

Chicago Shakespeare Theater announces cast and creative team
 for an electrifying world premiere play

Billie Jean

Based on the life of sports icon and equality champion Billie Jean King
 by Lauren Gunderson and directed by Marc Bruni
 Starring Chilina Kennedy in the title role

July 18–August 10 in The Yard



Chicago—June 12, 2025—[Chicago Shakespeare Theater](#) (CST) announces today the cast and creative team of the world premiere play *Billie Jean*, about sports icon and equality champion **Billie Jean King**. Playwright **Lauren Gunderson**, one of the most-produced playwrights in the US, and director **Marc Bruni** (Broadway's *The Great Gatsby* and *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*), team up to stage this empowering new look at a legend who shattered glass ceilings on and off the court. Following her path to becoming a sports icon, from her record-breaking victories to her relentless fight for equal pay and equal rights, *Billie Jean* explores the cost of public battles and private struggles—bringing us closer than ever before to a woman whose battle for identity and equality inspired and continues to inspire generations. The production runs **July 18–August 10, 2025**, in The Yard at Chicago Shakespeare Theater. **Chilina Kennedy** stars as Billie Jean King, leading a cast that also includes **Julia Antonelli**, **Dan Amboyer**, **Elena Hurst**, **Courtney Rikki Green**, **Wynn Harmon**, **Carolyn Holding**, **Jürgen Hooper**, **Callie Rachelle Johnson**, **Lenne Klingaman**, **Nancy Lemenager**, and **Murphy Taylor Smith**.

Named one of the “100 Most Important Americans of the 20th Century” by *Life* magazine, **Billie Jean King** is the first woman athlete to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the first individual woman athlete to be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. She is the founder of the Women's Sports Foundation, the Women's Tennis Association and the Billie Jean King Foundation. She is part of the ownership groups of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Angel City FC and a member of the Advisory Board of the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). In 2020, King became the first woman to have an annual global team sports event named in her honor when Fed Cup, the women's world cup of tennis, was rebranded as the Billie Jean King Cup. The National Tennis Center, home of the US Open, was renamed the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in 2006 in honor of her accomplishments on and off the court.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's world premiere production of *Billie Jean* is developed by special arrangement with four-time Tony-winning producer **Harriet Newman Leve** (*Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *War Horse*, *Stomp*) and **Stephanie Sandberg** (Country Lane Productions), with **Lily Tomlin** and **Jane Wagner** (powerhouse creative duo in television, sound recording, film, theater, and animation for more than 40 years).

Chilina Kennedy is best known for playing Carole King in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* on Broadway for over 1,200 performances. Her Broadway credits include Myrtle in *The Great Gatsby*, Annie in *Paradise Square*, and Mary Magdalene in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and she starred in the first national tour of *The Band's Visit* (Toronto Critics Award). Kennedy's other selected credits include the Off-Broadway world premiere of *This Ain't No Disco*, the world premiere of *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* (Hartford Stage/The Old Globe in San Diego), and the one-woman play *The Human Voice* (filmed for

Toronto's Ontario International College). She spent three seasons each at the Shaw Festival Theatre and the Stratford Festival, with credits including Rose of Sharon in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The cast also features **Dan Amboyer** (Netflix's *Survival of the Thickest* and *Uncoupled*, TV Land's *Younger*, NBC's *Blacklist: Redemption*) as Larry King, **Julia Antonelli** (Ari Aster's *Beau Is Afraid*, Netflix's *Outer Banks*, Nickelodeon's *Every Witch Way* and *WITS Academy*) as Young Billie Jean, and **Elena Hurst** (*Becoming A Man* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* at American Repertory Theater) as Rosie Casals, as well as **Courtney Rikki Green** (*Henry V* at CST, *Romeo and Juliet* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival), **Wynn Harmon** (*Porgy and Bess* on Broadway), **Carolyn Holding** (HBO's *The Gilded Age*, STARZ/Netflix's *Heels*), **Jürgen Hooper** (*The Comedy of Errors*, *Amadeus*, and more at CST, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* on Broadway), **Callie Rachelle Johnson** (*Hamlet* at CST, *Next to Normal* at Drury Lane, *Pal Joey* at Porchlight), **Lenne Klingaman** (*Waitress* on Broadway and first national tour, *The Underlying Chris* at Second Stage), **Nancy Lemenager** (*McNeal*, *Chicago*, *Never Gonna Dance*, and more on Broadway), and **Murphy Taylor Smith** (*A Transparent Musical* at Center Theatre Group).

