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## Local legend contributes to her alma mater

By Sora O'Doherty



Zendaya in 2007 production Photo provided

It started with a trip down memory lane: actor Zendaya wanted to show her boyfriend, Tom Holland, her beloved Cal Shakes, where she spent a great deal of her childhood. Executive Director Clive Worsley was frank in a recent interview. Asked if he approached the actor for a donation, he exclaimed, "I absolutely did!" The result was that Zendaya recently contributed \$100,000 to Cal Shakes. Worsley was touched that Zendaya posted a photograph of herself at the theater on Instagram with just the one word caption, "Home." Worsley was contacted by Zendaya's mother, Claire Stoermer, who had been the house manager of Cal Shakes for many years. Stoermer told Worsley that her daughter wanted to show Holland around the theater where she grew up and studied. Worsley welcomed them warmly; he himself had only come back to Cal Shakes last year, when the theater was in decline and closure was being discussed. Worsley shared his vision of the future with Zendaya and Holland when they visited. Since the days when theatergoers would buy season tickets seem to be gone, never to return, Worsley wants to open up the theater to a wider variety of events. He envisions dance performances, comedy, and live music; even weddings

and other private events. Worsley said that Zendaya was excited by the prospect of saving the theater by opening it to wider audiences. And so she made her donation through the Women Donors Network, a national network of women, both cis and trans, nonbinary, and gender-expansive donors committed to protecting and advancing gender, racial, economic, and climate justice. When Zendaya was a child growing up in Oakland, California, her mother worked as a teacher at Fruitvale Elementary School and also as the house manager at Cal Shakes, taking care of things such as ushers and the cafe. Zendaya would come after school and hang around the theater, talking to the actors. She did summer programs for years, Worsley says, including eight seasons of summer classes. Zendaya and her mother now both live in Los Angeles, but the actor returns to the Bay Area to visit her grandmother, who still lives in Oakland. Summer season classes, which are still running and open now for registration for next summer, include things such as acting, voice, movement, stage combat, and text analysis. After morning classes, the students rehearse the play that will be performed at the end of the season. Worsley noted that the objective of the summer sessions is also to teach other skills, such as listening more than speaking, the benefits of teamwork, and the values of being humane, not just human. "We want to set them up for success and also to be good for society," Worsley said, adding that "it was nice to see all of that come to fruition in Zendaya" and that her contribution speaks to the kind of person she is. Zendaya met Colman Domingo at Cal Shakes, and now they are cast together in *Euphoria* on HBO. Domingo has received his first Oscar nomination this year for his performance in *Rustin*. Other prominent Cal Shakes alumni include Annette Benning, nominated for best actress for her performance in *Nyad*, and Mahershala Ali, winner of two Oscars and numerous other awards. Like Zendaya, Ali was one of the presenters at the 2024 Oscar awards on Mar. 10. Cal Shakes has robust fundraising goals to meet its annual budget of about \$3 million. \$1 million, approximately, comes from ticket sales. This year Cal Shakes celebrates its 50th anniversary. Part of the celebration will be performances of *As You Like It*, directed by Elizabeth Carter throughout September. Cal Shakes didn't originate in Orinda, but in Emeryville in 1974 as the Emeryville Shakespeare Festival. It moved to Berkeley shortly thereafter, and in 1991 opened its open air theater in Orinda. In 2010, they added a building that houses the café, business office, wardrobe and dressing rooms, as well as restrooms. The performance season runs from mid-May to mid-October. There is parking for patrons, or some find it easier to take BART to the Orinda station, from where there is a shuttle bus to the Bruns Amphitheater. In addition to helping Cal Shakes, Zendaya also works with Destiny Arts in Oakland, a non-profit group dedicated to empowering young people through art and movement. Cal Shakes also reaches out to Title 1 schools and Promise neighborhoods. In addition, they have run programs at Orinda Intermediate School since 2003 and often hire St. Mary's students for summer sessions. In terms of exposing students to Shakespeare, during the season Cal Shakes presents student matinee programs beginning when school is still in session. Artists are sent into schools, sometimes for a year, sometimes as part of an embedded program. "We don't learn Shakespeare by reading it," Worsley affirms, "but by acting it or by seeing it performed." He stressed the "power of language and meter to lend emphasis to important words," and extolled Shakespeare's "unbelievable sense of the human experience." You can join Zendaya in supporting Cal Shakes today. Visit <https://calshakes.org/support/> to make your tax deductible donation.

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[back](#)

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