

VETERANS IN ART®

AN ARTS-BASED EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE FOR CHRONICALLY UNEMPLOYED VETERANS SUMMER 2016 REPORT



**“And smooth the frowns of war with peaceful looks...”
-Henry 6, Part 3**

E X E C U T I V E S U M M A R Y

Veterans in Art® (ViA) is The Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles’s (SCLA) signature arts-based transitional employment opportunity offering short-term paid on-the-job entry-level vocational training in technical theatre arts and life-skills development for chronically unemployed honorably discharged military veterans.

For this 4th year of ViA, we continued to work closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and for the first time SCLA established a new multi-level partnership with Santa Monica College (SMC).

In 2016 **SCLA recruited, hired and trained a total of 30 military veterans**, many dealing with homelessness, who are receiving various levels of healthcare services and psychosocial rehabilitation programs in the VA’s Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLAHS), including **5 with severe psychological disabilities**. 23 vets were enrolled at SMC and received academic credit for their work. The program’s 2 administrators were also vets.

Over the past 4 years, the outcomes are notable:

- **107 chronically unemployed veterans have been trained and have earned salaries in hundreds of ViA jobs, some having returned to work multiple summer productions.**
- **40 veterans report ongoing employment after working with SCLA.**
- **10 have enrolled in post-secondary school following employment with SCLA.**
- **30 are living independently, and 30 are living semi-independently with the assistance of Veterans Affairs Support Housing vouchers.**

In 2016 the SMC enrolled vet/students received training from SMC’s technical theatre arts faculty and worked on all aspects of SCLA’s professional, union-contracted 20 performances (+ 2 previews) of *Twelfth Night*, July 29 – August 21 at the college’s main Theatre Arts facility. Their work included venue and scenic crews, audio engineers, wardrobe assistants, ushers, parking attendants, technical director, and actors. Many also worked on SMC’s two additional student summer productions. Veterans with severe mental illnesses were employed in site-specific marketing.

The *Twelfth Night* printed program lists all production staff as well as Veterans in Art® Participants technical and shop crews, and audience services and promotional street team personnel. In addition, there is a page for Veteran Tribute, noting the name, rank and branch of each vet with an additional page featuring a more in-depth summary of service careers. (Please see Addendum)

SCLA worked with Volt Workforce Solutions to provide work-ready veterans with employment outplacement support, including resume preparation, interview techniques; some ViA alumni join Vets in Film & TV, an industry-specific job hunting organization.

Additionally, SCLA also continued its free admission policy for veterans, active military, their families, and caregivers, giving away a total of 600 tickets, valued on average at \$30 per ticket, for a total contribution of \$18,000.

SCLA is grateful for the support provided to our vet employees and the program through many generous members of the community. A list follows the 2016 report.

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V E T E R A N S I N A R T 2 0 1 6

A New Venue Brings Exciting New Opportunities

After three successful summers of the ViA program, in 2014 SCLA was informed that the Japanese Garden at the West Los Angeles Veterans Healthcare Campus venue would no longer be available as the outdoor host venue for SCLA's Summer of Shakespeare production. In the course of the next year, Santa Monica College reached out and asked if their theater arts building would be sufficient to host the ViA program as well as the acclaimed Shakespeare productions. A partnership with SMC proved to enrich the ViA program in many ways, including 1/ enabling veterans to formally enroll and receive college credit for their work, 2) connect with other campus vets through a formal program that enabled a gradual transition into an academic community and 3/ encouragement to continue post-secondary studies that could lead to accreditation valued by potential employers, and 4/providing two additional SMC student productions that comprised a true Shakespeare summer festival. (The inaugural Summer of Shakespeare at SMC began with an apprentice company production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (9 performances + 1 preview), followed by the children's show *Aladdin Jr.*) The new indoor venue also enabled SCLA to reach new (Westside) larger (200 seats) theatre-going audiences for its acclaimed productions.

