

Pink Floyd: In one theater, for one night only



Peter Garino, the Director of Chicago Shakespeare Project's "Darkside" by Tom Stoppard during rehearsal on Sep. 14, 2015 at Niles Public Library in Niles, Ill. (Ting Shen / Chicago Tribune)



Rick Kogan Contact Reporter

For one night only: A Pink Floyd 'play,' performed by Shakespeareans.

The relationship between British playwrights Tom Stoppard and William Shakespeare, though separated by more than four centuries, has been a fruitful and fascinating one and, frankly, far more interesting than that between any flashy Hollywood couple.

Stoppard's first major success was "Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead," the 1968 Tony Award-winning play inspired by and featuring characters from Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and it continued with his co-writing the screenplay for the 1998 film "Shakespeare in Love," which was a critical and box office smash,

earning more than \$300 million worldwide and winning seven Academy Awards, including one for the writing.



Fredric Stone, left, and David Skidmore, who plays the character "Fat Man" and "Bankers" in Chicago Shakespeare Project's "Darkside" by Tom Stoppard during rehearsal on Sep. 14, 2015 at Nilas Public Library in Nilas, Ill. (Ting Shen / Chicago Tribune)

Stoppard is now in collaboration with the Shakespeare Project Chicago and this, too, has a winning look. In what is a major, if all-too-brief, theatrical event of the fall season, the SPC will be presenting a single performance of Stoppard's "Darkside" at 7 p.m. Sept. 27 at the Mayne Stage, that stylish live music venue at 1328 W. Morse St. (www.maynestage.com).

The play, which was written for and first staged on radio for the British Broadcasting Corporation in August 2013, was inspired by and incorporates one of the most successful albums of all time: Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of the Moon," which hit the Billboard album chart in 1973 and stayed there for a record 14 years, selling more than 40 million copies.

It took Stoppard four decades to finally getting around to writing the play, having first been asked to do so by the BBC when the album was first released. He was a natural — he started his theatrical career writing for radio and was a big Pink Floyd fan — but he stuck with stage (and a bit of movie) work, going on to become what he is now, which is one of the greatest living playwrights.



Stephen Spencer, who plays the character "Politician" in Chicago Shakespeare Project's "Darkside", during rehearsal on Sep. 14, 2015 at Niles Public Library in Niles, Ill. (Ting Shen / Chicago Tribune)

Asked again on the occasion of the album's 40th anniversary, he accepted the challenge, Stoppard telling the BBC, "I didn't try to make a story that was the album writ large in any way. I invented a little story in the spirit of the album, taking a cue as to what level of reality this story might be on."

The play is only 48 pages long (the album is about 43 minutes long), and Peter Garino, the artistic director of the SPC, discovered it early last year when he was out with his teenage son "doing one of our favorite things to do together, which is shopping for music."

Walking down one of store aisles, amid piles of CDs and DVDs, he came upon little brown, shrink-wrapped book: "Darkside, A Play for Radio by Tom Stoppard, Incorporating The Dark Side of the Moon by Pink Floyd."

"I was wildly intrigued," says Garino. "I had never heard of it before but I'm a big Pink Floyd fan. 'Dark Side' came out when I was 18, and it is one of the most important pieces of music I have ever listened to."

He bought the book, which was accompanied by an audio CD. He took them home and for the next hour sat wearing headphones, listening as he read along in

the book, which was the script of the play. "I was blown away," he says. "Stoppard had written a piece of drama that intentionally incorporates this entire incredible record into his narrative."

"I had no idea if it had ever been done any place else. But I knew that I wanted us to try and take a crack at it."

He contacted Stoppard's agent and asked about the rights. Not available, he was told. That was July 2014. In November he got a phone call: he could have the rights for one performance. Elated and empowered, he then went about getting similar permissions from the living members of the band (Syd Barrett and Richard Wright are dead; Nick Mason, David Gilmour and Roger Waters remain) and from the outfit that owned the publishing rights.

"Stoppard's approval certainly helped pave those roads," Garino says. "His people certainly looked into who we were, and I think the reason this is happening at all is that Stoppard admires what the SPC is all about."

SPC began in 1995 when Garino and some like-minded actors/Shakespeare fans, bumping into one another at audition, decided to meet once a week to read plays. They did this, as another member of the group, Stephen Spencer, puts it, "to flex our muscles. You can read and rehearse a monologue by yourself, but you can't do a scene all alone."

The first reading, held in a library, attracted some curious, "Can I stay and listen?" folks, and so the SPC was then born, as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with a more formal reading of "The Merchant of Venice." Over the last decades the all-Equity group has performed more than 100 plays, each of Shakespeare's at least once, at such venues as the Chicago Cultural Center, Lincoln Park Cultural Center, Harold Washington Library and other libraries, senior centers, civic organizations and schools.

The company numbers a couple of dozen regulars and has an annual budget of about \$30,000. Actors get paid a pittance but, as Spencer says, "No matter how humble, we know we are part of the scene."

And so, featuring a cast of eight under the direction of Garino, "Darkside" will go on as a benefit, with all proceeds going to the SPC's educational outreach efforts, which brings 50-minute readings of Shakespeare at no charge into area classrooms. (The upcoming four-play SPC season starts in October; www.shakespeareprojectchicago.org).

"Our education outreach program is more important today than ever before, since it was recently estimated that fewer and fewer of the top universities in the United States require Shakespeare," he says, citing a study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a non-profit aimed at maintaining academic freedom. Those sad facts: Only four of 52 universities and liberal-arts colleges

ranked highest by U.S. News & World Report required their English majors to take a class delving into Shakespeare. "And we are seeing Shakespeare being marginalized on the high school level too."

Garino has not had any conversations with Stoppard, but he would surely have understood the playwright's frustration expressed in an onstage conversation in London in February. The subject of Shakespeare came up, and Stoppard noted that one of his plays refers to Goneril, the eldest of King Lear's three daughters. "In 1974 everybody in the audience knew who Goneril was and laughed," Stoppard said. "In about 1990, when the play was revived, maybe half knew."

It's an odd and disturbing world we live in where many more people are familiar with the fly-by-night names of reality television stars than with the immortal characters of Shakespeare. But there is something about which to be happy and hopeful when Shakespeare, Stoppard and a group of passionate Chicago actors can come together to celebrate Pink Floyd and one special moment in the history of rock 'n' roll.

"After Hours With Rick Kogan" airs 9-11 p.m. Sundays on WGN-AM 720.

rkogan@tribune.com

Twitter @rickkogan

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