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Optimist Theatre Announces 2026 Shakespeare in the Park Performances

Director and Dramaturg Cara Johnston to helm summer season

Milwaukee, WI – Optimist Theatre, producer of Milwaukee’s Free Shakespeare in the Park (SitP), is delighted to announce its 2026 touring titles: *The Merry Wives of Windsor: Falstaff’s Tale* and *Richard III* (Puppet Edition). Cara Johnston will serve as director and dramaturg for both productions.

Johnston is a respected presence in Milwaukee’s theatre community. She delighted Optimist audiences as Peasblossom in Liz Shipe’s *Another Midsummer Night’s Dream*, part of 2024’s Shakespeare in the City Series. Cara’s not only well-regarded as an actor and director but also as a playwright. Her new dark comedy, *Great White Throne*, has recently been announced as part of *Renaissance Theatreworks’* 2026–27 season roster.

The cast features Optimist favorite Libby Amato*, who stunned audiences in 2024’s ambitious one-woman *Hamlet*, joined by returning artist Rebekah Farr and newcomer Bree Beelow.* In a bold artistic choice, the powerhouse all-female ensemble will portray the entire world of both productions.

Richard III (Puppet Edition) is a bold, fast-paced 50-minute adaptation that blends medieval spectacle with inventive puppetry, creating a visually dynamic and theatrically daring reimagining of Shakespeare’s gripping tragedy.

In this production, Amato takes on the titular role as the sole human presence onstage, a striking departure from her one-woman *Hamlet*, in which she portrayed every character. The remaining three actresses bring the royal court and battlefield to life through multiple characterizations and puppetry, each embodying approximately four roles.

The Merry Wives of Windsor delivers Shakespeare at his most mischievous in a lively 40-minute comedy in which Mistresses Page, Ford, and Quickly hilariously outwit the boastful Falstaff. The production will feature live musical interludes performed by Early Music Now, Milwaukee’s

premier Renaissance music ensemble celebrating 38 years of artistry. Their live performance will weave throughout the production, adding a rich and vibrant musical dimension to the summer tour.

“I love that this season offers such a striking contrast,” said Executive Director Susan Fry. “Puppetry is the perfect way to bring a dark, over-the-top play like *Richard III* to life, so to speak, while *Merry Wives* is pure comedic joy, elevated by extraordinary live music. Together, they show just how inventive Optimist is and how and surprising Shakespeare can be.”

Johnston adds: “What excites me most about this season is the range of theatrical imagination it invites. From the bold visual storytelling of *Richard III* (Puppet Edition) to the exuberant comedy and live music of *Merry Wives*, these productions are designed to surprise audiences and remind us how playful, immediate, and alive Shakespeare can be.”

Performances will take place Saturdays and Sundays opening Saturday, July 11, and closing Sunday, August 16, 2026 and will remain free to attend. Optimist plans to return to favorite past performance sites including Wisconsin Lutheran College and Milwaukee’s Washington, Humboldt, Sherman, Lincoln, Grant, Lake, Kern, and Wisconsin Avenue Parks.

More information on the production is available on the Optimist Theatre website at www.optimisttheatre.org. For the very latest developments, follow Shakespeare in the Park on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ShaxParkMKE or sign up for the e-newsletter on the website. For more information on Optimist Theatre and all its various programs, email Susan Fry at ssfry@optimisttheatre.org

Shakespeare in the Park is a production of Optimist Theatre, a 501(c)3 nonprofit theatre company whose roots date to 1993. Since 2010, SITP has presented free, professional live theatre to a cumulative audience of more than 27,000 and have employed more than 300 Wisconsin-area actors, crew, suppliers and vendors, primarily from the greater Milwaukee area. Optimist Theatre is proud to be a Small Professional Theatre with Actors’ Equity Association and the only Equity company touring the works of Shakespeare in the Midwest.

All shows are free to see and all cast and crew are paid, thanks to donations from individuals who believe that Shakespeare in the Park is important – to Milwaukee, to the community – and a vital element of a city with a rich theater tradition. They are also supported by grants from Bader Philanthropies, The Bradley Foundation, the Milwaukee Arts Board, Maihaugen Foundation, Steigleder Foundation and others.

* Member of or appearing under a contract with Actors' Equity Association