What truly made this year's ViA initiative unique was not only the indoor theatre, but the willingness of the SMC campus community – from students, faculty and administrators -- to engage and support our veterans. The veterans gained experiences from young college students in ways which were not afforded to them while living at the VA or through their normal daily lives. The young civilian students, in turn, got to see what hard work and dedication looked like. The professors enjoyed the mixture of recent high school graduates working with the much older veterans, because each group had something to gain and give by working so closely for weeks. Thus the new opportunity enrich the program's goal, to help veterans in their transition to becoming productive citizens in civilian life through FREE IAVets Transition Training Workshop, to develop employable skills and to work with fellow vets and earn minimum wage (\$10/hour) for 50-200 hours of OJT. The location also gave them

the opportunity to leave the VA's West LA Healthcare campus and experience the beautiful city of Santa Monica.

Veteran Demographic and Backgrounds

SCLA secured sufficient resources to employ a veteran workforce size of 31 people which is in line with our previous years and hired vets to administer the program. A majority of vet employees were recruited through the VA's Veteran Community Employment Development programs for Supported Employment. These veterans are enrolled in the program by referral of the VA social services caseworkers and / or mental health practitioners as part of their wellness plan. Other veterans that had joined enrolled because of their past experiences taking part in our year's past programs. Some of these rehabilitation and transitional housing programs that have referred veterans to the Shakespeare Center are:

- The Salvation Army Haven
- New Directions, Inc.
- West LA VA's Domiciliary
- West LA VA's Rehabilitation for Recovery Center
- West LA VA's Dual Diagnosis Outpatient Clinic
- U.S. Vets
- Vet-2-Vet
- I.A. Vets T.T.

Many of the veterans in the production crew and front house staff were chronically unemployed for an average of 4.5 years with a range of less than a year to 16 years unemployed prior to their summer job. The veterans with diagnoses classified as Severely Mentally Ill had been out of work even longer, averaging unemployment for 10 years. When many of these veterans started their SCLA employment nearly every single one of them was dependent on some form of government benefits such as social security disability insurance, unemployment compensation/ insurance, food stamps, general relief, section 8 housing, or disability compensation from the VA due to service connected injury. The veterans ranged from 27 to 69 years old, with the average age being 45 years old.

SMI Veterans Site-Specific Marketing

One of the most dramatic successes of the ViA employment initiative has been hiring a group of veterans from the VA's Supported Employment Program with diagnoses classified as Severely Mentally Ill. This designation is assigned because of the severity of the veterans' diagnosis or because a veteran is contending with multiple psychological challenges such as a combination of Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.



This group of veterans is hired to hand out printed flyers to promote the show at a variety of public venues, and to engage and inform the public about the performances at Santa Monica College. In 2016, SCLA was able to employ a total of 8 veterans from this specific VA program. This crew continued to be one of the great successes of Veterans in Art® because what initially seemed like a straightforward job offers a unique opportunity for veterans to work on specific challenges of social interaction and self-confidence related to their diagnoses.

Dressed in SCLA T-shirts the team diligently distributed flyers and engaged with potential patrons during busy lunch hours at a variety of high foot traffic locations around West Los Angeles. The crew of veterans accompanied by three vocational rehabilitation specialist from the VA, acting as job coaches to help veterans learn from their experiences and further develop their inter-personal communication skills. The team went to a variety of locations including Santa Monica 3rd Street Promenade, Brentwood's Farmer's Market, Santa Monica's Farmer's Market and Westwood.

Below are testimonials from veterans who handed out flyers:

"This job increased my self-esteem and increased my self-confidence... it made a profound difference in my life and gave my life greater meaning. It was very rewarding, enriching experience that helped my growth as a person."

"I looked forward [to] getting out of the house and being productive. I really appreciate the Shakespeare Center for giving me this opportunity... I enjoyed working with other veterans. I'm glad to be a part of it"

T H E P E R F O R M A N C E

The Shop and Show Work Crews Earned Minimum Wages and College Credit

ViA provides training and hands-on experience in the various areas of technical theater, scenery, costumes, lighting, properties, sound, and production management through SMC's Theatre Arts 18 course. Students learned to demonstrate proper shop and theatre safety rules as part of a production team, identify theatre shop tools used in the construction of scenic elements, and demonstrate proper technical knowledge and backstage conduct in the process of performing running crew duties for production. Advanced or experienced students may be given leadership positions on the crew, special projects, or area head responsibilities. Veteran employees made commitments to a formal work schedule.



