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Cal Shakes summer conservatory at Saint Mary's College

By Sophie Braccini



It is a match so perfect that one would wonder why it did not happen sooner: a summer Shakespeare Conservatory led by Cal Shakes on the beautiful grounds of Saint Mary's College. The theater company brings the experience of years of teaching youth Shakespeare during the summer while the college's performing arts-theater department offers the venue, including the Lefevre Theater and theater students who are engaged, passionate and ready to be hired as teaching assistants.

Rebecca Engle, who teaches theater history, acting and theater masterpieces at the college met socially with Eric Ting, CalShakes artistic director, and a conversation started. Both teams felt that there were possible synergies, as they share the same passion for theater, high standard for quality, and also have both committed to social justice and integration of all through the arts.

Students performing "Twelfth Night" from 2015 Oakland Conservatory. Photo Jay Yamada

Clive Worsley, director of artistic learning at Cal Shakes, said that he loved working with the Saint Mary's team to

build a Moraga program. He said that the course offers an immersive theater experience rooted in passion for artistic exploration and excellence. He appreciates that the students will come to a wonderful venue including plenty of outdoor space, and a well-equipped theater where they will perform at the end of their experience.

Engle knows how the campus is so welcoming and beautiful in summer, several camps are run there, a lot of events are booked such as weddings and seminars and the theater facility is not fully in use during those months, so some summer programing with Cal Shakes was a good match.

Summer conservatory is for children 8 to 18, it is led by five teaching artists with a cohort of students. All the teachers are professional artists and each has a student assistant. Cal Shakes hired the teaching assistants and a number of SMC students were hired for these positions.

Engle noted that this provides an opportunity for students to work with a master teacher, improve their craft while acquiring hands-on pedagogical skills, something she felt will help them with other opportunities. She sees American actors who can "do" Shakespeare as an elite, belonging to a specialized desirable niche.

When the program was announced it was immediately sold out and dates were added, another mark of the attractiveness of this educational offer.

Both Engler and Worsley highlighted the alignment of values of both institutions; their common desire to reach a diverse community and creating theater that speaks to 21st century audiences. Last year, both Cal Shakes and Saint Mary's Theater programed a play by Oakland-native contemporary playwright Marcus Gardley, "black Odyssey" by Cal Shakes in the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda, and "and Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi" at Saint Mary's. "There was a natural deep resonance between how we train young theater artists and what they (Cal Shakes) are doing," said Engler. It would not be surprising to see more collaboration in the future.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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