



# CLARION

## My Friends,

It is with deep gratitude that I welcome you to the 54th season of Montana Shakespeare in the Parks.

For more than five decades, MSIP has had the privilege of bringing live, free professional theatre to remarkable communities throughout the Rocky Mountain West. Each summer we gather in parks, schoolyards, and open spaces to share stories that have endured for centuries, stories that challenge us to reflect on our values, our relationships, and the communities we build together.

This season we are excited to share two beloved works from Shakespeare's canon: *The Merchant of Venice*, with its exploration of justice and mercy, love and betrayal, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, a joyful comedy that explores honor, friendship, reputation, and the complexities of love. Though written centuries ago, these plays continue to speak powerfully to circumstances and questions we face today.

Our momentum for this season has been strengthened by the tremendous success of our current **Shakes!** tour, featuring a new adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* titled *Good in Everything*. This program will reach more than sixty elementary schools and communities throughout the region this winter and spring. Seeing young

audiences encounter Shakespeare, many for the first time, continues to affirm the importance of making these stories accessible to everyone.

But MSIP's story is not only about the performances themselves. It is about the relationships that have sustained our mission for generations.

The continued investment, friendship, and support of audiences, volunteers, sponsors, and community partners have made it possible for MSIP to flourish while remaining free and accessible to all, engaging rural communities across five states.

Just as importantly, your support has created a remarkable artistic home.

Over the years, thousands of actors, designers, teachers, and production artists have traveled the long roads between our communities, arriving with trucks, costumes, and a stage that rises each evening in the heart of your parks. For many of these artists, MSIP becomes a defining chapter in their creative lives; one shaped not only by the work onstage, but by the warmth and generosity of the communities that welcome us each summer.

I know this personally. I first joined Montana Shakespeare in the Parks as an actor in 2002, and the experience profoundly shaped my artistic life. Over the years, MSIP has provided me the opportunity to grow as an actor, teacher, director, and now as a leader within this organization. Like

so many artists who have traveled these roads, I continue to be inspired by the spirit and values of the communities we are honored to serve.

As we prepare for another summer of gathering in your parks, we remain deeply grateful for the friendships and partnerships that have sustained this mission for 54 seasons. Your continued support ensures that these stories and the sense of connection they inspire remain available to everyone.

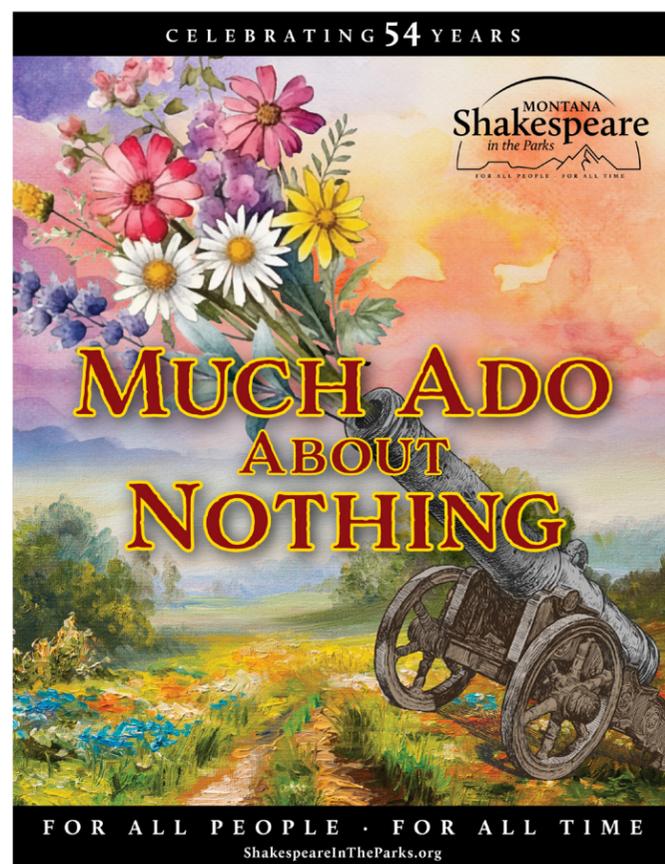
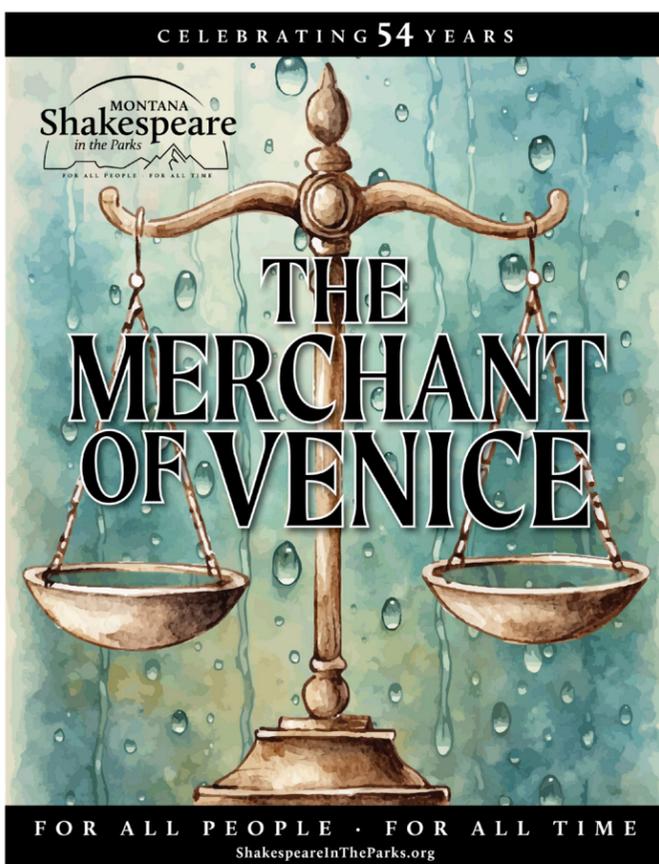
Shakespeare reminds us in *The Merchant of Venice* that **"the quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven."** It is a sentiment that speaks beautifully to the spirit of our communities; places where generosity, compassion, and a belief in shared experiences continue to bring people together.