With the first performance less than four weeks away and an 8-week show run ahead of them, the Theatre Arts 18 class enrolled vets had to get to work without much ado. Under the direction of Professor Douglas Forsyth, SMC's Director of Technical Theatre, the scenic and venue crews worked from 9am to 11pm throughout the weeks preparing the stage for the first week of rehearsals and

opening night. The veterans were responsible for the preparation of the indoor proscenium theatre facility and maintenance of all the components involved in the theater production. The scope of the employees' activities included everything from constructing all the stage props from hand, installing the lights and sound, creating and altering the wardrobe for the actors. It was only the second time in the history of ViA that veterans assisted with the technical rehearsals after the initial construction of the sets.

SHOP CREW (min. 50 hours) includes construction and set up of the various technical aspects of the productions. Their work includes, but is not limited to: Scenic, Lighting, Sounds, Special Effects and Properties jobs. All of our shop crew will be trained how to safely use almost every tool in our Scene Shop; Table Saw, Radial Arm Saw, Sliding Compound Miter Saw, Band Saw, Drill Press, Cordless Drills, Routers, Sanders, & every tool needed to clean up a scene shop. A lot of the shop crew will also get training in scenic painting and prop building and costuming.

SHOW CREW (similar hours but required dates) supports the running of a department production, by being backstage during the show. The positions available for this choice include: stage hands, lighting and sound operators, costume assistants, properties, and house staff for technical and dress rehearsals, and performance dates, averaging around 3 weeks, for a production. Some of the crew is exposed to, and learn how to operate many different pieces of high tech gear such as; Digital sound board, Computer light board (ETC- ION), LED lighting fixtures, Moving lights, 4HD Digital projectors, as well as software programs like; EOS (lighting), Q-Lab (sound), and WatchOut (projection).

At the end of the *Twelfth Night* run, six of the most experienced production crew vets employees worked one additional day to strike the set and ready the SMC Theater Arts building for the regular upcoming fall semester.

All our veterans contributed in the construction or maintenance of at least two of the three unique plays. As rehearsals ended, we had 10 veterans worked as ushers, parking attendants, and as an audio technician to support five weeks of performances. Veterans on the ushering staff were responsible for the setup and maintenance of all audience related amenities before, during, and after the show, and attending to the needs of theatergoers.

In response to the needs of the SMC venue and how well our veterans worked, the actual number of work shifts offered to all veterans involved in the production of the shows, including ushers and parking attendants, nearly doubled.

Post Employment Questionnaire

A post-employment questionnaire was administered to the veterans to help quantify their experience with SCLA. The questionnaire developed was an employee satisfaction survey similar to the surveys SCLA uses to assess the experiences of youths who participated in SCLA's Will Power employment programs. The questionnaire consisted of 9 statements which the veterans responded to by saying they either strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The veterans responses were then coded on a scale of 1 to 5 as 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The scores of the 23 veterans who agreed to participate in the survey were then averaged. The means of the responses to each statement were: (Figure A)

Post - Employment Questionnaire Results Average

FIGURE A

Range 1-5

4.7	This work experience met or exceeded my expectations.
4.6	This work experience enhanced my quality of life.
4.4	This work experience enhanced my self-esteem and/or self-confidence.
4.5	During this work experience I felt connected to a whole.
4.1	I felt less alone or isolated because of this work experience.
4.75	This work experience helped me develop new job skills.
4.58	It was a respectful and supportive work environment.
4.7	I would recommend this program to other veterans.
4.9	I enjoyed working for the SCLA.

