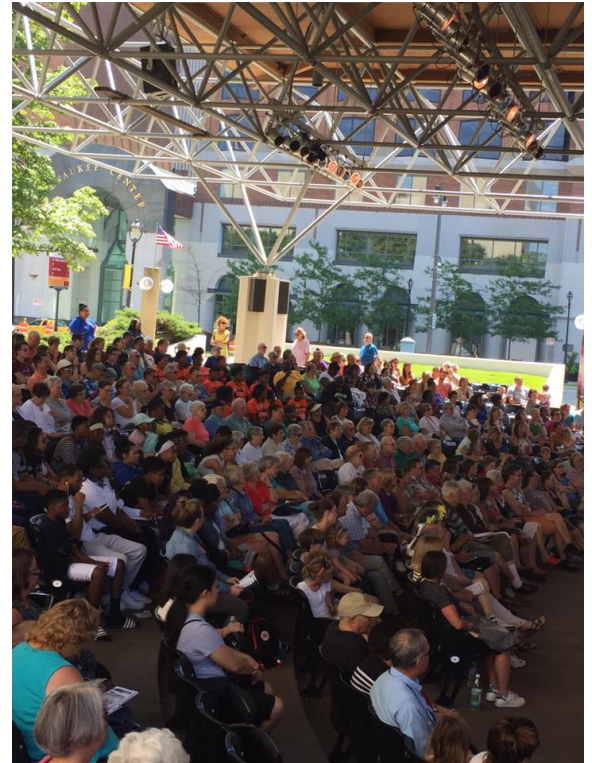
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### ◆ **Act IV: Audience Development**

Shakespeare in the Park is not your typical event. It's outdoors. It's public. It's free. It's noisy. 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 cornerstone in Milwaukee's cultural and festival makeup. We are working with the Marcus Center to better and better meet and exceed audience expectations in a variety of ways.

If the audience take-away is that Shakespeare in the Park is a top-quality experience, they are more likely to spread the word to attend. Word of mouth is the number one driver in attendance.

2019 will mark Optimist Theatre's first year working with a professional marketing firm to reach out to new audience segments.



## ◆ **Act V: Financial Support**

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.

**Foundations and Grants.** Currently, the cornerstone of Shakespeare in the Park is foundation giving. We will continue to partner with organizations such as the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, Herzfeld Foundation, Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation, and Bader Philanthropies to fulfill our shared missions.

**Individual Giving.** Almost 20% of Optimist Theatre's annual operating income comes from individuals. That used to be much higher however, as more foundations realized the value and potential of Shakespeare in the Park to further our mutual missions, that decreased. It's time to focus a greater effort on raising money from individual donors.

**Earned Income.** 2019 will see a new focus on creating earned income. Currently, Optimist Theatre has re-contracted a touring production, "To Be! Shakespeare Here and Now." This program is very successful and has had years of success.

An annual ticketed event, working title ShakesCon, is under development. This event has the greatest potential for generating earned income directly from individuals. The long-term goal is to create an event so attractive that it has regional or even national appeal. With a strong foundation in the for-profit entertainment sector and great support from traditional convention producers, ShakesCon has the foundation needed to make the impact it must make to support Shakespeare in the Park.

**Board development.** Optimist Theatre is looking for opportunities to turn mentors who are knowledgeable arts supporters to translate into board membership. A number of relationships are in development.

**Donor advised funds.** Our year-round grant writer is securing more family foundations and donor-advised funds that are able to grant \$1,000 to \$5,000. These add up significantly.

**Business sponsorships.** We are developing our efforts 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.



Shakespeare in the Park 2018 was made possible by the support of these fine organizations...

- ❖ Isabel and Alfred Bader Fund,
- ❖ Greater Milwaukee Foundation,
- ❖ Brico Fund,
- ❖ Herzfeld Foundation,
- ❖ Harry and Lynde Bradley Foundation,
- ❖ BMO Harris Bank,
- ❖ Milwaukee Public Schools Arts Internships,
- ❖ Milwaukee Arts Board,
- ❖ Jane Bradley Pettit Foundation,
- ❖ CAMPAC,
- ❖ Steigleder Charitable Trust,
- ❖ Packers Foundation,
- ❖ Wisconsin Arts Board,
- ❖ Molitor Charitable Trust,
- ❖ Plunkett Family Foundation,
- ❖ hundreds of individual donors,
- ❖ and many more.

“... 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