"It's so exciting to be announcing this brilliant cast for Lauren Gunderson's play about the heroic Billie Jean King," shared Chicago Shakespeare's artistic director **Edward Hall**. "Bringing thought-provoking and original drama into our repertoire alongside Shakespeare gives us and our audiences such a wonderful opportunity to explore the connections between Shakespeare's world and ours. Billie Jean has left and continues to leave her mark on our world, helping to shape our thoughts and challenge accepted societal norms. It is a joy and a privilege to be bringing this play to CST first."

Playwright **Lauren Gunderson** has been one of the most produced playwrights in America since 2015, topping the list thrice. She is a two-time winner of the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award for *I and You* and *The Book of Will*, the winner of the William Inge Distinguished Achievement in Theatre Award, the Lanford Wilson Award, and a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. Her plays have been translated into a dozen languages and are produced across the world including the West End. Her anthology, *Revolutionary Women*, is published by Bloomsbury, where her play *I and You* is a "modern classic."

Gunderson shared, "CST is the perfect place to launch this new play about Billie Jean King, her activism, and her ongoing impact on the world. Her story is a hero's journey, and the house of Shakespeare's heroes is a fitting home for this theatrical debut about excellence, equality, and heart. We want this play to be an exploration of contrast: instantly recognizable and also deeply surprising; athletic and also theatrical; heartfelt and heroic. I am honored and thrilled to have *Billie Jean* be a part of CST's season."

Director **Marc Bruni**'s credits include *The Great Gatsby*, currently running on Broadway and the West End as well as the Tony, Grammy, and Olivier Award-winning *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* on Broadway, in the West End, US and UK Tours, and in Australia. He also directed *Trevor: The Musical* which was filmed Off-Broadway at Stage 42 and now streams on Disney+. Bruni was Jeff Award-nominated for Chicago credits *Trevor* at Writers Theatre and *Old Jews Telling Jokes* at the Royal George, and his many additional credits include *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Music Man*, *How to Succeed in Business...*, *50 Years of Broadway* (Kennedy Center), and *Hey, Look Me Over!*, *Paint Your Wagon*, *Pipe Dream* and *Fanny* (City Center Encores!).

Billie Jean features movement direction by **Steph Paul** (*Sanctuary City* at Steppenwolf Theatre, *Nobody Loves You* at American Conservatory Theater), scenic design by **Wilson Chin** (*Cost of Living* and *Pass Over* on Broadway), costume design by **Linda Cho** (*Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Othello*, and *Mary Stewart* at CST, Tony Award winner for *The Great Gatsby* and *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder* on Broadway), lighting design by **Jen Schriever** (Tony Award nominee for *A Strange Loop* and *Death of a Salesman* on Broadway), sound design by **Jane Shaw** (credits at Theater for a New Audience, Roundabout Theatre Company, Playwrights Horizons and many more), and video and projection design by **David Bengali** (Tony Award nominee for *Water for Elephants*). The creative team also includes **Chels Morgan** (Intimacy Coordinator), **Eva Breneman** (Dialect Coach), **The Telsey Office | Karyn Casl CSA & Charlie Hano CSA** (Casting), **Bob Mason** (Chicago Casting), **Amy Marie Seidel** (Associate Director), **Lily Tomasic** (Assistant Scenic Designer), **Herin Kaputkin** (Assistant Costume Designer), **Colleen Doherty** (Assistant Lighting Designer), **Taylor Edelle Stuart** (Associate Video Designer), **Kristi J. Martens** (Production Stage Manager), **Amanda Blanco** (Assistant Stage Manager), and **Ethan Coon** (Production Assistant).