Veterans' Testimonials

To further assess the impact of the work experience the veterans were also asked a series of short answer questions that were written with the help of Dr. Amy Cohen, Co-Director of the VA's Health Services Unit of the Desert Pacific Mental Illness, Research, Education, and Clinical Center. Some of the questions were:

- What was it that you looked forward to at this job?
- What has been the biggest impact of this experience?
- Would you recommend this program to another veteran? Why or why not?
- What are the benefits of this program?
- If you wanted to promote this program to veterans' caregivers what would you say?
- Is there anything that could or should be improved for the next time this program is run?

The Veterans in Art initiative accomplishes so much more than just finding veterans a job and giving them marketable skills. It boosts their self-esteem, it gives them something to look forward to, and most of all it helps them feel normal again after serving their country.

From The Vets

To further assess the impact of the work experience the veterans were also asked a series of short answer questions:

- What was it that you look forward to at this job?
- What made you continue to attend?
- What has been the biggest impact of this experience?

The following is a sample of ViA participant's responses:

"... it has truly connected me with something/people greater than myself. It has given me a boost of confidence/self-esteem and has given me a sense of direction, purpose, and meaning."

"Initially, things were bumpy. However, once I settled into working in the costume shop I decided I was "home". Kristi and Christian recognized my abilities right away and gave me so many opportunities! I was exposed to techniques and processes I had never seen before. It was a wondrous experience."

"Inspired me to try to enroll in college for film/tv production."

"The interaction with other veterans and the opportunity to network."

"It has further encouraged me to step through whatever "doors" I find in life, and to constantly be alert to potential opportunities."

What makes our veterans initiative so inspiring is how it affects the lives of our workers in ways we could never imagine or quantify. Each veteran comes into our program with a unique past that gave them special abilities to use in life. Our program does it best to help discover and cultivate these abilities into real world work experience and skills.

What also happens through our program is the building of communication skills which leads them into forming healthy and productive relationships with people. For the first time in our history, we even had two people apart of our program start a serious relationship and are considering moving in together

SCLA also received testimonials from Professor Douglas Forsyth, Director of Technical Theater, Santa Monica College

"I have been a teacher here for 20 years so I have worked with hundreds of students and every semester I will have a few students who want to be here and really want to learn what we are teaching, but I have never had an entire class full of students (the Vets) who, not only want to be here, and want to learn, but who also want to apply what they have learned immediately.

Not only were the Vets great students but they were great teachers as well.

They would pass on the lessons they were taught to the non-vet students but they also taught them things like; being on time, taking pride in the work you do, and the desire to actually be a student and learn something.

I've also learned a few things from them, I learned that we need to treat our vets better, there needs to be programs, like this, that gives Vets the chance to be a part of something again and to prove to themselves that we (society) need them to share the skills they have with the rest of us.

Since then, I have run into a few of the Vets who are now taking classes here at SMC and every time they see me they thank me for the work I did with them, and that's not the way students greet their teachers now days, so I am very proud to have worked with all of them and look forward to working with more vets in the future."

Nationally-Acclaimed Program Recognized by The National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military

Throughout the development and creation of its Veterans in Art® Employment Initiative, SCLA had unique and privileged opportunities to participate on the national stage for the use of arts in healing for warriors. In October 2011, SCLA's leadership was invited to attend a National Summit on the Arts in Healing for Warriors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. The summit marked the first time various branches of military collaborated with civilian agencies to discuss how engaging with the arts provides opportunities to meet the key health issues our military faces. SCLA Associate Director of Veterans Affairs Kellogg Brengel attended the two-day conference that took place in the main hospital at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and the new National Intrepid Center of Excellence on the same campus as the hospital. The 2011 summit included numerous speeches by the military leadership, presentations from practitioners of successful arts-based therapy programs across the nation, performances by veterans, and workshops to help arts programs establish themselves as caregivers in the veteran community.

As an outcome from the summit a group of concerned and dedicated military, government, the private sector, and nonprofit leaders convened a national roundtable at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The goals of the roundtable were: advance the policy, practice, and quality use of arts and creativity as tools for health in the military; raise visibility, understanding, and support of arts and health in the military; and make the arts as tools for health available to all active duty military, medical staff, family members, and veterans.