We look forward to sharing these stories with you, your families, and your neighbors in the months ahead.

With gratitude,

**Kevin Asselin**  
 Executive Artistic Director  
 Montana Shakespeare in the Parks

## INTRODUCING THE 2026 SUMMER TOUR



## OUR MISSION

The mission of Montana Shakespeare in the Parks is to engage and enrich both rural and underserved communities with professional productions of Shakespeare and other classics and, through educational outreach, to inspire creative expression and appreciation of the arts in young audiences.



## DIRECTOR INTERVIEW WITH **JOHAMY MORALES** DIRECTOR OF *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

**Hello Johamy! You’ve studied and worked in theaters nationally and internationally and currently serve as the Artistic Director of the Seattle Children’s Theatre – please tell us a bit more about your background in theatre and what inspires your current work?**

I’ve been fortunate to study and work in theatre both nationally and internationally, and those experiences have deeply shaped who I am as an artist and leader. Throughout my career, I’ve had the opportunity to collaborate on new play development, classical works, devised theatre, and community-centered productions. Each of those experiences strengthened my commitment to centering voices that have historically been underrepresented on stage. I’m continually inspired by the power of theatre to build empathy, spark dialogue, and create spaces where people feel seen and heard.

Now, as the Artistic Director of Seattle Children’s Theatre, I bring that global and community-focused perspective into my work with young audiences and families. Children are some of the most honest and imaginative audience members we have. They ask bold questions, respond authentically, and approach stories with openness. That inspires me every day.

I firmly believe that theatre for young audiences isn’t simply about cultivating the next generation of theatre-goers, it is essential art that shapes how young people understand themselves and the world around them.

**Can you tell us a bit about your process as a director and approach to *Much Ado About Nothing*?**

When I began shaping my approach to *Much Ado About Nothing*, I found myself returning to something deeply personal: the world of the telenovela. In many ways, this play feels like a dramatized telenovela, overheard conversations, heightened emotion, romantic entanglements and misunderstandings that spiral into chaos. The love stories feel absolutely real and urgent to the characters, while we, the audience, are invited to witness the eavesdropping that propels their assumptions and misjudgments. Like a telenovela, the play creates tremendous fuss, panic, and excitement over what might appear insignificant from the outside. And yet, for these characters, reputation, love, and honor are life and death. That emotional duality, intimacy and spectacle drives my directing process.

In rehearsal, I focus on building trust, respect and deep listening with the ensemble. An “ensemble” is a group of people coming together for a common goal. Ensemble storytelling requires generosity. It asks actors to support one another’s moments and listen rather than compete for them. A collective group agreement in silence and in sync can be just as powerful as a soliloquy. When the ensemble is unified, the world feels cohesive and connected.

**You’ve done lots of work in your career building theatre for young audiences – what excites you about engaging MSIP’s intergenerational audiences with this particular production?**

One of the most exciting aspects of directing *Much Ado About Nothing* at Montana Shakespeare in the Parks is the opportunity to fully embrace play, both in spirit and in setting. Shakespeare’s comedy thrives on mischief, wordplay, mistaken identity, and high-stakes romance and all elements that flourish when actors lean into physicality, spontaneity, and imagination. Incorporating a spirit of play allows performers to connect across generations, making the humor immediate and accessible whether someone is encountering Shakespeare for the first time or returning to it after many years.

Equally thrilling is the experience of performing outdoors. Presenting *Much Ado About Nothing* under open skies transforms the play into a communal event rather than a formal theatrical presentation. I am looking forward to seeing how the natural environment, shifting light, ambient sounds, and shared experience, outdoors, impacts the art we produce.

**What does your experience working with young audiences teach you about how people actually watch, listen to, and engage with live theatre?**

Creating and directing theatre for young audiences fundamentally reshaped my understanding of spectatorship. Working with young people taught me that audiences don’t passively consume theatre, they *actively experience* it. Young audiences are the most honest barometer in the room. If they’re confused, they show it. If they’re delighted, they erupt. If a moment drags, you can feel their attention drift in real time. That immediacy sharpened my instincts as a director and storyteller. It taught me to pay attention to specificity and make sure every moment is grounded, purposeful and alive.

**What elements of this play are you most excited to highlight through your production?**

The language and wit in this play makes it uniquely thrilling to direct. Unlike some of William Shakespeare’s heavier tragedies, *Much Ado* lives in speed, eloquence and verbal sparring. Beatrice and Benedick don’t just speak; they duel. Their lines are packed with puns, reversals, interruptions, and layered meaning. The audience hears both if the actors lean fully into the text. Directing becomes an exercise in uncovering how humor and honesty coexist in the same breath.

**What do you think Shakespeare has to offer its audiences in 2026?**

The play’s exploration of gender, pride, and vulnerability is still very relevant today. Beatrice and Benedick’s battle of wits isn’t just comedic sport; it’s about the fear of intimacy and the courage it takes to be emotionally honest. In 2026, when conversations around identity, partnership, and equality continue to evolve, those dynamics feel alive and contemporary. At the same time, through this production I will emphasize the radical power of joy. In a moment when many communities feel polarized or fatigued, *Much Ado About Nothing* insists on laughter, music, and communal celebration. The play ends not in division, but in dance. That theatrical act, gathering together, witnessing conflict, and choosing reconciliation models a kind of collective resilience.

## DEAN’S LETTER

DEAN ADAMS | DEAN, COLLEGE OF ARTS & ARCHITECTURE



### Greetings!

Montana Shakespeare in the Parks’ 54th season is upon us! In 2026 we are connecting with new communities and new partners and continuing long-lasting relationships throughout the Intermountain West. I am also inspired by the amazing work MSIP does through their education programs, *Montana Shakespeare in the Schools*, and *Montana Shakes!*, during the school year.

Williams Shakespeare’s work, considered through the lenses of MSIP’s insightful directors and producers, talented actors and designers, and hardworking staff, connects us to others and to ourselves.

By effectively integrating the cultural traditions of theater and literature with contemporary lived experiences, MSIP invites us to explore universal truths and our human condition. In collaboration with community members, teachers, and with the support of donors, MSIP embodies the Montana State University land grant mission of integrating education, creation of knowledge and art, and service to communities.

