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Optimist Theatre Announces Retirement of Founding Artistic Director Ron Scot Fry

MILWAUKEE, WIS. – Optimist Theatre, producer of Milwaukee’s free Shakespeare in the Park since 2010, has announced the retirement of Ron Scot Fry, its Founding Artistic Director. Fry set the vision and mission of Optimist Theatre (OT), from its founding as Midwest Children’s Theatre (MCT) in 1993, through its evolution to producer of Shakespeare in the Park (SITP) in 2010 to the post-pandemic return to live theater. This year, he designed the inaugural season of SITP’s mobile production with the well-received “A Midsummer Night’s Dream: The Lovers’ Tale.” His new focus will include special theatre projects and his growing contractor business, FryCroft.

Optimist Board President Michelle Owczarski states, “There simply would not be a Shakespeare in the Park here without Ron. We all wish him well in his retirement as Artistic Director, but we are also saddened to lose his strong creative leadership as an active member of the team. I’m glad to say he will continue with the Board as both a member and a mentor. While Ron leaves enormous shoes to fill as Artistic Director, the board is considering several options as how best to move forward with the many roles and responsibilities now open.”

Fry earned his Master of Fine Arts in Drama from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 1985 with a thesis on scene design for children’s theatre. At MCT, he wrote, directed, designed and performed in numerous original children’s theatre pieces that toured throughout the Midwest. Simultaneously, he worked as an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Carthage College for five years and as the Artistic Director for the Bristol Renaissance Faire for 19 years.

From 1993 to 2020, Fry also portrayed William Shakespeare in the award-winning original one-man show, “To Be! Shakespeare Here and Now”. “To Be” has been seen by more than 80,000 people domestically from Los Angeles to Washington DC, and has traveled as far as Florence, Italy, as well as being adapted for virtual performance during 2020.

Midwest Children’s Theatre officially changed its name to Optimist Theatre in 2009 when Ron and wife Susan Fry realized its focus had broadened, and the plans for Milwaukee’s free Shakespeare in the Park began to coalesce. Quickly teaming up with co-founders Tom Reed and M.L. Cogar, SITP presented its first show in 2010.

As Optimist Theatre's Artistic Director, Fry directed the SITP performances of "The Tempest" in 2010, "Macbeth" in 2012 and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in 2015; designed and acted in "Twelfth Night" in 2011, "The Winter's Tale" in 2014, and "King Lear" in 2018; and was either Technical Director, Scenic or Lighting Designer or a combination of all three for 2013's "As You Like It", 2017's "Much Ado About Nothing" and 2019's "The Comedy of Errors."

Over the course of the Shakespeare in the Park years, Fry also directed, designed sets, created 10-foot-tall puppets, acted and taught for numerous other companies, including Bronzeville Arts Ensemble, Black Arts MKE, Theatre Gigante, Milwaukee Public Theatre, Milwaukee Mask and Puppet Theatre, Theatre for Young Audiences in Sheboygan and the Children's Theatre of Madison among others. He also served as Artist in Residence at the Milwaukee High School of the Arts and the scenic and lighting designer for several shows at Alverno College.

After 12 years of work establishing the company's contribution to the Milwaukee theatre community, Fry determined it was the appropriate time to move on from his leadership role as Artistic Director. He continues to share his expertise, however, with current design and set building projects for Black Arts MKE's "Black Nativity" and others.

For Optimist Theatre, Fry continues to guide and serve the company he helped found as a member of the Board of Directors, and expects to continue to provide design services, as needed.

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