After the National Initiative was launched in January 2012, and the Roundtable had convened, a National Steering Committee comprised of federal agencies, military, nonprofits, and private sector partners announced the second National Summit: Arts, Health, and Well-Being across the Military Continuum, at Walter Reed National Medical Center on April 10th, 2013. Aware of the success of

SCLA's 2012 Veterans Employment Initiative, SCLA leadership was invited by the initiative's steering committee to attend the National Summit. Different than at the first summit, SCLA leadership was now invited to also present on the success of its own veterans initiative.

For the 2013 summit, the afternoon was broken into separate panels that ran simultaneously, so as to accommodate the growth in attendance and presenters. Ben Donenberg, SCLA Founder, and Artistic Director, served on the panel dedicated to addressing Veterans/VA Health Systems and Community Based Programs. The purpose of each panel was to create discussions of and specific recommendations for the needs in research, practice, and policy to advance arts-based health programs across the military spectrum. Utilizing a multimedia presentation that included video testimonials, Ben, along with three other panelists and two facilitators, led an open and lengthy discussion with a room full of military personnel, VA employees, and civilians, on how partnerships and successful programs can be formed between the VA and independent community-based programs.

The main point made in Ben's presentation, and a point that resonated with the audience in the room, was that a key to great success in forming a partnership between the VA and a community-based program comes from each partner specializing in what they do best.

A fundamental component of SCLA's Veterans Employment Initiative was making sure SCLA could focus on creating the best professional art and work experience possible while the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists helped screen candidates and offered ongoing mental health support to the veterans working on the summer show. Another distinction of SCLA's Veterans Employment Initiative at the National Summit was that of all programs presented that day SCLA's was the only one that emphasized paid employment and putting veterans back to work through the arts.

In addition to the four afternoon panels, there were speeches made by Read Admiral Stocks, U.S.N. Commander of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Rear Admiral Boris Lushniak, Acting Surgeon General, and dozens of mental health and arts professionals. Some of the topics of the main speeches were: Creating a Blueprint for Action for the National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military, the Art of Health Maintenance, and the Arts & Resilience in Mind and Body. As an outcome of the summit and panel discussions, a white paper is being drafted that will include the recommendations contributed that day for policy, practice, and research for arts programs for veteran healthcare.

Most recently, the Shakespeare Center was afforded another opportunity to participate in the national conversation on arts in health for military veterans at the 77th Annual National Guild for Community Arts Education Conference. SCLA's Director of Veterans Affairs Kellogg Brengel was invited to speak at the Deploying the Arts for Health and Well-Being across the Military Continuum workshop. Kellogg presented the success story of the Veterans in Art® transitional employment program as a case study of how arts organizations can build employment-based community arts programs to engage veterans.

SCLA Founder and Artistic Director Ben Donenberg and Associate Artistic Director Chris



Anthony joined Kellogg at the workshop to help speak to arts organizations about how SCLA creates all of its community arts programming, including Veterans in Art®. The workshop was led by Jeff Poulin, Arts Education Program Coordinator for Americans for the Arts, and covered topics of program development, collaboration/partnership, and community engagement. The workshops presentation is available upon request.

Press

In addition to theatrical reviews by the LA Times and Broadway World among others, Annie Stein of the Huffington Post wrote an interest piece on the social impact of SCLA's programs, including Veterans in Art. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/annie-stein/much-ado-about-something_1_b_5631157.html

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

TUESDAY, JULY 22, 2014 • LATIMES.COM/CALENDAR

Shakespeare helps set new stage for vets

[Shakespeare, from D] Angeles. He completed a detoxification program in 2011 and for this summer was referred to the Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles to do various jobs on the set of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Whiteside, 61, and some 30 other veterans of the Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam and the Gulf wars assisted in building the set and working odd jobs with the production, which continues through Sunday.

Artful ambitions

Shakespeare Center artistic director Ben Donenberg said employing veterans stemmed from another of the company's outreach programs. Will Power to Youth, which hires young Angelenos to study and perform Shakespeare plays. After seeing alumni of the program serving in the armed services and later seeking jobs at home, Donenberg said, the company decided to extend its employment program opportunity to veterans, starting last year.