In addition to serving our community broadly, MSIP’s work helps bring people together and build engaged communities, including through our “Share the Stage” initiative.

The MSU College of Arts & Architecture, the home of MSIP, hopes you will enjoy this season’s programs and discover the beauty, emotion, triumph, and agony explored through the world-class performances around our wonderful region. We thank you for your ongoing support! We could not achieve all we do without you.

Please take a moment and help us create the new MSU strategic plan by filling out the survey at <https://www.montana.edu/strategicplan/>. Your voice is critical to helping us chart our future! I hope you are thrilled by the performances this season!

Warmly,

**Dean Adams**  
Dean, College of Arts & Architecture  
Montana State University

## 54<sup>TH</sup> SEASON COMMEMORATIVE POSTER DESIGN CONTEST



**Montana Shakespeare in the Parks is pleased to announce our FOURTH ANNUAL poster design contest for the 2026 season.**

The artist of the winning design will be awarded a cash prize of \$250 and have their artwork featured on this season’s commemorative poster that will travel to 65 communities across the Rocky Mountain West.

**ALL PEOPLE**  
are encouraged to enter!

**Submissions Due April 27th**

[ShakespeareInTheParks.org/art](https://ShakespeareInTheParks.org/art)





## DIRECTOR INTERVIEW WITH **KEVIN ASSELIN**

DIRECTOR OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

**Kevin, congrats on celebrating your 25<sup>th</sup> year with MSIP (including the past 12 as Executive Artistic Director)! What is exciting to you about MSIP's growth since you first toured as an actor, and what inspires you as you look ahead? What are your hopes for MSIP's future?**

Twenty-five years is quite some time to dedicate to this mission, and you don't really think about how much time you're committing until you're at that 10-year mark of that 25-year mark. I've had the honor and joy of being part of this organization in so many capacities — as an actor, director, fight director, and teacher in my early years, and now as someone who gets to work alongside some amazing teams to continue the mission and help nuance it a bit to shape the organization's future. That evolution has been deeply gratifying.

I've been really proud of how much the organization has grown: our budget has doubled, we've expanded our reach across the five-state region, our Artistic Director Circle has grown three or fourfold, and we went through a significant rebrand.

I'm so thrilled about the administrative team that we have within the organization and everyone's commitment and passion for what we do. We have great retention with artists coming out every year to be part of the building and touring process.

But what I really love is that with the organization, nothing significantly has changed about what it is that we ultimately do, which is fundamentally about bringing communities together to experience and reflect upon Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Alongside the education programs, they've all been really traditional to how this organization was built 54 years ago. We've remained true to its mission and have not derailed from that at all, just found ways to nuance the design, administrative, and fundraising processes.

My goal for the organization is to maintain that continuity in providing free access to professional theatre and build upon our success of audience development. We have a wonderful, loyal audience base, and building on that is incredibly rewarding for this mission and for the next five years.

The primary goal year in and year out is to ensure that we can find new ways to invite people into this experience for the first time, so in terms of growth, that's what I really see us focusing on.

**This year, MSIP received a record number of submissions by young actors hoping to tour with its year-round programs. You conduct a nation-wide circuit of auditions and see hundreds of in-person auditions – what do you think draws actors to work with MSIP, and how did you first become interested in working for MSIP?**

There are many things that draw actors to MSIP, but at the heart of it, it all comes down to community. The adventure our actors embark upon every season is truly unique within the theater industry, with traveling to amazing communities in rural and geographically diverse areas, performing for audiences who treat them like family and are genuinely curious about their work and their process. There's a great reward in that as an artist, and it's very fulfilling.

We've also been very successful with retention over the years. Actors come out to be part of this mission and they want to keep coming back — not only for the opportunity to perform great plays and great characters, but to work with amazing people. The word spreads across the nation.

For 54 years, this organization has provided actors with tremendous experience to hone their craft and deepen their engagement with people across a wide region. We're the fourth oldest Shakespeare festival in the country, and I'm proud of the success our artists have gone on to achieve. We have actors heading to Utah Shakespeare Festival and American Players Theatre this summer, and alumni like Bob Ford, who toured with us in the 80s and is now running an incredible theater in Arkansas.

There's also a great romantic quality about what we do. You're building a stage, you're touring Shakespeare the way theater was toured in the Old West. That combination of artistic adventure and immersion in nature is a big part of what draws people here.

It certainly drew me. I grew up in Maine and New Hampshire, deeply connected to rural communities and the outdoors. When I was acting in Chicago in 2000 and saw the opportunity, I actually auditioned twice before Joel hired me, but I kept at it, because I really wanted to be part of it.

The idea of combining performance and Shakespeare with being so immersed in nature was the best opportunity for me as a young actor, and I think that that's applicable to many actors, designers, and production staff across the scope of our small community. The nationwide community is small and so that opportunity to be immersed in nature while performing is the perfect combination.

**MSIP last produced *The Merchant of Venice* in the summer of 2011. What about this story do you think audiences will connect with the most in 2026? Are there particular themes you look forward to elevating? What is it about this play that excites you most as a director?**

*The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most complete plays in Shakespeare's canon. It offers so much for audiences: the young people in the play have a fascinating journey, but it's the deeper questions that Shylock, Antonio, and Portia navigate on a truly human level that I find most compelling as a director.

Within this play are conversations about the importance of mercy. Why is mercy important for us to stay focused on in our lives, whether in our families, our communities, our political or religious lives? How do we continue to strengthen our empathetic selves?

The play reminds us how to deeply reflect on how we can become better human beings and the challenges we face when we live within stereotype and assumption, and how we can move beyond our own exclusive viewpoints to be more mindful of the experiences of others.

There's also a powerful conversation in this play about betrayal — within partnership, within family — and again, how we employ our merciful selves to listen, accept, and not categorize people into a box that differs from our own.

