

2023 Annual Report



SHAKESPEARE
in Action

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Letter from outgoing Artistic Director Cameron Grant

2023 was an exciting year for Shakespeare in Action. After three years of navigating lockdowns, cancellations, and pivots, it finally felt like we could return to our core programming: making theatre, telling stories and working with youth. We returned to Little Avenue Memorial Park for our summer production of *otihew*, delighting 1,000 audience members over 10 performances. For the first time ever, we took part in Nuit Blanche, partnering with Artscape and UrbanArts to join Toronto's all night all-night celebration of contemporary art. We saw 215 people come through our Undocumented.Stories exhibit produced in collaboration with Access Alliance, and we hope it will continue to reach thousands more through our virtual exhibit. 2023 saw the creation of two new initiatives: The Community Engaged Theatre Project, and the In the Works commission project. These two initiatives led to the creation and development of two new Canadian plays. We also saw the return of our Backstage Centre Technical Apprenticeship Program, over 30 workshops in schools and communities spaces, and a Dora Award awarded to the cast of our 2022 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. And Action for Outstanding Ensemble.

It was a busy year. But one valuable lesson we needed to take away from the past few years was the need to work within capacity. This year provided us with an opportunity to reflect on what is important to us, and how we can have the greatest impact in the programming we offer while working in a way that is sustainable. Like many theatre companies across the country, Shakespeare in Action has been faced with funding challenges. Despite a remarkable year of artistic excellence, and record audience engagement, we remain in a precarious financial position.

Small companies like ours rely on public funds and donations to achieve our mission. We are incredibly grateful for the financial support we have received this year. We had a record number of individual donors show their support for the work we do. Thank you! While we are always appreciative of financial support, we also need your support in advocating for public funding for the arts. Please consider lending your voice to support arts funding. Without funding for small, community-focused companies like ours, we will not be able to survive.

There is a lot to look forward to next year. We are very excited to announce our new name and brand! While we have been working toward this for years, we knew we needed to have the community involved every step of the way. We consulted with the Weston and theatre communities in a number of ways, such as a survey, community interviews, and a group brainstorming session to make sure our new name took everyone's voices into account. We were delighted at the community response of over 250 respondents to our survey. And how delightful it is that the name we chose actually came from the community brainstorm session we held, and was voted as the top choice from that day! Next year will also bring new leadership. I bid goodbye to Shakespeare in Action at the end of 2023, and am looking forward to the new life and energy our next artistic leader will bring.

All the best,

Cameron Grant



Letter from current Artistic Director Michelle Urbano

In 2023, I had the unique opportunity with my work as Producer of otihêw to connect to the people of the Weston community. This rooted me in the organization's purpose and is a great launching point into my new role as Artistic Director. I am thrilled to be joining Shakespeare in Action at this pivotal time, launching into the rebrand. I look forward to the upcoming 2024 season, where I will be honouring the path Cameron and Jackie laid out for us and continuing to explore artistic programming that serves the community.

To the future!

Michelle Urbano



Thank you, Cameron!

Shakespeare in Action would like to extend a huge, heartfelt THANK YOU to Cameron Grant for an incredible year+ as Artistic Director. Cameron moved on to career aspirations further afield at the end of 2023, leaving his position of AD at SIA. In his time with us, Cameron transformed the inner workings of the company, our outreach with local community organizations, and launched exciting new programming initiatives that we will carry into 2024. We are so thankful for the time he worked with us, and for his tireless work to move SIA toward a bright, creative, sustainable future as Weston's theatre company. Thank you, Cameron!

Something new is coming!

For over thirty-five years, Shakespeare in Action (SiA) enhanced local arts education by bringing the language and stories of Shakespeare to audiences of all ages. SiA accomplished this by presenting Canadian interpretations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays for young audiences, and growing arts education outreach programs in schools, libraries and community centres.

