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Chicago Shakespeare Theater announces 40th Anniversary Season

Launching a vision for the future of America's leading Shakespeare Theater with dynamic productions of Shakespeare's plays alongside world-class contemporary work



Chicago—May 15, 2026—[Chicago Shakespeare Theater \(CST\)](#) Artistic Director **Edward Hall** and Executive Director **Kimberly Motes** announce today the company's **40th Anniversary Season**. America's leading Shakespeare Theater curates a season rooted in Shakespeare and Chicago with a complement of world-class contemporary work—emblematic of the Theater's global, yet unmistakably Chicago perspective. Celebrating four decades of vivid and entertaining performances that captivate minds, spark conversation, and invite new perspectives, CST now embarks on the Theater's next thrilling chapter.

The 2026/27 Season begins with **Play On!**, a joyful musical inspired by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* set to the songs of Duke Ellington, directed by Sheldon Epps. Next is an unforgettable theatrical event: **The Winter's Tale** and **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, both staged by Artistic Director Edward Hall and performed in repertory by a single company of 14 actors, a first-ever in CST's history. The winter will feature **Romeo y Julieta**, a bilingual English and Spanish adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Henry

Godinez; and the return of the Tony Award-winning smash hit **Illinoise**, based on the Sufjan Stevens album and directed and choreographed by Justin Peck, after a sold-out world premiere at CST in 2024. The season ends with the hilarious whodunnit **Reunion in Bartersville** directed by Jerry Dixon; and the world premiere of **Heartbreakers**, a high-voltage reimagining of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* told through the electrifying rock catalog of Grammy-winners Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo and with book and direction by Bradley Bredeweg. CST continues to deepen its commitment to the next generation of theatergoers through **award-winning education programs**, annually serving more students and teachers than any theater in the city.

"It is only fitting that this celebratory milestone season brings together the best of Shakespeare and the best of contemporary work," said **Edward Hall, Artistic Director**. "We've long believed that plays of the past can illuminate our present—and that the voices of today shine a light on how much we share with one another: past, present, and future. It is my joy to embrace our audiences with distinctly Chicago-style Shakespeare. This upcoming season is a tribute to the artistry, excellence, and ambition that has come to define Chicago Shakespeare Theater."

"From the moment that the first words 'O for a Muse of Fire...' were spoken on the roof of the Red Lion Pub in Barbara Gaines' debut production of *Henry V*, a destiny for Chicago Shakespeare Theater was born," shared **Kimberly Motes, Executive Director**. "Now forty years later, CST has grown beyond what anyone might have imagined—and the sky is the limit as we dream ahead to the Theater's next 40 years and beyond."

The 2026/2027 Season

Launching the season in The Yard is **Play On! (September 11–October 18, 2026 | The Yard)**, a joyful musical retelling of Shakespeare's beloved comedy *Twelfth Night* set to the timeless jazz tunes of quintessential American composer **Duke Ellington**. Original creator **Sheldon Epps** returns to the three-time Tony-nominated musical with book by **Cheryl L. West** for the first time in 20 years to stage Shakespeare's story for a new generation. Aspiring songwriter Vy takes the A-Train to Harlem in the swinging 1930s with big dreams of a career in showbiz, only to find that it's a man's world. She disguises herself to reach the inner circle of renowned band leader, the Duke—but plans backfire when she catches the eye of Lady Liv, the star singer of the Cotton Club, and mistaken identities make way for romance. Music is indeed the food of love with big band pizzazz and Ellington's hit songs "It Don't Mean a Thing," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," "I'm Beginning to See the Light," and much more. **Play On!** is presented in association with MMaxwellMedia, WMK Productions, Alyssa Melani, and The Classical Theatre of Harlem.

“Over the last couple of years, Cheryl and I took a deep dive back into the book of the show,” revealed director **Sheldon Epps**. “Our credo in all of this has been to enhance and heighten the celebration of Black Excellence, Black Brilliance, and Black JOY. The Excellence being the celebration of the artists who inspired these characters and the actual cast onstage; the Brilliance is that of Mr. Shakespeare and the Duke of Ellington; and the Joy is consistently the experience of the audience that we hope to achieve with each performance. In simple but very effective ways, we have and will continue to focus on the fact that the show is all about the search for LOVE, and removing the masks that we often wear that keep that hoped-for goal from entering our lives fully.”