People might describe *Merchant of Venice* as a religious play, but I think it's a much more global conversation. If Hamlet talks about holding the mirror up to nature, this play gives us the opportunity to hold that mirror up to ourselves and take some accountability. Not as a community, but as individuals and how we view the world, how we judge without understanding, and the reminder that in the end, we are all the same, all human beings. We all feel deeply about what we believe in, we all have relationships that matter to us, and we all struggle with assumption and judgment. If audiences can experience this story and come back to themselves with a deeper understanding of their own behaviors, then I feel this play will be truly successful.

**This particular play will be performed 39 times this summer in nearly as many locations. What are special considerations you must make when directing an outdoor production for MSIP? What are some specific challenges and benefits of the MSIP model?**

The outdoor environment shapes nearly every production decision we make. We're talking right now about *The Merchant of Venice* and placing it seasonally in the summertime to allow for greater comfort for the actors when they're navigating extreme temperatures. Costume design with Jeremy must account for the full range of conditions our actors face across the season, from high summer heat in Montana and the surrounding states to the cold snaps that can arrive at the beginning and end of tour.

Our wigs and costumes are living in totes in the back of a trailer, so we're always asking how we build pieces that can withstand the grueling nature of this tour. Tom and Miguel's set design faces the same demands: it has to withstand the elements and the repeated process of packing in and out of our trailers, loaded onto the back of our trailer.

Sound design is also a really important part of what we do. Twenty-first century audiences are accustomed to how underscoring and soundtracks support storytelling on screen, so we work hard to use sound atmospherically to bring audiences into the world of the play in ways that lighting simply can't, because lights on the road aren't possible for us. I do value performing under daylight, but I love our experience in Bozeman where we have the opportunity to use lighting and bring a more fully produced atmosphere to the work.

Then there's the logistics. Three vehicles, a 24-foot trailer, and housing that gets more expensive every year. We're always asking how we can be strategic and sustainable for our production materials, for our artists' comfort, and to ensure that audiences at the end of the season receive the same quality experience as those at the beginning.

And sometimes we're pulling all of our equipment to the top of a butte in the middle of southeastern Montana, with actors camping on site, fully immersed in the elements. That's the MSIP model, and it's as challenging as it is extraordinary.

### MONTANA SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARKS 2025 AT A GLANCE

**43,000+**  
Total People Reached

**6**  
States

**25,000+**  
Miles Traveled

**200**  
Days on the Road

**189**  
Free Performances

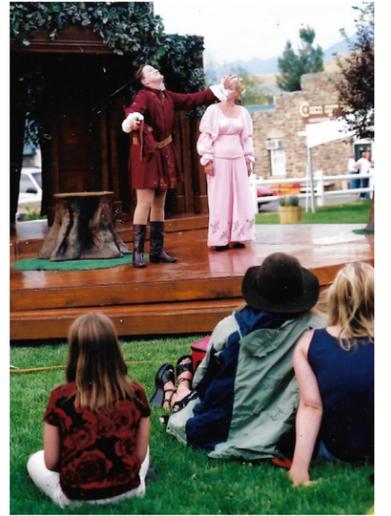
**95**  
Communities Reached

**200**  
Volunteers

**1**  
Enduring Tradition Across  
Five Decades and Counting

**100% FREE. ALWAYS**

# MSIP ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



## LYDIA BERGER GRAY

“WE USED TO JOKE THAT A DAY ON TOUR WAS LIKE AN ENTIRE WEEK IN REAL LIFE.”

### How did you first hear about MSIP?

I played Adriana in a Chicago production of *Comedy of Errors* directed by Joel Jahnke, and several cast members were MT Shakes alumni. Auditions for the MSIP's summer season were approaching, and they couldn't stop talking about how it was the time of their life and that I had to audition.

Since I had just worked with Joel, who was the Artistic Director of MSIP at the time, and had hit it off with some of the alumni, I like to think it helped me land one of the ten acting spots in the 2002 30th Anniversary Season. One of those ten actors was Kevin Asselin - also his first tour. Neither of us knew then how much MSIP would shape our lives, or that he would one day help carry the company forward as Artistic Director.

### When did you tour with MSIP, and what roles did you play?

I toured in the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2004, with two fall tours in between.

In 2002 I played Mistress Quickly in *Henry IV, Part 1* and the Abbess and Courtesan in *Comedy of Errors*. In 2003 I played Rosaline in *As You Like It* and Bet Bouncer in *She Stoops to Conquer*. In 2004 I played Elmire in *Tartuffe* and Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

### Favorite memories from touring?

I remember setting up on a butte once in Eastern Montana and watching trucks roll in from miles away. Later we would hear audience members talking about past productions in Shakespeare's canon and how this year's compared.

We used to joke that a day on tour was like an entire week in real life. If we had an hour between set-up and



performance, we would find a watering hole somewhere and jump in. If we were staying with someone in town (home stays were about half the tour back then), we would get to know our hosts so well that some of them are still friends today. If we spent two nights in one location, we would get to know the local businesses and invite them to the show.

I loved driving from town to town with my fellow actors, listening to music and feeling so grateful - falling in love with Montana from the east to the west, from Wyoming to the Hi-Line. By the second

summer it felt like 'coming home' in every town.

And I loved that Shakespeare performed by a troupe just like long ago - can bring us all together, no matter who we are or where we are from.

### How did MSIP shape your career?

My time with MSIP connected me to the roots of theatre and the transformative gift of storytelling. For the duration of a play, we are all in one world together.

I've never forgotten the importance of being fully present - with the audience and with each other. Because of my time with MSIP, I never take it for granted.

I didn't go on to be famous (not yet!), but I *am* living my dream: I'm a working actor. I've worked with many theatres in Chicago and regionally, and in recent years I've focused more on commercials, TV, film, and VoiceOver.

### What was it like returning as a text coach?

It was so cool to come back and be on staff 20+ years later. Getting to work with Kevin again was really special - we did our first tours together and he, like many of the actors I

toured with, feels like family.

It was also wonderful working with Riley O'Toole, who directed *Richard III* and now serves as Associate Artistic Director - a former MSIP actor himself and someone helping carry the tradition forward.

A text coach gets to really nerd out with the language of the play and work one-on-one with actors so they fully understand what they're saying and why. Watching this year's actors discover the play and grow into their roles was such a delight.

### What does Shakespeare offer audiences today?

Hope.