In 2019, SiA found a permanent home in the Weston neighbourhood, and we began evaluating our existing program to better serve our community. By 2024, SiA's programming had flourished far beyond the confines of Shakespeare. To better reflect our new direction of producing relevant and accessible theatre in Weston, we are changing our name and look, and updating our mandate. This company will always focus on telling universal stories to a wide audience and providing theatre education to youth - and now, with a brand that reflects our current direction. This exciting change is just around the corner; keep an eye out in April 2024 to see who we are now and where we're going next!



Leadership Team

Michelle Urbano, Artistic Director

Michelle Urbano (she/her) is a Toronto storyteller, puppeteer, theatre creator, and producer. She recently worked with Shakespeare in Action to produce their summer production of *otîhêw*. Before that, she spent five years with Storytelling Toronto, first as their Operations Manager and then as the Producer of the 43rd and 44th edition of the Toronto International Storytelling Festival. She has told stories at Weston Winterfest, Storytelling Toronto events, and on Replay Storytelling. She has completed three tours with the Wee Festival on Lost & Found, and Quest for the Moon, two puppetry pieces for very young audiences, and she recently received funding from the Ontario Arts Council to develop a new puppetry piece inspired by the children's book *Strega Nona*. She has performed and worked in a variety of capacities with the CBC, Theatre Passe Muraille, Theatre by the Bay, Pandemic Theatre, Eldritch Theatre, the Old Trout Puppet Workshop, Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia, and was a part of award winning puppetry productions in the Toronto Fringe and Summerworks. She has been a proud resident of Humber Heights since 2020.

JR Williams, Executive Director

JR Williams is a Toronto transplant with a background in nonprofit project management. They earned their Master of Arts degree in Psychology from The New School before spending several years as Associate Director of a nonprofit serving survivors of gender-based violence. Within academia, JR specialized in the psychology of identity within a social and interpersonal context. They have significant experience in community-based and narrative-based research methods and data analysis. As a past Associate Director of a nonprofit, they were responsible for multiple facets of the organization's functioning. Eventually deciding that storytelling was the purpose of life, they started pursuing production work for both stage and screen. They have produced stage plays and digital media, and are passionate about the power of game-based, improvised storytelling.

Stage Productions

otîhêw

Shakespeare in Action's 2023 summer offering was otîhêw, a Metis-Cree reimaging of Shakespeare's Othello, written by PJ Prudat and directed by Lisa Nasson. Playwright PJ Prudat wove together themes of duty, love, betrayal and familial bonds in a poetic and powerful play that surprised audiences familiar with Othello and captivated audiences encountering the story for the first time.

2023 marked five years of Shakespeare in Action bringing free summer theatre to Little Avenue Memorial Park. It was an absolute joy to share otîhêw with the almost 1,000 people who attended our show over three weeks. It was so exciting to see the park filled with audiences made up of community members, artists, families, first-time theatre goers and supporters every night! SiA cannot wait to be back in the park again this summer.



Back row: JR Williams, Jessi Elgood, Michelle Urbano, Spencer Bennet, Raymond Jordan Johnson, Nishina Loft, Heather Bellingham, Vivien Illion, Tanvi Vyas

Front row: Sophia Francis, Stephon Smith, Brefny Caribou, Jordan M. Burns, Nicole Joy-Fraser, Jonathon LeRose, Lisa Nasson, Jewell Bowry, Cindy Ci, Kayleigh Mundy, Cameron Grant, Aaheli Mukherjee, Sooji Kim

Photo credit: Matthew Hertendy

Education

Shakespeare in Action's educational programming during 2023 included a March Break camp held by our Artscape neighbors, UrbanArts. We partnered with UrbanArts to provide a day camp to local students, and provided exciting programming, including stage combat and puppetry. Our campers had a blast!

SiA also partnered with Syme Woolner Neighbourhood & Family Centre to offer theatre games and workshops during Syme Woolner's summer day camp. Keele Community Hub partnered with SiA to offer Rhythm & Poetry, a spoken word poetry workshop for teens. SiA is looking forward to continuing to partner with service organizations to incorporate theatre education into their offerings!