By coincidence, Shakespeare Center's summer productions have been presented at the Japanese Garden of the VA campus in West Los Angeles since last summer.

Donenberg shared his motto, "Art can be great, and art can do great things."

Veterans earn \$10 an hour and are hired for a two-month period, which includes the show's two-week run along with setup and tear-down. In addition, the center hires vets throughout the year for other projects.

For many of the employed veterans, the prescription to work comes from therapists at the VA. Chris Anthony, associate artistic director at the Shakespeare Center, said the opportunity to work helps veterans adjust from life in a combat setting.

"One of the things we want to do as a company is to ease the transition to civilian life, and part of that is on the civilians; there's only so much the veterans can do," Anthony said. "The rest of us have to see them in a different light. It's something we need to work on as civilians."

'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

Where: Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, Japanese Garden, West Los Angeles VA, 13301 Wilshire Blvd.

When: 8 p.m., Tuesdays through Sundays. Ends Sunday.

Cost: \$25
Info: www.shakespearecenter.org
Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes

Ricky Walker, 54, of Brawley, a former cannoner who served for three years in the Army, assists playgoers at each of the productions.

Since returning from combat in 1981, Walker said he has struggled financially, was incarcerated and had a failed marriage. Working with the VA has allowed him to start putting his life back together and enabled people outside the military sphere to understand the struggles that veterans face, he said.

"It's a nice experience because people get to ask us personal questions that they're not going to get in the brochure," Walker said. "Having people be more aware of the vets is important because most people think war vets, just because they see them on the road, are all like that. They don't want to see them, and they don't see that each situation is different."

Lessons learned

Whiteside, who cheerfully passes out programs before each show, says the experience has helped him readjust; he said he left the service "a little off center." The opportunity to work and continued support from the VA have helped the former addict stay clean.

"I look back and say, 'Yeah, I made those mistakes and I learned from them,'" Whiteside said. "I'm two years clean now. After 25, 30 years of drug and alcohol, two years is a long time."

Whiteside has had the opportunity to watch "A



MILITARY VETERAN Jerry Whiteside passes out programs before each Shakespeare Center performance.

Midsummer Night's Dream" on evenings when he was working and said he is re-inspired to pursue a career in theater. He hopes to continue working behind the scenes in other productions and keep building sets as he did this summer.

In the parking lot of the Japanese Garden, James Simpson, 51, ushers guests to their parking spots.

The former Air Force sergeant has worked various odd jobs since returning from service but said he hasn't been able to find anything steady. His employment with the Shakespeare Center will end shortly after the play's final performance, but the relationship might not end then. The center works to help the veterans find other employment after the curtains close.

Tommy Sowers, assistant secretary of Veterans Affairs, said Donenberg's own outreach efforts and the center's follow-through set the program apart.

"He and the folks that sponsor the Shakespeare Center have a commitment to veterans," Sowers said. "Many employers say they do, but they actually show it."

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THE HUFFINGTON POST

TOP NEWS AND OPINION

Annie Stein | Author

Much Ado About Something

Posted: 07/22/2014 4:34 pm EDT | Updated: 08/08/2014 5:56 am EDT

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The Shakespeare Center of LA has done what a lot of non-profits never get the chance to do: grown up. Well into its twenties, now it seems to be fulfilling its potential and then profits didn't make, but SCLA, though still having to work hard for every penny, is at all a success story.

Started in 1986 as the Shakespeare Festival LA, it was the child of Ben Donenberg's heart. Donenberg, then a newly transplanted Julliard-trained NY theater actor, had a part time gig (like most struggling actors), working part time for composer Henri Mancini's wife Ginny. Casually mentioning his dream was to recreate in Los Angeles, the New York Shakespeare Festival held every summer in Central Park's Delacorte Theater. Mancini, a generous patron of the arts, impressed by the young man she'd come to know, handed him a blank check and said have at it. He wrote himself a check for three thousand dollars (which has long since been repaid) and with it created what has become his life's work.

