

## Shakespeare Project of Chicago marks its 20th year



The Shakespeare Project member Erin Neal reads lines during a rehearsal of "King Lear" at West Ridge Community United Methodist Church on Oct. 17, 2014, in Chicago. (John J. Kim, Chicago Tribune)

By **Rick Kogan**,  
Chicago Tribune

OCTOBER 22, 2014, 5:08 PM

**T**he current production of William Shakespeare's "King Lear," playing through Nov. 9 at the handsome and justifiably renowned Chicago Shakespeare Theater on Navy Pier, stars Larry Yando as the increasingly delusional title character and features the music of Frank Sinatra. It is has gotten rave reviews — "raw and visceral ... Yando as Lear has his audience on a string," wrote my colleague Chris Jones — and is playing to packed houses.

Another, quite different "King Lear" will be taking place this weekend at four libraries around the area. There is no Sinatra. There are no costumes. There is no set. There are just actors reading from scripts held in their hands — "on book," in theater-speak — the words that Shakespeare wrote more than 400 years ago. And it's free.

The cast is composed of theater pros, all members of Actors Equity, the professional union of actors and stage managers. All of these people have long lists of credits, from Broadway to TV and movies and dozens of local stages. All love Shakespeare and his words.

"You might think of us as 'Shakespeare unplugged,'" says Peter Garino, the director of this show and one of the founders of The Shakespeare Project of Chicago ([shakespeareprojectchicago.org](http://shakespeareprojectchicago.org)). "We greatly

admire what Barbara (Gaines, the founder and artistic director of the Chicago Shakespeare Theater) does. Many of our actors have performed on her stage to great joy. But we are unadorned and direct, and sometimes a person will tell us after a reading, 'I finally get this play.' That means a great deal to us."

The Shakespeare Project of Chicago is celebrating its 20th year in the Bard business, and if you have never heard of it you are not alone. "We are under the radar," says Garino. "We are barely if ever reviewed, mentioned by the mainstream press. We are up and gone in a weekend."

Still, this is an essential thread in the cultural fabric of this clime.

It began in 1995 when Garino, along with a few other actors/Shakespeare fans, would bump into one another at auditions. A group of eight then decided to meet once a week in a room at the Chicago Park District's Berger Park Cultural Center on the North Side.

"This was a way for actors to flex their muscles. You can read and rehearse a monologue by yourself, but you can't do a scene all alone," says Stephen Spencer, who will be reading the role of the Fool, with Fredric Stone playing Lear.

Shortly after they began meeting, "People would walk by and ask, 'Mind if I sit in and listen?'" says Garino, who is the group's artistic director. "We never went looking for an audience. People just started to find us, and there were so many dropping by to listen that we eventually decided to give a public performance."

They presented a reading of "The Merchant of Venice" at Berger Park. It was well-attended and enthusiastically received. Each of the dozen cast members was paid \$15.

The salaries have not gone up much since then. "No one does this for the money," says Spencer. But over the last decades the group has performed more than 100 plays — each of Shakespeare's plays at least once — at such venues as the Chicago Cultural Center, Lincoln Park Cultural Center, Harold Washington Library, senior centers, civic organizations and school classrooms.

The group's performers once mounted a full production many years ago but, as Spencer recalls, "We blew our entire budget," and so have ever since presented almost exclusively on-book shows.

"We are the classic itinerant company," says Garino, smiling. Its current "stages" are in public libraries in Niles (7 p.m. Friday), Wilmette (2 p.m. Saturday), Highland Park (2 p.m. Sunday) and the Newberry (10 a.m. Saturday) in the city, but the group's performers rehearse wherever they can.

"It would be lovely if someone might offer us a permanent rehearsal space," says Garino, noting that organization is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

The company — "We never call ourselves an ensemble," says Garino — has, give or take, depending on people's other theatrical commitments, a couple of dozen regulars. Its annual budget is \$30,000, about what some big productions might spend on wigs. This money comes from an Illinois Arts Council grant, some private donors and from friends-of-the-library groups that raise funds through such activities as bake sales. It has a tiny board of directors.

"No matter how humble, we know we are part of the scene," says Spencer

Later in its current season, the company will present its 50-minute productions of "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet" (in January), "Macbeth" (in late February) and "The Revenger's Tragedy" (in April). (Yes, that latter

show is not from Shakespeare's pen but rather the work of Thomas Middleton, one of the Shakespeare contemporaries whose work is also performed by the company.) Each performance comes with short introductions to the play, and every performance is followed by the cast having conversations with the audiences.

As an acknowledgment of the company's durability and ongoing importance, the Newberry recently invited it to contribute artifacts such as scripts, production notes, photographs, programs, posters and other materials from its 20 years in business to form a permanent archive.

The library, which has a fine collection of Shakespearean materials, celebrated the 450th anniversary of the playwright's birth earlier this year with a terrific exhibition, "The Bard is Born." It featured The Shakespeare Project of Chicago's "All's Well That Ends Well," which played to a packed house.

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