SiA's final educational offering of 2023 was Storytelling Through Games, an after school program for kids aged 8-12, with a focus on storytelling skills. Using a game called Kids On Bikes, Storytelling Through Games introduced kids to some basic concepts of storytelling, like worldbuilding and character development, and gave them a chance to practice their skills in a collaborative environment. They worked together to build their world, create their characters, and send those characters on adventures.



Young participants at SiA's puppetry workshop with UrbanArts

Community Engaged Theatre

Young Creators Theatre Project

The Community Engaged Theatre Initiative is a development initiative in which SiA partners with non-artistic community organizations or individuals to develop new theatrical works. Our current project under this initiative is the Young Creators Theatre Project, in which youth aged 18-25 work with a playwright to generate a new play on a specific topic.

In 2023, the Young Creators Theatre Project brought together five women and non-binary youth from the Weston area, along with several theatre professionals, to create a play exploring the theme gender-based violence in Shakespeare's plays. The result of this project was *The House of Magic*, a prequel to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, written by collaborative playwright Chiamaka Glory.

A reading of *The House of Magic*, free and open to the public, was performed by our five young participants at the end of May. The participants each played a major role in the performance, which was then followed by an open discussion with our audience, who had the opportunity to ask questions and give feedback on the script.



Our five youth participants in 2023's Young Creators Theatre Project

In The Works

The Book of Kit and Mel

"In The Works" is an initiative that supports the commission of new work to be developed and produced by SiA. Under the banner of the "In the Works" initiative, SiA continued to develop THE BOOK OF KIT AND MEL, a new TYA musical, book by Deivan Steele and lyrics and composition by Garry Williams.



Deivan Steel, one creator of The Book of Kit and Mel

Job Training

Backstage Centre Technical Apprenticeship Program

The Backstage Centre Technical Apprenticeship Program (BCTAP) is a performing arts technical skills development program that provides paid job training in theatre production to youth, mentored by industry professionals, to gain unique and valuable experience they can bring with them into the workforce. This year, BCTAP participants worked on our summer production in Memorial Park. Six emerging theatre technicians from in and around Toronto filled out our crew for our flagship production.