CST's 40th Anniversary Season continues with an unforgettable theatrical event in the Jentes Family Courtyard Theater: for the first time in CST's history, two plays will be performed in repertory by one masterfully talented Chicago Shakespeare Company of actors. Under the creative leadership of **CST Artistic Director Edward Hall** and taking its inspiration from Shakespeare's own company and CST's roots as the Shakespeare Repertory, a company of 14 actors perform both *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, two of Shakespeare's most beguiling fairy tales. This double header of productions makes for a thrilling theatrical experience, with two beautiful plays exploring the formidable power of love, laughter, and forgiveness. Audiences will have the unique opportunity to experience both repertory productions in one day on November 21 & 24 and December 5 & 12.

“Bringing these two plays together with one group of actors is a genuinely exciting prospect,” said Artistic Director **Edward Hall**. “Audiences will have the rare opportunity of seeing performers switch into completely different roles from one play to another celebrating Chicago's huge well of creative talent. This Chicago Shakespeare Company will have it all: laughter, drama, magic, forgiveness, and love. An unforgettable journey through magic forests and wild seacoasts, with fairies, oracles, bears, kings, and queens. Everything that a good adventure can bring you and all from the safety of your seat!”

The repertory series begins with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (**October 13–December 12, 2026 | The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater**). Once upon a time in a land called Sicilia, King Leontes is infected by an uncontrollable jealousy over his pregnant wife Hermione. Shakespeare's timeless romance takes us on a fairy tale adventure from the drama of Sicilia to the color and music of Bohemia. Shipwrecks, bears, and magic oracles dance across the stage in this story of betrayal, forgiveness, reunion, and reconciliation. Hope and forgiveness sit at the heart of Shakespeare's most magical of fairy stories with an unforgettable ending driven by the power of redemption.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (**November 11, 2026–January 3, 2027 | The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater**) sparkles with the festive spirit of the holiday season. Shakespeare's magical romantic comedy is a delectable treat for the entire family. A snowy Athens gives way to the warm and colorful dream of a midsummer forest as Shakespeare's best-loved characters are consumed by the absurd chaos of love and the joy of friendship. Young love collides with a fairy feud and an enthusiastic group of amateur theatricals in the most warm-hearted play in the English language. An enchanting story of love, marriage, and magic, this holiday *Dream* will fill you with happiness and hope.

Next in the Courtyard, **Henry Godinez** directs *Romeo y Julieta* (**January 26–March 14, 2027 | The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater**). Shakespeare's classic tale of star-crossed young lovers from feuding families is transported to Miami in the early 1960s, as an influx of Cuban exiles find their dreams of returning to their homeland at odds with the reality of their new home. As conflict escalates between the Montescos and the Capuletas, the young couple defy the enmity between their families and the prejudices of their community—only to discover that love is the true universal language. This dynamic 90-minute bilingual adaptation from **Karen Zacarías** and Godinez is performed in both English and Spanish with projected translation. A Havana native, Godinez is a co-founder of Teatro Vista and the Sabl Resident Director at Goodman Theatre, where he most recently directed *Inherit the Wind*, *Fannie*, and *American Mariachi*. He returns to Chicago Shakespeare, where he first appeared thirty-seven years ago in Barbara Gaines' *Cymbeline* in 1989, and went on to perform in ten productions as well as to direct 2022's highly acclaimed *Measure for Measure*.

Director **Henry Godinez** shared, “My favorite old t-shirt, which I've proudly worn to tatters, is from NYC's Shakespeare in the Park with the words ‘SHAKESPEARE PARA TODOS’ emblazoned on the front. I'm sure at some point I wore that shirt to Chicago Shakespeare Theater 18 years ago when Karen Zacarías and I were first developing this bilingual adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Now, at a time when the Latiné community of Chicago has been horribly villainized and persecuted, made to feel like this country was not our home, the opportunity to present this *Romeo y Julieta* at one of the great cultural institutions in the heart of our city is a tremendous source of pride and validation. It shows the universality of the greatest writer—and perhaps the greatest story ever written—in the English language. It proves, like my tattered t-shirt says, that ‘SHAKESPEARE IS FOR EVERYONE!’”

The Tony Award-winning phenomenon *Illinois* (**February 9–March 14, 2027 | The Yard**) returns to where it all began. Based on **Sufjan Stevens'** landmark album *Illinois*, this “mysterious, deeply moving and unforgettable dance-musical” (*The New York Times*) is directed and choreographed by Tony winner **Justin Peck** (New York City Ballet, Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*). Peck partners with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Jackie Sibblies Drury** to tell a hauntingly beautiful original story through live music, dance, and theater. After a sold-out world-premiere at Chicago Shakespeare in 2024, *Illinois* took Broadway by storm. Now, it returns to its spiritual home at CST.