There has always been theatre. Humans have always told stories. It's timeless and it knits us all together - even today.

Shakespeare will outlast this moment and carry on into the next. And how wonderful that we get to be here now, telling these stories together.

### What are you up to now?

I continue to work in commercials, film and VoiceOver. And as a proud Equity actor since 2012, I still perform in plays from time to time, my most recent Shakespeare - Henry V.

### What makes MSIP unique?

Montana.  
You - the audience.

You can find remarkable theatre anywhere (and let me be clear: the shows you see from MSIP are as good as anything you'd see in Chicago or New York).

But what makes MSIP truly unique and extraordinary... is Montana.

SCAN  
TO GIVE A GIFT TODAY!



MAKE A ONE-TIME GIFT OR PLEDGE  
YOUR MONTHLY SUPPORT.



WE'RE SOCIAL!  
FOLLOW US FOR ALL THINGS MSIP

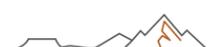


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## DRAMATURGICAL NOTES

# Bound to be difficult: *The Merchant of Venice*

BY GRETCHEN MINTON

Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* c. 1596-7. It was classified as a comedy then and for a long time after, because it features young couples in love who enjoy the promise of a conventional happy ending. Today, however, that aspect of the plot is assuredly less noticeable than the troubling plotline involving the Jewish character, Shylock. Officially speaking, there were no Jews in England during Shakespeare's lifetime, for they had been expelled since the late thirteenth century; a general lack of direct experience, however, did not prevent a strong cultural anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, Shylock has tremendous depth. He is flawed as well as sympathetic—never more so than when he delivers his famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech.

Near the beginning of the play, the merchant, Antonio, asks Shylock for a loan, and Shylock makes the bizarre suggestion that they enter into a “merry bond” in which the price for forfeiture of the loan is a pound of the merchant's flesh. Such flesh-bond stories go back to ancient literature (including the Talmud), so despite how strange the price seems to us, the notion was not original with Shakespeare. However, by combining this story with several others and developing a network of character relationships, Shakespeare found a way to explore in depth what it means for humans to be bound to one another. In its legal sense, a bond is a contractual obligation whereby one person must pay something owed to another. Yet during the early modern period, as in our own, the word “bond” had many other meanings, including anything that restrains liberty, an obligation or duty, a cementing force for any kind of union, a covenant between two or more people, and a pledge of oneself.

Legal obligation is at the center of this play; Antonio is contractually bound to Shylock, and thus becomes physically bound during the trial scene, when Shylock prepares to cut off his flesh. Yet Antonio enters into this agreement in the first place because of another kind of bond: friendship. Bassanio begs Antonio for money on the basis of this friendship, yet Bassanio has nothing to offer in return but his love. The fact that Antonio is ultimately willing to die for Bassanio shows that such bonds are not casual, but instead a matter of the deepest human sacrifice.



Sketch by Tom Watson, Scenic Designer

The bonds of family are also central to multiple plots in this play. Portia is bound by the will of a dead father, and Jessica by a living one. Portia cannot accept or refuse her suitors because her father's will stipulated that she marry the one who chooses the correct casket, irrespective of her own desires. Jessica's bondage is more literal, for she is locked in a house which she calls “a hell,” told not to even look out the window. Her decision to break with her father is monumental, for it involves not just a young woman eloping, but the concomitant loss of religion, community, and family. This storyline shows the great pain that Shylock suffers when she deserts him and leaves open the question of whether she, too, regrets the break with her over-protective father.

The words of the traditional Christian marriage ceremony speak to another sort of bond: “What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mark 10.9). *Merchant of Venice's* final act focuses on the importance of marriage bonds as symbolized by rings. Portia and Nerissa manipulate their husbands into breaking a minor vow—keeping a ring—in order to highlight the importance of keeping the paramount vow—fidelity. The women poignantly demonstrate that human bonds are vital, but also fragile, and breaking them can quickly result in catastrophe.

All the characters agree that the citizens of Venice are bound by the law, even the Duke himself. Without a legal system

that protects all inhabitants (including marginalized Jews), this society would fall apart. In the case of Venice, people obey such rules because they are all dependent upon commerce: ships are at sea, money is lent out, and servants work for masters. In all cases, the Venetians need one another because they are part of an economic system that requires marketplace cooperation.

The references to law in this play cannot be fully disentangled from the references to religion. In sixteenth-century England, standard Christian theology preached that Jews were too bound by law (the Old Testament), remaining stubbornly unwilling to accept the message of Jesus' grace (the New Testament). Likewise, so far as the Christians in the play are concerned, Shylock's error is a harsh and barbaric obsession with the law. Portia tries to get Shylock to understand the distinction, asserting a contrast between Christian mercy and Shylock's insistence that, despite everything, he will have his bond and take Antonio's pound of flesh. Yet Shakespeare stops far short of offering a conventional sermon about Jewish impiety at the end of this play. The Christians emerge not only as bigoted, but as harsh and unbending, especially when Antonio chooses to punish Shylock by forcing him to convert to Christianity. Such forced conversion is a sentence of unbearable trauma, for it separates him from his community, his heritage, his God.

Like Shakespeare's characters, we are bound by family, friendship, money, and religion. And we are also bound by history. In the twenty-first century, it is notoriously difficult to talk about *Merchant of Venice* because of the sensitive issues it raises about anti-Semitism and its monstrous consequences. Some people, in fact, feel that such a play should not be performed any longer because of the horrifically bigoted language and actions of its characters. Yet *Merchant of Venice* remains valuable precisely because it challenges us to face the most difficult questions, urging us to grapple with reprehensible human behavior not just in the past, but in the present. No play gives us a better avenue whereby we can explore how we are bound not just to those who are like us, but also bound by prejudices, stereotypes, and ill treatment of those whom we label as outsiders.

## DRAMATURGICAL NOTES

# Quite a lot about Noting

BY GRETCHEN MINTON

When we think of Shakespeare's comedies, we might immediately picture a world of magic, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or a cross-dressing heroine, as in *The Merchant of Venice* or *Twelfth Night*. However, *Much Ado about Nothing* has neither magic nor cross-dressing; instead, it is known for the witty, outspoken duo at its center: Beatrice and Benedick. The energy of the play comes from this clever pair who detest one another...until they don't.