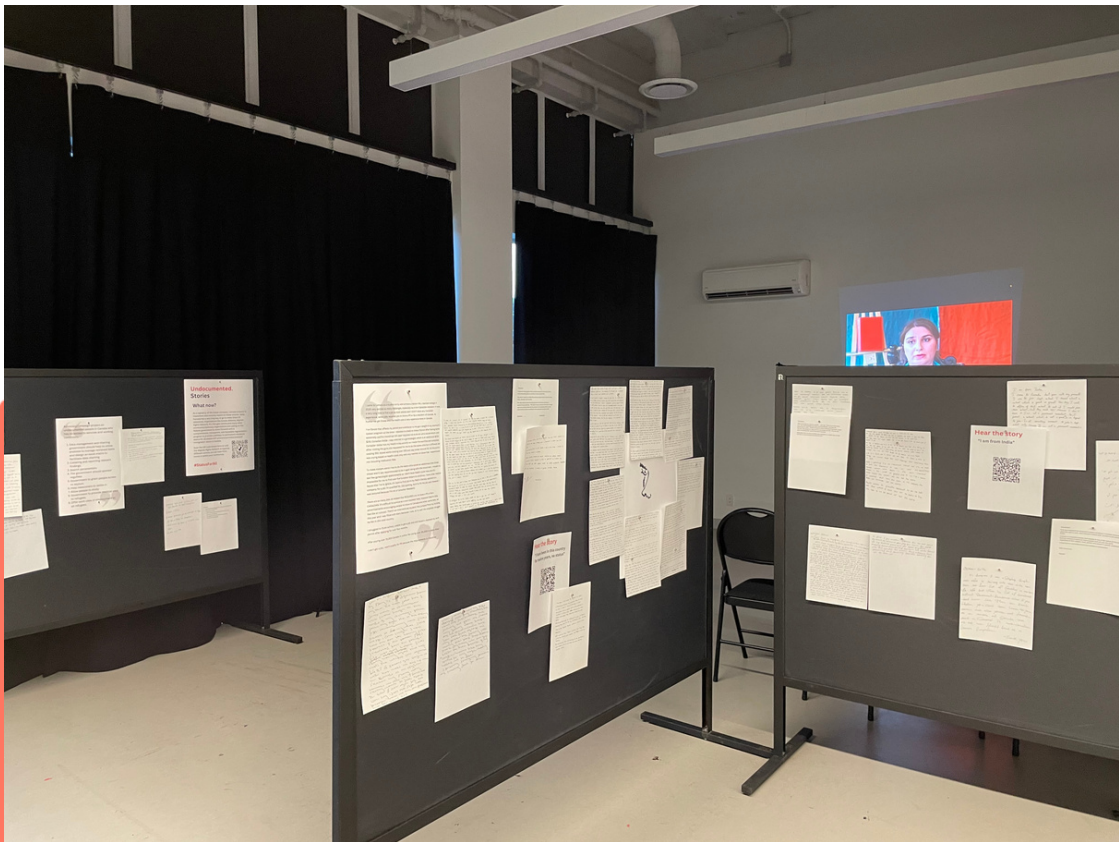


From left to right: Stephon Smith, Jacob Lin, Cindy Ci, Kayleigh Mundy, Sooji Kim

Community Programming

Nuit Blanche

In 2023, Shakespeare in Action participated in Toronto's Nuit Blanche event for the first time. SiA partnered with Access Alliance to present "Undocumented.Stories", an exhibit featuring over 100 handwritten accounts collected from residents living with precarious immigration status. The stories speak of incredible struggle and loss, fear and exploitation, humiliation and intimidation. Through written accounts and video and audio recordings, the exhibit voices a collective and undeniably human desire to live in a society where anyone, regardless of their immigrant status, can fully contribute to the communities in which they live.



*Undocumented.Stories, SiA's exhibit for
Toronto's 2023 Nuit Blanche*

Community Programming

Neighbourhood Festivals

SiA supported Weston's Fall Festival, hosted by Community Place Hub, by providing a face painter for the day! This was a family-friendly festival with kids' activities, food, music, games and much more. We had a blast!

SiA was excited to offer a storytelling hour for the Weston Village BIA's Weston Winterfest. We had the incredible storyteller and York South local Michelle Urbano (now our Artistic Director!) in to tell some wintery stories in the SiA studio. Nearly 100 of our neighbours came out to cozy up in the storytelling circle and hear some tales! The Weston Village BIA hosted quite a fest at Artscape Weston Common, with programming run by our neighbours at UrbanArts, a bustling craft market, lots of yummy food vendors, and fun activities like photos with Santa and marshmallow toasting.



Michelle Urbano delights audience members at Weston Winterfest

Dora Mavor Moore Award

2023 saw Shakespeare in Action receive its first ever Dora Mavor Moore Award. Our 2022 production of Romeo and Juliet. And Action. received the award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in the Theatre for Young Audiences division. We are so proud of our ensemble cast of Gugun Deep Singh, Suzanne Roberts Smith, Andrea Massoud, Jamar Adams-Thompson, Deivan Steele, and Arielle Zamora for their incredible work.



From left to right: Cameron Grant, Arielle Zamora, Gugun Deep Singh, Frankie Bayley, Kay Wong, Alexandra Montagnese, and Suzanne Roberts Smith accept SiA's Dora Mavor Moore award

Looking Ahead

2024 will see SiA once again in Little Avenue Memorial Park! This year, we're excited to partner with several other performance organizations to bring a wider variety of offerings over an extended period to the neighbourhood. Our slate of park shows will be announced very soon!