Director **Justin Peck** shared, "It is incredibly meaningful to bring *Illinoise* back as part of CST's 40th Anniversary Season. This show has always been about memory, senses, and the quiet poetry of human connection—ideas that feel deeply aligned with a theater reflecting on its own legacy. At the same time, returning to CST with *Illinoise* feels less like a revisit and more like a continuation shaped by the artists, audiences, and spirit that make Chicago such a vital creative home. The icing-on-the-cake will be hearing Sufjan Stevens' hit song 'Chicago' ring out within the very city that inspired it."

Next in The Yard is the hilarious whodunnit ***Reunion in Bartersville* (April 11–May 9, 2027 | The Yard)**. The surviving members of the Bartersville High class of 1933 gather in their small Texas hometown to celebrate their 50th reunion. Over punch bowls and sandwich platters, a decades-old murder case is thrown wide open when the septuagenarians are confronted by a ghost from their past and they must all face their own scandalous secrets. This irreverent comedy will have audiences dying of laughter. Written by award-winning playwright **Celeste Bedford Walker**, this quick-witted comedy first premiered at the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn in 1987. Now, it finds new life in Chicago, celebrating its 40th anniversary alongside CST, directed by **Jerry Dixon**. *Reunion in Bartersville* is presented in association with LaChanze Productions, led by Tony Award winner **LaChanze** who returns to CST after co-producing the acclaimed *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* in 2025.

"*Reunion in Bartersville* is the reason I'm a producer today," said **LaChanze**. "This play is full of truth and humor that keeps you guessing in the traditional style of a murder mystery. My mission is to produce stories that will expand our theatrical appetite, and this play as the inaugural production at LaChanze Productions is setting the bar."

Rounding out the season is a new musical powered by the music of four-time Grammy Award winners and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees **Pat Benatar** and **Neil Giraldo**. ***Heartbreakers* (May 4–June 6, 2027 | Carl and Marilynn Thoma Upstairs Studio)** drops *Romeo and Juliet* into a sweaty, neon-lit underground—reimagining the iconic love story as a high-voltage collision of love, rivalry, and identity that feels dangerous, immediate, and alive. Featuring an electrifying catalog of rock anthems including "Love Is a Battlefield," "We Belong," "Shadows of the Night," "Promises in the Dark," "Heartbreaker," "Invincible," and "We Live for Love," alongside new original songs written for the production by Benatar and Giraldo, the show fuses Shakespeare's timeless romance with a pulse-driving theatrical experience where desire takes over, loyalties fracture, and love is a contact sport. The Carl and Marilynn Thoma Upstairs Studio transforms into an immersive in-the-round space that is part dance floor, part theatrical playground. Married collaborators for over four decades, Benatar and Giraldo have defined a generation of music with multiple multi-platinum albums, 19 Top 40 hits, and more than 40 million records sold worldwide. **Bradley Bredeweg**, best known for creating the critically acclaimed Television Academy Award-winning drama *The Fosters*, writes the book and directs. *Heartbreakers* is presented in association with Madison Wells Live.

Pat Benatar and **Neil Giraldo** shared, "It is an immense honor to share this new musical with audiences as part of CST's milestone 40th Anniversary Season. We were inspired by the epic stakes of Shakespeare's story. It truly has the heart and soul of rock music at its core. As artists, it is incredibly rewarding to discover new voice and meaning in this music that means so much to us and to create something completely new. We can't wait for Chicago audiences to rock out and join us on this wild ride."

CST Education and Lifelong Learning

Engaging audiences of all ages with the highest caliber of programming is central to the Theater's mission. **CST is proud to serve more students and teachers than any theater in Chicago.** In the 2026/27 Season, CST will welcome more than 15,000 young people to 29 **dedicated student matinee performances** with subsidized ticket prices, post-show discussions with artists, and supplemental curriculum materials for teachers to incorporate in the classroom. Student matinees are scheduled for *Play On!* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with an extended run of student performances planned for the 90-minute *Romeo y Julieta*. The 40th Anniversary Season will also see the return of the celebrated **Chicago Shakespeare SLAM** program for high school students.

Initiatives for lifelong learners include adult programs like the four-part "**Demystifying Shakespeare**" course with CST Artistic Director Edward Hall in partnership with the Newberry Library, **Backstage Tours**, **Post-Show Discussions**, and **PreAmble** talks with scholars. The **\$30 Under 30 program** makes CST productions accessible with discounted tickets to students and young adults.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 40th Anniversary Season subscriptions are on sale now starting as low as \$317 for a 7-play package. Subscribers save up to 25% on the season and receive other benefits including discounts on individual tickets, free exchanges, invitations to behind-the-scenes events, and more. Single tickets will go on sale later this summer. For more information and to purchase subscriptions, visit www.chicagoshakes.com/subscribe or call the CST Box Office at 312.595.5600.