Beatrice and Benedick's verbal jousting results in some rather memorable insults, especially when it comes to the war between the sexes. The quick wit of these characters is contrasted with a character on the other end of the social spectrum: the constable Dogberry, whose language is full of malapropisms. For instance, he says “desertless” when he means “deserving” and “tolerable” when he means “intolerable”, causing audiences onstage and off to laugh at him. Even the play's title is a word game. On the surface, the title *Much Ado about Nothing* assures us that this comedy is a piece of fluff, not really about anything of import. On the other hand, the title also puns on the word “nothing” because during Shakespeare's time it was pronounced in the same way as the word “noting”. This wordplay offers us the opportunity to consider whether this comedy ultimately is about nothing at all, or is in fact about the ways that we see and (mis)understand the world around us.

Stories about love are often based on vision, as in the clichés about love at first sight and the blindness of Cupid. In *Much Ado*, Shakespeare's interest in different kinds of noting ties directly to this theme, for people note one another's appearance, find themselves blinded by love, and have trouble distinguishing who is behind the masks, both literal and metaphorical. Such an emphasis on sight highlights a common problem, which is that humans are notoriously bad at recognizing the truth behind what they see. The portion of the plot that revolves around another pair of lovers, Claudio and Hero, traces near-tragic events that arise from this kind of blindness.

As a result of believing a false report, Claudio becomes convinced that Hero is unfaithful. Rather than telling her of

his suspicion, Claudio slanders her at the altar, calling her a whore and refusing to marry her—brutal acts that seem surprising coming from a character who has been, up until this point, mild-mannered and blandly lovable. Claudio's error lies at the heart of what makes this play relevant to every era, for it emphasizes how suspicion, misogyny, and insecurity are inherent in love and friendship alike. When Claudio later realizes that he was wrong to accuse Hero of infidelity, he weakly asserts, “Yet sinned I not / But in mistaking”. Yet as the play shows, mistaking one woman for another is a serious offense, growing out of his complete failure to note who Hero really is on a much deeper level.

Viewers and readers of this play can see what many of the characters cannot: that the women and their love should be cherished, not thrown away carelessly based on second-hand reports and unsubstantiated rumors. Don John is the villainous instigator behind this plot, but his plan would not have worked unless male characters, including even Hero's own father, Leonato, were predisposed to assume the worst about women and to believe anything they hear or see (or think they see). Although Shakespeare could not have imagined social media feeds, doctored videos, or TikTok, he did portray a society filled with half-heard conversations, whispered insinuations, and false reports of sexual encounters. The damage caused by public slander can, and does, ruin lives.

This sounds like heavy material for a comedy, and indeed it is. Shakespeare is not fond of backstories that give easy answers about what might cause such violent, impetuous behavior. However, one potential answer is hinted at in the often-overlooked context of this play's opening: the men are just returning from a war. They have been immersed in a dangerous and violent world, and no doubt they have been witness to horribly traumatic events. As with all wars, no matter the cause, the toll on the soldiers' psyche carries forward into times of peace, impacting relationships. Such small hints about the source of Claudio's sudden violence,



Sketch by Miguel Salazar, Scenic Designer  
The setting is inspired by the director's concept of using the eastern coastline of New England during the late 1700's to mid 1800's. The lighthouse offered a means to introduce a sense of wonderment and romanticism, while emitting a sense of the past.

like the resentment that Don John has for being labeled a bastard, do not excuse their behavior, but they do encourage us to take the complexity of each character seriously.

*Much Ado* ends with dancing and imminent weddings, as comedies usually do. The storyline involving Beatrice and Benedick shows that stubborn people who seem too proud to love can indeed fall head over heels for the least likely person. Their deep affection by the end of the play promises a more mature relationship future than Shakespeare suggests for most of his young lovers. The excitement at the conclusion is palpable; the lovers are paired off, difficulties have been overcome, and the future looks relatively bright. Benedick's final speech admits that people are “giddy” creatures—imperfect, changeable, and all too often a bit foolish. It's hard to deny this acknowledgement of human failings, and it's surely a good idea to laugh at ourselves and enjoy the comedy that ensues when we make mistakes.

In the end, however, *Much Ado* balances joy and laughter with a reminder of the terrible consequences that result from not truly understanding those we cherish. Lack of trust, gender inequity, violence, and slander are dangerous forces in human relations that require constant attention, lest we find ourselves making the same mistakes over and over again. Perhaps, then, it is best to keep in mind Dogberry's advice: “Be vigilant” (i.e. vigilant).

# 2026 ACTING COMPANY



**SAM CHEESEMAN:**  
Gratiano / Aragon - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Don John / George - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**HANNAH FREUND:**  
Lancelot - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Hero - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**EVAN JOSLYN:**  
Duke / Tubal - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Benedick - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**GABBAY MADU:**  
Solania - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Beatrice - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**CALLEE MILES:**  
Portia - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Ursula / Conrad - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**JAMIE NEBEKER:**  
Nerissa - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Dogberry - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**ANGELA TOMASO:**  
Jessica - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Margaret / Verges - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**HUNTER TRAMMELL:**  
Bassanio - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Barrachio / Friar - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**DUSTIN VALENTA:**  
Shylock - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Don Pedro - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**JOHNATHAN WALLACE:**  
Antonio - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Leonato / Sexton - *Much Ado About Nothing*