SiA also intends to offer a Theatre for Young Audiences play as a touring show this Fall, which will visit many local schools in northwest Toronto to bring the magic of theatre directly to youth. This show is currently in the works, and we can't wait to share it with you.

SiA has continued offering theatre education opportunities, and will continue throughout 2024. We have partnered with Keele Community Hub to offer several different workshops to teens, and are hoping to bring similar programming to a day camp this summer in partnership with a local service organization. We will also host in-house education programs like a new iteration of Storytelling Through Games!

Our theatre creation initiatives, In The Works and Community Engaged Theatre, are currently being planned for 2024. We will be sure to share information on those programs as it becomes available!

Keep an eye out for a season announcement very soon - we hope we see you at the show!



2023 Outcomes

13 public performances

1,354 audience members

258 youth program participants

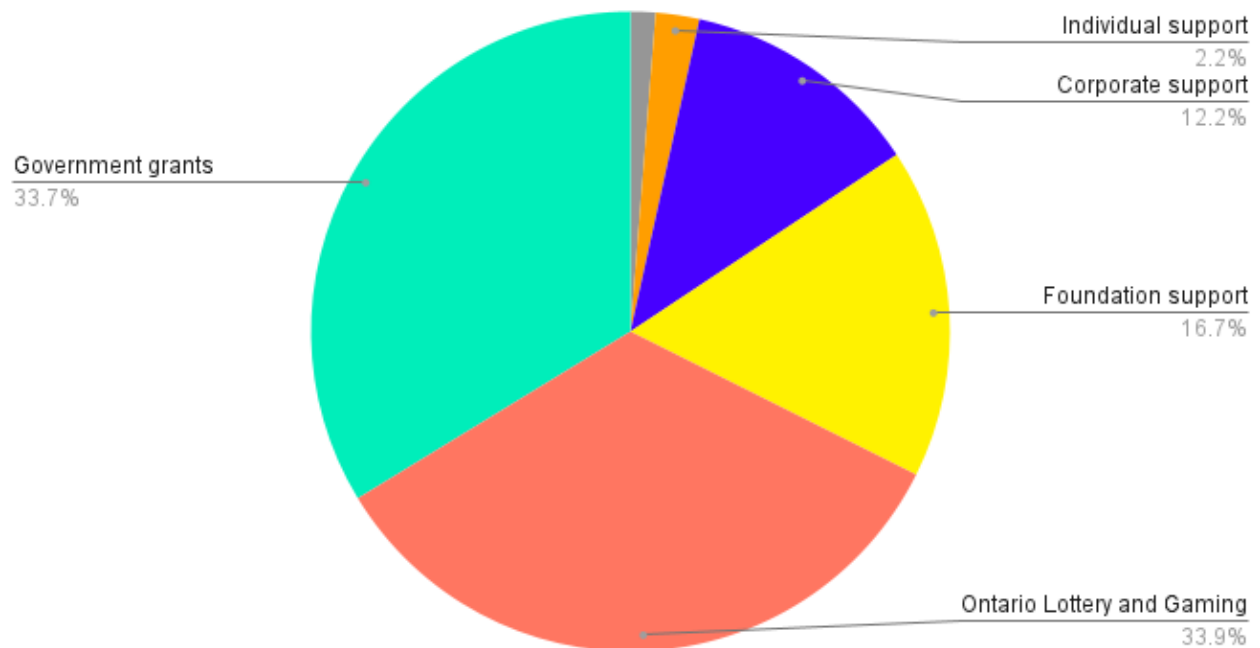
31 artists employed

Financial Report

Resources

Total resources in 2023:
\$400,283

Earned revenue, other	\$5,036
Individual support	\$8,845
Corporate support	\$48,893
Foundation support	\$66,848
Ontario Lottery and Gaming	\$135,655
Government grants	\$135,006

