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## Local talent shines at opening of 50th season of Cal Shakes

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Craig Isaacs, BlueGoo Photography

Students from local schools, including Miramonte High School and Saint Mary's College, performed at the launch of the 50th season of the California Shakespeare Festival on Saturday, May 18.

On the sunny but cool afternoon, the students from Miramonte performed three 10-minute short versions of Shakespeare's plays. As a part of the school's drama program, their remit was to work dressed in all black, with no set or props beyond a number of black chairs. Drama teacher Heather Cousins introduced the Miramonte students, explaining that this annual project is the last thing that senior drama students do before graduating. Each play used five to six actors, and the chairs were transformed into beds, weapons, ships, or walls.

St. Mary's College in Moraga has a longstanding partnership with Cal Shakes, according to Rebecca Engle, a founding member of the school's performing arts

department. She introduced Ryanne Biernat, who was one final-exam-week away from graduation with a BA in Performance & Theatre Studies from Saint Mary's. Biernat performed "Faire Play," her senior capstone. This 15 minute solo performance was co-conceived with, and written by, professional actor/playwright Mike DiSalvo, and directed by Visiting Professor Shannon R. Davis for this spring's senior one act festival.

In addition, Kimiya Shokri and Justin Howard represented St. Mary's alumni, having both graduated from Saint Mary's in 2019. Shokri and Howard played Beatrice and Benedict, from Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing." Both Shokri and Howard made their professional acting debuts before graduating from college: Shokri with Shotgun Players, and Howard in "War of the Roses" at Cal Shakes. Shokri was assistant director of the world premiere of "House of Joy" at Cal Shakes, and became a Cal Shakes Teaching Artist for schools across the Bay Area. Howard understudied key roles in both "King Lear" and "Winters Tale." Now married, both work at Saint Mary's: Shokri as Assistant Director of Saint Mary's Intercultural Center and Howard as an Admissions Officer.

Cal Shakes Executive Director Clive Worsley, noted that although it is the 50th anniversary of Cal Shakes, they have been at home in Orinda for 33 years. The group began in Emeryville, and moved to Berkeley before finding their home at the Bruns Memorial Amphitheater. To celebrate its 50th anniversary, Cal Shakes will be offering Shakespeare's comedy, "As You Like It" this year, directed by award-winning Bay Area theatremaker Elizabeth Carter.

Carter praised the gorgeous set for the upcoming production and spoke about the play. "You go into the woods and you figure something out," she said, talking about the discovery of how you really operate in the world. "In the woods, you're not judged for how you show up," she added, noting that there is an unfolding array of gender embodiment in the production. Worsley added that he is excited about the upcoming production, including the cast and the design team.

"As You Like It" will run Sept. 12 to 29 at the Bruns Memorial Amphitheater. The opening night gala performance will be on Sept. 14. Tickets will be on sale soon.

On June 29, Cal Shakes will hold a Fire Light Tea Party from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. The Fire Light Tea Party is described as "an immersive, educational and artistically inspiring event, supporting Bay Area communities to recalibrate our relationship to fire, in actionable, effective, and enjoyable ways," that will pair art and entertainment with usable resources and community connection. Tickets for the four-hour event are available for \$20 each.

For further information about these and other upcoming events, see <https://calshakes.org/>.

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