**MATTHEW CHAVEZ:**  
Lorenzo / Morocco - *The Merchant of Venice*  
Claudio - *Much Ado About Nothing*

## MSIP STAFF & PRODUCTION COMPANY

- Kevin Asselin** - Director & Fight Director - Merchant
- Johamy Morales** - Director - Much Ado
- Ronnie Avansino** - Assistant Director - Merchant
- Riley O'Toole** - Asst Dir.- Much Ado  
Asst Fight Dir. - Much Ado / Merchant
- Jeremy Floyd** - Costume Designer - Merchant
- Jazmin Medina** - Costume Designer - Much Ado
- Tom Watson** - Scenic Designer - Merchant
- Miguel Salazar** - Scenic Designer - Much Ado
- Max Allen** - Stage Manager - Merchant
- Paige Wisneski** - Stage Manager - Much Ado
- Ronnie Avansino** - Asst Stage Manager - Much Ado
- Emmaleah Stapp** - Asst Stage Manager - Merchant
- Nok Kanchanabanca** - Sound Designer - Merchant
- Andrew Hansen** - Sound Designer - Much Ado
- Stacy Hostetter** - Properties Designer
- Matt McCarren** - Lighting Designer
- Gretchen Minton** - Dramaturg
- Kathy Logelin** - Text/Verse Coach
- Shari Watson** - Choreographer
- Jaime Nebeker** - Intimacy Coordinator
- Octavio Jimenez** - Acting Apprentice
- Shadie Walette** - Acting Apprentice
- Gabe Malek** - Acting Apprentice
- Brenna Holgate** - Production Apprentice
- Angela Cateora** - Costume Shop Manager
- Isabella Weiland** - Draper
- Perey Bridges** - First Hand
- Claire Carroll** - First Hand
- Nora Tjernagel** - Stitcher
- Elias Dennis** - Costumes Craftsperson
- Kyle Pingel** - Wig Master
- Blake Watson** - Carpenter / Co-Technical Director
- Eric Sanchez** - Carpenter
- David Zavala** - Master Electrician
- Dylan McPhail** - Audio Engineer
- Liz Johnson** - Director of Community Access & Engagement
- Marianne Gilman** - Grants & Sponsorship Director
- Vicki Stenberg** - Executive Assistant

# 2026 TOUR SCHEDULE

## JUNE

10-13	Bozeman	The Merchant of Venice	8:00pm	MSU Duck Pond
17-20	Bozeman	Much Ado About Nothing	8:00pm	MSU Duck Pond
22	Big Timber	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Lion's Club Park
23	Utica	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Utica Women's Clubhouse
24	Lewistown	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Creekside Pavilion
25	Malta	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Trafton Park
26	Wolf Point	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Faith Lutheran Home Park
27	Sidney	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Veterans Memorial Park
29	Beach, ND	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Beach Swimming Pool Park
30	Glendive	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Hyatt Amphitheater In Makoshika State Park

## JULY

1	Ekalaka	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Nursing Home Lawn
2	Baker	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Roger Schmidt Amphitheater
3	Miles City	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Riverside Park
5	Forsyth	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Rosebud County Courthouse East Lawn
6	Colstrip	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	CPRD--Rye Park Pavillion
7	Hardin	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	South Park
8	Billings	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Pioneer Park
9	Billings	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Pioneer Park
10	Fishtail	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Fishtail Family Park
11	Red Lodge	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Lions Park
12	Silver Gate	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Silver Gate Park
13	Powell, WY	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Washington Park
15	Cody, WY	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Canal Park
16	Worland, WY	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Sanders Park
17	Sheridan, WY	The Merchant of Venice	6:30pm	Kendrick Park Bandshell
18	Birney	Much Ado About Nothing	6:30pm	Poker Jim Butte
19	Laurel	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Town Square
20	Roundup	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Roundup City Park
21	Chico	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Chico Main Lawn
22	Gardiner	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Arch Park
24	Columbus	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Heritage Park
25	Big Sky	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Big Sky Town Center Plaza
26	Afton, WY	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Afton City Park (Star View Park)
27	Pocatello, ID	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	ISU Hutchinson Memorial Quadrangle
28	Pocatello, ID	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	ISU Hutchinson Memorial Quadrangle
29	Driggs, ID	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Teton County Courthouse Lawn
31	Dillon	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Legacy Plaza, Montana Western campus

## AUGUST

1	Salmon, ID	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Sacajawea Interpretive, Cultural & Educational Center
2	Deer Lodge	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Old Montana Prison Museum
3	Helena	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Anchor Park
4	Helena	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Anchor Park
6	Fort Benton	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	City Park
7	Great Falls	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	University of Providence Campus
8	Great Falls	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	University of Providence Campus
9	Conrad	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Swimming Pool Park
10	Choteau	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Weatherbeater/TASGA Grounds
11	Augusta	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Sun Canyon Lodge
13	Cut Bank	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Cut Bank City Park
14	Kalispell	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Wachholz College Center - O'Shaughnessy Amphitheater
15	Eureka	Much Ado About Nothing	5:00pm	Historical Village
16	Libby	The Merchant of Venice	5:00pm	Libby Elementary School
17	Polson	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Polson Fairgrounds Amphitheater
18	Charlo	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Palmer Park
19	Liberty Lake, WA	Much Ado About Nothing	5:00pm	Pavillion Park
20	Sandpoint, ID	The Merchant of Venice	5:00pm	Lakeview Park
22	Sandpoint, ID	Much Ado About Nothing	5:00pm	Lakeview Park
23	Trout Creek	The Merchant of Venice	5:00pm	Trout Creek Park
24	Seeley Lake	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Double Arrow Resort
25	Anaconda	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Washoe Park
26	Philipsburg	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	Winninghoff Park
27	Missoula	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	The Oval (MSU Campus)
28	Missoula	Much Ado About Nothing	6:00pm	The Oval (MSU Campus)
29	Hamilton	The Merchant of Venice	5:00pm	Sapphire Lutheran Homes
31	Twin Bridges	The Merchant of Venice	5:30pm	Riverside Park, Soccer Field by the Fairgrounds

## SEPTEMBER

1	Whitehall	Much Ado About Nothing	5:30pm	Main Street Green - Next to Star Theatre
2	Boulder	The Merchant of Venice	5:30pm	Jefferson County Fairgrounds
3	White Sulphur	Much Ado About Nothing	5:30pm	Castle Museum Lawn
4	Livingston	The Merchant of Venice	6:00pm	Blake Pavilion at the Shane Center
5	Pony	Much Ado About Nothing	5:00pm	Pony Park
6	Townsend	The Merchant of Venice	5:00pm	Heritage Park
7	Butte	Much Ado About Nothing	5:30pm	Stodden Park
8	Bozeman	The Merchant of Venice	5:30pm	Grant Chamberlain Park (MSU Campus)

For the most up to date TOUR SCHEDULE GO TO:  
[ShakespeareInTheParks.org](http://ShakespeareInTheParks.org)



# COSTUME DESIGNER SPOTLIGHT

## Interview with Jeremy Floyd

**Hello Jeremy! Please tell us a bit about your personal and professional background - how did you first become involved in theatre and how did you become interested in costume design?**

I did theatre in high school and really enjoyed it, but had no idea it could be a profession. I discovered costume design in college when I took a theatre elective and as part of the class, we all had to audition for the upcoming musical. After getting cast, I went for my first "real" costume fitting and was taken aback by the designers point of view and how she could communicate so much through character. I changed my major 6 months later.

