

Published August 5th, 2020

## Cal Shakes cuts costs and moves staff to Orinda

By Sophie Braccini



Sarah Williams works in the eucalyptus grove at the Bruns. Photo Sophie Braccini

The California Shakespeare Theater decided to cancel its entire season as soon as the March 16 shelter-in-place order was issued, before rehearsals for the summer plays at the Bruns amphitheater in Orinda had even started. For Sarah Williams, managing director of the nonprofit, the decision made by the team led by artistic director Eric Ting, was logical, given the shows' high starting cost and deep uncertainty of the times. With the reopening future still unknown, deep cost cutting needed to be made.

The company has furloughed the majority of its staff and conducted layoffs, and the entire company is leaving its Berkeley office where the theater company lived year round - with its rehearsal space, offices, production shop, and large storage area - and relocating to the hills of Orinda, next to the stage.

Nonprofit theaters always operate on very narrow margins, explains Williams. Cal Shakes' revenue today comes through donations as well as some online camps and classes. Certain foundation partners were able to turn some existing project grants to operating support or accelerated the cycle of new grants. With 40% of Cal Shakes revenue coming from ticket sales, the remaining percentage comes from donations, but most of this happens during production season when people are most engaged, Williams says.

The lease on the Berkeley space ended at the end of July and there was no easy solution for finding space for the costumes, props, and other staging equipment. Because there is tremendous solidarity between theater companies in the Bay Area, Cal Shakes was able to move materials to different locations provided by fellow theater companies. The Bruns is located on land owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District that Cal Shakes leases, and the company owns all the buildings that are on it.

Those other than facility personnel work remotely, but the director hopes that as the pandemic gets under control people will be able to come to Orinda to work, either inside or outside.

While shop space, rehearsal space and storage space is missing, Williams says the company is lucky to have a production space located outside. She knows that in the age of social distancing Cal Shakes may have to adapt its model and rescale production with fewer patrons at a given time.

Williams is very concerned for the artists and technicians in the community whose benefits ended at the end of July; she does not know how some of them will survive. Cal Shakes is implementing several ideas to put some cash in their hands. The first program was Mystery Shakespeare Theater 1592 where artists provided live commentary for a small stipend. The company is looking at more funding to playwrights and artists who are creating work relevant to this moment. Cal Shakes is also thinking about how to utilize the outdoor space, such as the eucalyptus grove that has many picnic tables interspaced at a large distance to accommodate movie nights, presentations, or lectures.

Meanwhile, the company is offering an online 10-week in-depth dive into Shakespeare with Cal Shakes' resident dramaturg Dr. Philippa Kelly. "Hamlet," "King Lear," "Julius Caesar," "Measure for Measure," and "The Taming of the Shrew" are on the syllabus. Kelly will explore the vital question: what makes these plays so potent for the moment we are living in right now? Each play's exploration includes two one-hour classes on Tuesday nights and one one-hour Saturday study session, for the price of \$60 per play. Classes began Aug. 4 on Zoom.

Williams says that there is no precise end in sight for the crisis, the industry has been hit to its core and it is going to be a very long recovery process.

For more information, visit [calshakes.org](http://calshakes.org).

### Town Hall Theatre cuts staff

Town Hall Theatre's board decided to eliminate the artistic director position from its permanent staff list and Susan Evans, who had held that position for three years, was let go. Dennis Markam, the managing director is one of the three paid staff left with the production manager and development director. The director of

education was not replaced. Markam explained that the situation was not sustainable and that the theater company will be reinventing itself in the coming weeks/months. The current staff and volunteer board members will conduct outreach to the community in the near future to evaluate its theatrical needs.

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA