

Nelson: South Dakota Shakespeare Festival Turning More Heads



By Sarah Wetzel For the Plain Talk, March 20, 2026

https://www.plaintalk.net/local_news/article_2a6556b1-801a-4f1a-a9bb-9dc9a2e30fe6.html



Juliet (Caroline Borio) appears on her balcony, and Romeo (Aaron Allen) watches her from below saying, “But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? / It is the east and Juliet is the sun.” Romeo listens as she talks about him and eventually climbs up to the balcony to her. They tell each other that they love each other with Romeo asking her for “The exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.” This scene is from the opening night, June 26, of South Dakota Shakespeare Festival held in Vermillion’s Prentis Park.
David Lias/Vermillion Plain Talk.

The Artistic Director and the Board President for the South Dakota Shakespeare Festival, SDSF, visited the Vermillion Rotary Club last week to provide a preview of the upcoming performance and share other information about the festival itself.

Board President Dennis Nelson announced this year’s production will be “Much Ado About

Nothing.” Performances will be held June 18-21 nightly at Prentis Park.

Both Nelson and Artistic Director Rebeca Bailey expressed profound gratitude for support the festival has received from not just the Rotary but also the University of South Dakota, the City of Vermillion, VCDC and United Way of Vermillion among others.

“South Dakota Shakespeare Festival is proud to be an active part of this community that has been nationally recognized as a Great Community and a small Arts town,” Bailey said. “Nationally. What a gift.”

The national recognition is reflected in the number of artist applications SDSF has received.

“Since 2024 until now our audition submissions to work with SDSF have nearly doubled,” Bailey said. “In 2024 from across the country, even internationally we had 172 video submissions. 172 people said, ‘I want to come to South Dakota and do art, do theatre and do Shakespeare in the park.’”

According to Bailey, the number rose to 246 in 2025, and 379 this year.

Several applications had to be removed from consideration because they were from Actors Equity which SDSF is not set up to work with yet.

Bailey pointed out that the fact that professional union actors are asking to come to speaks volumes about the community and the festival’s reputation.

The competition is especially stiff because there are only eight actor spots to be filled.

As Bailey explained, changes from last year created a lot of panic and some theatre companies chose to cut budgets, pay less or even take a season off.

SDSF made a different decision.

“Originally our actors would come work here for 4-5 weeks and they would do it for something around \$1800,” Bailey said. “We decided we were going to pay someone an actual wage that actually mattered and we were going to house them and we were going to take care of them the way artists should be taken care of because their work is valuable and when we pay less than what is fair we tell them that their work doesn’t matter the same so we moved closer to what was a fair

wage and we cut the number of people this year because we said we’re going to hire people we can take care of.”

Though no actor names have been announced yet, Bailey shared a sneak peek on a few artists who will be contracted this year.

“We have a graduate from Columbia University who’s also been working at Oregon Shakespeare festival and La Jolla Playhouse,” Bailey said. “We have an actor from the American Shakespeare Center. Our director is as well who’s also a professor at James Madison University. We have an artist who’s currently employed with Idaho Shakespeare tour, so that is also Midwest and working through there, she’s also a return artist. And we have a graduate of the Theatre School at DePaul in Chicago.”

According to Bailey they like to hire at least one local actor with the hopes of expanding in the future.

“As we get the number larger we have more room to give a young artist an opportunity,” Bailey said. “One person might be a single character, everyone else is multiple characters in this show so it’s a pretty heavy lift.”

Bailey shared a peek into her workload stating that she is currently filling out the grants for 2027 in addition to putting together the current festival that has yet to be cast.

Bailey’s year is full of behind-the-scenes work beyond putting on the summer show.

After wrapping the show near the end of June, the show for the next year needs to be decided upon by August, hire a director by September and deciding on a budget for actors by November.

“So not much of a vacation between the previous show and hitting the ground running for the next years show,” Bailey said.

Even while presenting, Bailey was in the middle of her lengthy to-do list.

“While I am here to visit we’re doing a fundraiser,” Bailey said. “I am rushing out of this door to sign contracts to handle who’s available. ... All of these things happen quietly, it’s easy to not see the work that happens all year.”

Part of the year-round work involves outreach.

“We were offered a spot as a panelist at the International Shakespeare conference in Newfoundland this year talking with North Dakota who we partnered with in 2024 and another artist that we worked with,” Bailey said. “We talked about Shakespeare in rural communities not just in South Dakota but worldwide.”

According to Bailey, she received encouragement and advice from a prominent colleague to apply for a \$25,000 ADA grant that funded Shakespeare in American Communities: Juvenile Justice.

“That doesn’t pay for the show we do here,” Bailey said. “That pays funding to be able to work inside the juvenile justice program. It doesn’t entirely shift what we do here on the show but it changed our outreach.”

According to Bailey the grant is a huge deal with only seven companies nationwide receiving it.

Bailey also works throughout the year hosting gatherings focused on artistic education, leadership and supporting regional programs as well as serving as an invited panelist for the “Shakespeare in American Communities: Reaching Underserved Youth” and “Shakespeare in American Communities Convening.”

All while arranging the festival for this year with lining up things like housing, travel and

transportation as well as the possibility of multiple performance venues.

According to Bailey there is a soft invitation to perform at a new spot next year as well as the strong possibility of a second that moves the show up the I-29 corridor.

“We also have a very strong possibility of having a connection to get our broadcast out to more South Dakota specifically on our online,” Bailey said. “We are trying very hard to reach more of South Dakota. We’re learning how to take our show on the road. We did it to North Dakota in 2024, we did it to Brookings in 2025. We are learning what we need to do to do it successfully. That’s growth and growth always has discoveries.”

According to Bailey, every decision for SDSF is made with the mission statement in mind, “to engage, connect and inspire communities by exploring our shared human experiences through inclusive, professional Shakespeare productions and theatre arts education.”

Bailey’s plea for volunteer work was mainly for marketing ideas and how to get information about SDSF out to Sioux Falls and other places who need to know about it.

“Either we’re going to figure out how to support it or it’s going to get smaller because we can’t,” Bailey said. “I think this community, this town has shown how excited they are about what it is that we do here. I think our community deserves this, not just Vermillion but our South Dakota community.”

To learn more, turn to their website at <https://www.sdshakespearefestival.org/>.