**Training/Education and current full-time position?**

I have a BFA in Theatre Design and Technology from the University of South Alabama, a certificate in Makeup for Film and Television from the Makeup Designory in Los Angeles, a Master of Arts in Theatre from the University of Kentucky, and a Master of Fine Arts in Stage Design from Northwestern University. I am an associate professor at Northern Illinois University where I teach costume design, research techniques, and script analysis for designers.

**What is a costume design that you've created that you're particularly proud of?**

Many years ago, I designed a production of a new play (at the time) by Lydia Diamond called *Harriet Jacobs* at Kansas City Repertory. The cast, creative team, and production staff were all absolutely amazing and the opportunity to work on a new play with a playwright I had studied in college was inspiring. I thought the design was simple, elegant, and really supported Diamonds storytelling about the life of a remarkable woman.

**You've worked on many productions with MSIP since 2018 - is there a particular costume design that stands out in your portfolio work with MSIP? What are some of the unique challenges and inspirations when it comes to designing and building costumes for MSIP?**

I think my favorite design thus far is *The Three Musketeers* (2023). Not only was the design very "dirty" and nuanced - two of my favorite types of costumes - but the play had the added challenge of creating over 50 looks for the 6 members of the cast that changed characters throughout the play. It was something I'll never forget. The biggest challenge as a designer for MSIP, and often the thing that drives really exciting design choices, is the need for everything to fit in the trailer (along with everything else) and survive the tour without production/wardrobe support for the cast - durability and duplicates!

**Every year MSIP hires a team of talented artisans from all over the country to build, buy, alter, and assemble costumes for the summer productions over the course of 6 weeks in May/June - can you tell people a bit more**

**about some of the various positions and skills of the MSIP costume team?**

First, I have to say the costume team at MSIP is one of my favorite things about the summer! Not only are they a fun bunch of folks, but their skills are the #1 reason the costumes are so stellar. The team consists of a Costume Shop Manager that keeps us all on track and ensures things are on stage on time, two Cutter/Drapers that interpret the designers' drawings and create patterns, and four First



Sketch by Jeremy Floyd, Costume Designer



Jeremy Floyd gives a talk at a Behind the Scenes event.

Hands and Stitches that turn flat pieces of fabrics and purchased clothing into the costumes you see on stage. They are joined by a Costume Craft Artisan that creates everything from hats to armor and a Design Assistant that keeps track of paperwork, purchases, and returns. Combined with two designers, a small but mighty crew of twelve create every piece of clothing you see on stage.

**This summer you are designing costumes for *The Merchant of Venice* - what are some of the inspirations for your designs? Is this production set in a specific historical period or are there particular artistic influences?**

When we first met as a design team, Kevin told us of his interest in telling the story in conjunction with the jazz age of the 1920's. With that prompt, I immersed myself in the art between the wars. I quickly found myself drawn to the work of Art Deco artist Tamara de Lempicka. Her painting style is very structured with bold lines and sculptural forms and I find it reflects the choices the characters make in the *Merchant of Venice* often to their own demise. Interestingly enough, de Lempicka and her parents converted from Judaism to Protestantism in the late 1800's, similar to Jessica in *Merchant*.

## THE SEASON BEGINS HERE

Each summer, communities across the region gather under open skies as Montana Shakespeare in the Parks returns with another season of live theater — free and open to all.

Our 54th season begins this June with the early leadership of the supporters recognized here.

### Early Season Leadership Supporters



See the full and growing list of 2026 Season Supporters — and join us this season.

For information on how to support the 2026 season, contact Marianne Gilman at 406-994-3944 or marianne.gilman@montana.edu



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## SHAKESPEARE IN THE SCHOOLS EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH



### SHAKES!

Since 2008, MSIP has brought Shakespeare to our youngest audiences across Montana and Wyoming. Every spring “*Montana Shakes!*” brings an original play based on Shakespeare stories and characters to 60 elementary schools for a whole day of theater fun!

Following the performance and talk-back, our 4 actor-educators lead students in classroom workshops designed to explore the themes of the play in line with Montana’s arts education content standards. Movement, language, and creativity give students the chance to explore Shakespeare’s work through collaboration and play.

**Our 2026 Shakes!** tour featured an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play *As You Like It*, called “*Good In Everything*,” by Matt Foss. Complete with mad-libs-style suggestions from the audience, puppets and props galore, this program activates imaginations and introduces elementary students to the magic of live theater!

### SHAKESPEARE IN THE SCHOOLS

For its 33rd season, our “*Shakespeare in the Schools*” program presented *Richard III* to middle and high school students as it was meant to be enjoyed – in an engaging, 80-minute live performance. **Associate Artistic Director Riley O’Toole** made his directorial debut with the 2025 fall production, which reached 50 schools across Montana and Wyoming with a new perspective on this timeless classic. MSIP was awarded a grant from the Montana Arts Council to support an ambitious production set design, which featured multimedia screen projections that helped to further illustrate the complex plot and supernatural themes.

Accompanied by a lively post-show talk back with the cast of 8 actor-educators, as well as 4 different in-classroom workshops designed to deepen comprehension and uncover the continued relevancy of Shakespeare’s play, this program provides teachers with resources for incorporating arts learning into the classroom and gets students up on their feet with lively games and thoughtful exercises.

**Contact Liz Johnson at [Elizabeth.Johnson25@montana.edu](mailto:Elizabeth.Johnson25@montana.edu)** for more information on how to bring these education programs to a school near you, or to host a free community performance!