The initial performance of the newly created Shakespeare summer festival was *Twelfth Night*. It was held downtown in Pershing Square, at the time the heart of LA's homeless and transient population. The audiences were comprised of friends, actors, and the lost souls who roamed the downtown streets. They all loved it! The homeless loved it so much they also became the first volunteers, showing up each night to show people to their seats and thank them for coming. After a while some of the homeless would bring recyclable bottles and cans as their thank you/admission tickets. On seeing that, Donenberg immediately saw another aspect of his dream. Community.

Better living through Shakespeare? So it seems.

In 1993 following the 1992 Rodney King ignited LA riots, when urban programs for teens were sorely needed, Will Power Youth was born as another arm of the Shakespeare Festival LA, and it's name changed to Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles, for the center it was indeed becoming. Launched with 14 kids performing a one hour adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in an outdoor plaza downtown, Will Power Youth was providing teachers who cared and paying jobs. Since then 20 to 30 teens are paid a salary to be a part of WPY Shakespeare Company for six weeks every summer. It has evolved into an amazing multi-leveled program many people would pay to be a part of! Teens, recommended by teachers and social workers, come together in the spacious downtown building, in need of a face life, that is home to

Argonaut

The Bard Goes to College

Employing military veterans, students and at-risk youth, the Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles finds a new home at SMC

By Evan Henerson

Photo by Michael Lamont

In the third act of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," the countess Olivia tries to dismiss the disguised Viola, who has been wooing the countess Olivia for another man while dressed in drag. (The hows and whys of this circumstance aren't particularly important. This is Shakespeare. We accept such things.)

"There lies your way, due west," says Olivia.

"Then westward ho!" returns Viola. "Westward ho!" could be part of the mission statement of Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles (SCLA), which has reached its beach. Now in its 30th year of producing plays, the largely nomadic company, which has staged summer Bard productions all over the city, has been scouting for a permanent Westside home since losing their performance space at the Japanese Gardens on the grounds of the VA West Los Angeles Healthcare Campus two years ago.



They appear to have found it. A new partnership with Santa Monica College has SCLA producing three summer productions at the Pico Boulevard campus, giving students the chance to get college credit, performance experience and a path to earning their union card with Actors Equity while providing summer employment, school credit, training and income for military veterans through another one of SCLA's social programs.

The inaugural Summer of Shakespeare at SMC began with an apprentice company production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," followed by the children's show "Aladdin Jr." A professional staging of "Twelfth Night" opened last week and runs through Aug. 21.

"There's a lot of possibility here," said Ben Donenberg, SCLA's founder and executive artistic director. "There's a lot of cooperation and a lot of opportunity for our social mission to be fulfilled in a deeper way, so we're really excited about it. This is our first summer, so we're trying to figure it all out, but things are going well."

"We do everything we can for our students, and I think this is a nice opportunity for them," said Perviz Sawoski, chair of the Theatre Arts Department at SMC. "I don't think Santa Monica has ever had a Shakespeare festival before, and I hope there are many more such undertakings. It's kind of a win-win all around."

A B O U T T H E S H A K E S P E A R E C E N T E R

Since 1986, The Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles has been a cherished community resource committed to making Shakespeare accessible, relevant and enriching for students, educators, artists and audiences from all walks of life.

Ben Donenberg, one of the city's greatest proponents of Shakespeare, started the Shakespeare Center with a free production of "Twelfth Night" in Pershing Square. Since then the company has grown to include the Will Power programs, a series of community and school-based initiatives that invigorate Shakespeare in the classroom as well as provide hands-on artistic experience, paid job training, communication skills training, and educational enrichment for at-risk youth.

Throughout its 29 year history, the Shakespeare Center has presented Shakespeare that reflects the landscape, history and people of Los Angeles, rendering interpretations that are artistically, financially, geographically, and physically accessible to all. Whether it is a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream set on 1920's Central Avenue, or Julius Caesar on the Steps of City Hall, Shakespeare Center's imaginative productions feature accomplished classical performers who reflect the cultural diversity of our community.