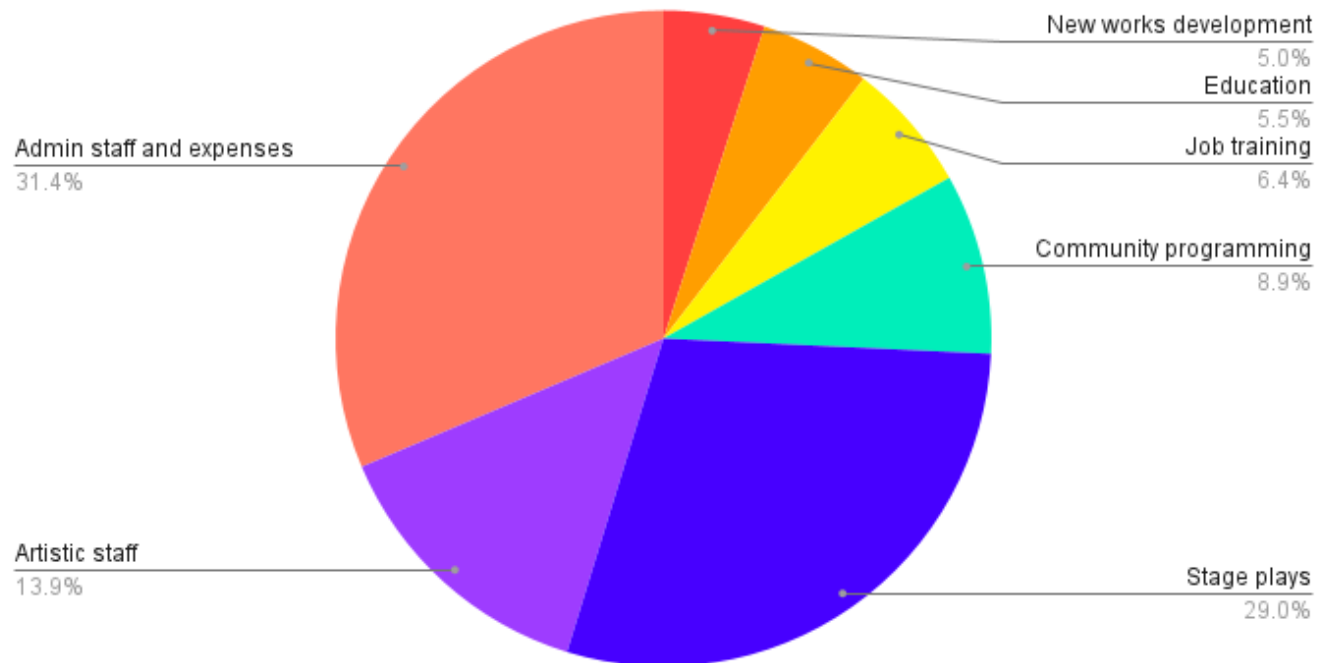


Financial Report

Expenses

Total expenses in 2023:
\$363,119

New works development	\$18,107
Education	\$19,851
Job training	\$23,224
Community programming	\$32,302
Stage plays	\$105,330
Artistic staff	\$50,298
Admin staff and expenses	\$114,008



Our Supporters

Shakespeare in Action is a not-for-profit and registered charity. We rely entirely on grants and donations in order to do our work. We would like to extend a special thank you to every individual, corporation, and foundation that contributed to Shakespeare in Action in 2023.

We were supported by the following organizations and businesses in 2023:



An agency of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
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Canada Trust

Lewitt Family
Foundation

Toronto Pearson



Romano D'Andrea
Foundation

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Foundation



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Our Supporters

Shakespeare in Action received donations from the following individuals in 2023. Thank you for keeping theatre alive in the heart of Weston.

Joanne Acri
Christina Akrong
Joseph Amodeo
Jeffrey Armstrong
Luisa Bada
Sarit Batner
Dave Bennett
Beatrice Campbell
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And our many many anonymous donors!