ABOUT CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER

Chicago Shakespeare Theater (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 hundreds of performances and events each year.

CST exemplifies theatrical excellence. Shakespeare is at the heart of the artistic work, illuminating the 400-year-old playwright as a modern writer for our modern world. CST also produces compelling, contemporary stories from fresh artistic 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. Productions originating from Chicago Shakespeare have gone on to Broadway, national and international tours, garnering three Tony Awards, three Olivier Awards, and two Grammy nominations.

The Theater fosters a lifelong relationship with the arts by providing transformational experiences for multigenerational audiences. Serving more students and teachers than any theater in the city, CST annually welcomes more than 20,000 high school and middle schoolers to attend 50+ daytime matinee performances and participate in after-school programs like Chicago Shakespeare SLAM. Professional development opportunities for teachers include the year-long Bard Core intensive for Chicago Public Schools educators. CST's initiatives support the development of young people's crucial skills, including social-emotional competencies, critical literacy, and meaningful collaboration. Learners of all ages deepen their engagement through PreAmble talks and post-show discussions. The \$30 under 30 discounted ticket program for young adults and students reduces barriers to participation for thousands of first-time attendees.

CST activates its campus with three best-in-class venues: The Yard, a robust 700-seat space with flexible configurations and expansive proscenium; the Jentes Family Courtyard Theater, an intimate 500-seat thrust theater where the audience surrounds the stage on three sides; and the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Upstairs Studio, a 200-seat black box theater. Situated along the picturesque shore of Lake Michigan, CST is the cultural anchor of the iconic Navy Pier, one of the top Midwest tourism destinations attracting 9 million visitors annually.

Fueled by the vitality of the city of Chicago, CST contributes significantly to the vibrancy and economic impact of the arts and culture ecosystem. CST's reach extends beyond the theater's walls with free programs like Shakes in the City, which brings performances and workshops to parks, festivals, and shared community spaces across Chicago's 77 neighborhoods.

For four decades, CST has distinguished itself with a spirit of innovation, dynamism, and ambitious vision. Shared humanity and unforgettable stories—now THIS is Chicago Shakespeare. chicagoshakes.com

CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER

40th Anniversary Season

(as of press time)

MUSIC IS THE FOOD OF LOVE IN MAJOR MUSICAL REVIVAL

PLAY ON!

Inspired by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Conceived by Sheldon Epps

Book by Cheryl L. West

Music by Duke Ellington

Directed by Sheldon Epps

The Yard

September 11–October 18, 2026

Presented in association with MMaxwellMedia, WMK Productions,
Alyssa Melani, and The Classical Theatre of Harlem

EPIC FAIRY TALE ADVENTURE WITH A MESSAGE OF HOPE

THE WINTER'S TALE

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Edward Hall

Performed in repertory with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater

October 13–December 12, 2026

SPARKLING WITH THE FESTIVE SPIRIT OF
THE HOLIDAY SEASON

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Edward Hall

Performed in repertory with *The Winter's Tale*

The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater

November 11, 2026–January 3, 2027

SHAKESPEARE'S PASSIONATE ROMANCE TRANSPORTED
TO 1960S MIAMI

ROMEO Y JULIETA

By William Shakespeare

Adapted by Karen Zacarías and Henry Godinez

Directed by Henry Godinez

The Jentes Family Courtyard Theater

January 26–March 14, 2027

TONY WINNING PHENOMENON RETURNS TO
SPIRITUAL HOME AT CST

ILLINOISE

Music and Lyrics by Sufjan Stevens

Based on the album *Illinois*

Story by Justin Peck and Jackie Sibblies Drury

Directed and Choreographed by Justin Peck

The Yard

February 9–March 14, 2027

A HILARIOUS WHODUNNIT MAKES CHICAGO PREMIERE

REUNION IN BARTERSVILLE

By Celeste Bedford Walker

Directed by Jerry Dixon

The Yard

April 11–May 9, 2027

Presented in association with LaChanze Productions

ELECTRIFYING NEW ROCK MUSICAL FROM LEGENDS
PAT BENATAR AND NEIL GIRALDO

HEARTBREAKERS

Inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Reimagined through the Music of Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo

Book by Bradley Bredeweg

Directed by Bradley Bredeweg

Carl and Marilyn Thoma Upstairs Studio

May 4–June 6, 2027

Presented in association with Madison Wells Live

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