More information at chicagoshakes.com/billiejean or on social media at @chicagoshakes.

Billie Jean

By Lauren Gunderson

Directed by Marc Bruni

July 18 – August 10, 2025

The Yard at Chicago Shakespeare Theater

PERFORMANCE LISTING

- Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m.
- Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. (no matinee July 23)
- Thursdays at 7:30 p.m.
- Fridays at 7:30 p.m.
- Saturdays at 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. (no matinee July 19)
- Sundays at 2:30 p.m.

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Chicago Shakespeare strives to make its facility and performances accessible to all patrons. Accessible seating, assistive listening devices, large-print and Braille programs, and sensory tools are available at every performance. Enhanced performances include:

- **Audio-described performance – Sunday, August 3 at 2:30 p.m.**
A program that provides spoken narration of a play's key visual elements for patrons who are blind or have low vision.
- **Open captioned performance – Wednesday, August 6 at 1:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.**
A text display of the words and sounds heard during a play, synced live with the action onstage.
- **ASL interpreted performance – Friday, August 8 at 7:30 p.m.**
All dialogue and lyrics are translated into American Sign Language by two certified interpreters

Creative Team

Lauren Gunderson - Writer
Marc Bruni - Director
Steph Paul - Movement Director
Wilson Chin - Scenic Designer
Linda Cho - Costume Designer
Jen Schriever - Lighting Designer
Jane Shaw - Sound Designer
David Bengali - Video & Projections Designer
Chels Morgan - Intimacy Coordinator
Eva Breneman - Dialect Coach
The Telsey Office | Karyn Casl CSA & Charlie Hano CSA - Casting
Bob Mason - Chicago Casting
Amy Marie Seidel - Associate Director
Lily Tomasic - Assistant Scenic Designer
Herin Kaputkin - Assistant Costume Designer
Colleen Doherty - Assistant Lighting Designer
Taylor Edelle Stuart - Associate Video Designer
Kristi J. Martens - Production Stage Manager
Amanda Blanco - Assistant Stage Manager
Ethan Coon - Production Assistant

Cast

Chilina Kennedy - Billie Jean King
Dan Amboyer - Larry King
Julia Antonelli - Young Billie Jean
Courtney Rikki Green - Woman Two
Wynn Harmon - Man One
Carolyn Holding - Woman Five
Jürgen Hooper - Man Two
Elena Hurst - Rosie Casals
Callie Rachelle Johnson - Woman Six
Lenne Klingaman - Woman Three
Nancy Lemenager - Woman One
Murphy Taylor Smith - Woman Four

CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER (CST)

CST is a leading international theater company and the nation's largest year-round theater dedicated to the works of Shakespeare. Under the visionary leadership of Artistic Director Edward Hall and Executive Director Kimberly Motes, the Regional Tony Award recipient is committed to creating vivid, entertaining theatrical experiences that invigorate and engage people of all ages and identities by illuminating the complexity, ambiguity, and wonder of our world. Each year, nearly a quarter of a million people experience CST's artistry through more than 12 productions. With Shakespeare at the heart of the artistic work, CST also produces compelling, contemporary stories from fresh voices of today. CST brings the world to Chicago and sends Chicago out into the world as Chicago's foremost presenter of international theater, and consistent producer of North American and world premieres. Serving more students and teachers than any theater in the city, CST annually welcomes more than 20,000 students to performances and programs like Chicago Shakespeare SLAM, alongside professional development opportunities for teachers. CST activates its campus with three venues: 700-seat The Yard; the 500-seat Jentes Family Courtyard Theater; and the 200-seat Carl and Marilyn Thoma Upstairs Studio. Free programs like Shakes in the City bring performances to parks and community spaces across Chicago's 77 neighborhoods. Shared humanity and unforgettable stories—now THIS is Chicago Shakespeare. chicagoshakes.com

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