The Youth and Education programs are founded on the belief that theatre is a tool for transformation; we can all be agents of change in our own lives. Now in its 22nd year, Will Power to Youth (WPY) is the highly acclaimed youth development program at The Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles. WPY combines academics, human relations, job training and art to create a unique summer employment opportunity for youth aged 15-21. (Yes! It's a job!) Will Power to Schools (WPS) invigorates the teaching and learning of Shakespeare in the classroom with workshops, residencies, and field trips to see SCLA's professional productions. Play On hires teens to create new poetry and music inspired by Shakespeare.

The Shakespeare Center of Los Angeles brings people together with programs and performances that use Shakespeare's rich insights into the human condition to help us find the best in ourselves and each other.

RITA WILSON AND TOM HANKS

From its early days, when it was called Shakespeare Festival L.A., the company attracted some soon-to-be-famous names to play Shakespeare. Helen Hunt, Benjamin Bratt, Lyle Lovett and Tessa Thompson have all been in SCLA productions.

But the company's longest sustaining celebrity connection began in the late 1980s.

For a production of "As You Like It," the company put out an open casting call in Dramalog and ended up hiring a young actress named Rita Wilson in the role of Celia, cousin to the heroine Rosalind. According to Donenberg, it wasn't until they spotted Dennis Quaid, Meg Ryan, Sally Field and Tom Hanks in the opening night audience at the Ford Amphitheatre that they learned that Wilson was newly married to Hanks.

“We were like, ‘Oh wow, that’s cool,’ Donenberg said laughing. “She won a Dramalog award and then we later learned that she had gotten her Equity card with us. They’ve remained loyal to us all these years.”

Wilson now serves on the company’s board of directors. She and Hanks have hosted Simply Shakespeare, a one-night benefit reading of a Shakespeare play featuring a celebrity cast, for the past 25 years. The 26th Simply Shakespeare, a reading of “Much Ado About Nothing,” happens on Sept. 19 at UCLA’s Freud Playhouse.

ARMY STRONG

A lawsuit between the American Civil Liberties Union and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs ended SCLA’s tenure in Brentwood, but the new partnership with SMC has opened up additional opportunities for veterans, who can now get college credit as well as an income. With their SMC ID cards, they can ride the blue buses free of charge. Several of the company members who hope to pursue civilian careers in the entertainment industry say the training has been valuable.

“The experience has exceeded everything I could have imagined it would be,” said U.S. Army veteran Stephen Jackson. “I’m learning new things all the time. The staff is very helpful, and they emphasize, ‘Don’t worry about messing up — that’s part of the process.’”

SMC Technical Director Doug Forsyth has been delighted to have the vets working in his scene shop. Since the scenery for SMC shows are typically built by college-age students, the veterans bring a different set of skills and a different work ethic, according to Forsyth.

“I would hire these guys full-time in a minute, and I will take them every summer,” Forsyth said. “These guys know how to work. They’re grown people and they have been in the armed services — they know what responsibilities are.”

Donenberg, meanwhile, hopes to solidify the Santa Monica partnership for years to come and then get back to directing. He has some ideas about “The Merchant of Venice” and has requested a meeting with actor/director Kenneth Branagh to talk them over.

“Oh yeah, I will direct again,” he said. “Part of the business plan is to hire people that can do all of the kind of work I’m doing now to free me up to direct as I move toward ending the part of my career as a business guy and become more of an artist guy.”

“Twelfth Night” continues at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and at 2 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 21 on the Theatre Arts Department Main Stage at Santa Monica College, 1900 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica. \$40 general admission, \$20 for students and free for military veterans (must call ahead). Call (213) 481-2273 or visit shakespearecenter.org.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

Major Funding Provided by The Ahmanson Foundation, The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, The Green Foundation, Kim and Craig Darian, Albert Sweet, Occidental Entertainment Group Holdings, City of Los Angeles' Department of Cultural Affairs, Los Angeles County Arts Commission, An Anonymous Donor

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