

Finding a Home in the Catskills

By Matt Beardmore

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It has been a slow build for Catskill Mountain Shakespeare since it was founded almost four years ago, but the nonprofit theatre company has found a home in the Hudson Valley community, and the support it is receiving is only growing.

Created in early 2020 by Montreal native Sarah Reny, Catskill Mountain Shakespeare was able to pivot as Covid restrictions hit, filming scenes from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* "in the lush backdrop of the Catskill Mountains" and uploading them for free online viewing.

"It was definitely a wild time to start a theatre," said Reny, also the theatre's artistic director. "The plan came to fruition and drastically changed as everything did."

Reny's plan to engage the community after the theatre's first season included a low-cost/no-cost ticket initiative in 2021 that "offers discounted and free performance tickets to anyone who requests them." The following year was the beginning of an Outreach Program that includes pay-what-you-can performances, an LGBTQ Summer Social, a Relaxed Performance for those with special needs, as well as no-cost theatrical workshops.

"It's been (of) vital importance for me that we prioritize giving back to the community and being of service to the community," Reny said.

The community, in turn, has embraced Reny, managing director Frank Wildermann, Carolyn Marie Wright, the new education and outreach director, and the entire theatre staff and team of actors.

The theatre's 12 performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2022 included five sold out shows. And this past summer, under the sponsorship of Catskill Mountain Foundation, and with Reny's long-time friend and collaborator, Sydney Berk, on board as director, the audience grew by 50% as the three-week run of *As You Like It* took place under a tent behind The Red Barn in Hunter, NY.

"I think it was our best show yet," Reny said. "Everyone we spoke to was really very complimentary – I think we did a spectacular job with it."

Reny said next year's production is yet to be decided, but it will be on the mountaintop again in July under the tent.

From April 8-28, 2024, Catskill Mountain Shakespeare will be performing *The Tempest* at local schools and venues for its Spring Tour, which is being supported by a \$25,000 grant it received in June from Shakespeare in American Communities, "a theater program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest."

For more detail on Catskill Mountain Shakespeare and its upcoming productions, please visit <https://www.catskillmountainshakespeare.com>.

