

# Theater



Edited by  
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**DUKE OF EARLS**  
Gudahl, seen here at CST as Duke Senior in last season's *As You Like It*, often nabs nobleman roles.

## Just a Gudahl boy

The ubiquitous Kevin Gudahl plays an un-*Anonymous* Shakespeare.  
By **Oliver Sava**

"I always think of myself as the storyteller," Kevin Gudahl says. "It's not about ego, it's not about how many lines I have. The clarity of the story is of the utmost to me." Gudahl's dedication to articulating ideas with precision and intelligence has made him one of Chicago's leading classical actors, particularly in works by Anton Chekhov, George Bernard Shaw and, most prominently, William Shakespeare.

Raised in rural South Dakota, Gudahl got his first taste of performing from singing in church, then being forced by his father into the all-school play. After a brief stint teaching theater at the University of Iowa, Gudahl pursued an acting career in Chicago to gain deeper knowledge of the business for the benefit of his students. He never returned.

More than 30 years later, Gudahl takes on the role of Shakespeare in Timothy Findley's *Elizabeth Rex*, his 29th production at Chicago Shakespeare Theater. "I suppose there's some pressure about it," Gudahl says during a lunch-break conversation at Navy Pier. "There's nothing I can do about what you might see Shakespeare behaving like or looking like, but it's more about the quality of the man, and I'm going to make that my own."

Described by Gudahl as a mediator among fiery personalities,

Shakespeare is an ideal role for the actor, who has a reputation for being a unifying leader in the rehearsal room. "He's a great team player. He's extremely generous and extraordinarily funny," says CST artistic director Barbara Gaines, a longtime friend of Gudahl's since casting him as the lead role in 1987's *Troilus and Cressida*, her first production with the company. "It is wonderful to have him in the room because he's a riot. It's a great way to break tension and become an ensemble, when you have a leader like that."

"He's a great leader in the company," echoes Gary Griffin, Gudahl's director in musicals such as *Passion* and *Pacific Overtures*, the latter of which took Gudahl to London with its transfer to the West End in 2003. "He's clearly committed to everything he's working on, whether it's a Japanese fisherman or Henry Higgins. The cast is always inspired by what he takes on and his process."

Gudahl breaks that simple but effective process into four steps: "Memorize, tell the story well, follow the story, take direction." Described by Gaines as "a director's dream," Gudahl brings his own ideas to the table but

welcomes experimentation. "The greatest thing about Kevin is you can suggest anything to him, and he'll take your 'what if' and make you look like a genius," Gaines says.

Gudahl, who lives in Rogers Park with his wife and five-year-old son, views himself as a guardian of rich, sophisticated language in a culture where ideas are becoming increasingly simplified. "My job is keep Shakespeare around, and Shaw, and Marlowe. I hope they don't become archaic museum pieces, and that the language would motivate new

playwrights to create as complicated ideas in modern culture."

As for the debate over Shakespeare's identity, newly revived by Roland Emmerich's film *Anonymous*, Gudahl believes that, based on the Bard's keen observations of human behavior, the playwright was most likely an actor. "Even though they claim that Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write those plays, I would like to think that there is an actor out there who is the smartest person in the room."

See Gudahl's Shakespeare in *Elizabeth Rex*, in previews now and opening Wednesday 7. See Resident companies.

**“My job is to keep Shakespeare around.”**

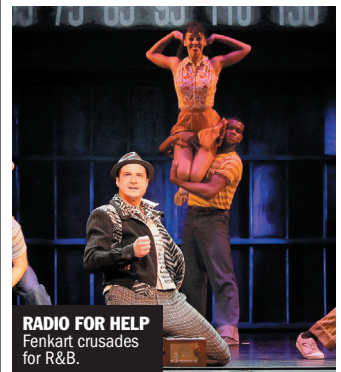
## Memphis



**Cadillac Palace Theatre**  
(see Touring shows). Book and lyrics by Joe DiPietro. Music and lyrics by David Bryan. Dir. Christopher Ashley. With Bryan Fenkart, Felicia Boswell. 2hrs 30mins; one intermission.

Music melts racial barriers like soft-serve in Joe DiPietro and David Bryan's pop-rock paean to radio rebels. Goofball white boy Huey (Bryan Fenkart), an impoverished, illiterate native of early 1950s Memphis, hears the music of his soul wafting up from underground juke joints on Beale Street. He ingratiates himself with the denizens of a black rhythm-and-blues club, if not quite winning over the place's owner, Delray (Quentin Earl Darrington), and finds himself infatuated with Delray's sister Felicia (Felicia Boswell). Huey soon bluffs his way into a gig as radio DJ, nixing cream-cheesy crooners like Perry Como and Roy Rogers in favor of "race music."

In addressing the youth-movement rise of rock & roll, *Memphis* joins a line of Broadway musicals stretching from white-bread *Bye Bye Birdie* to Technicolor *Hairspray*. (When Huey lands a TV dance program in *Memphis*'s second act, you'll be forgiven if the memory of "You Can't Stop the Beat" threatens to drown out Bryan's amiable but comparably blander beats.) Unlike in those shows, however, *Memphis* lacks a feeling of place in the larger world; DiPietro doesn't provide enough external opposition. Huey and Felicia's relationship faces objections from protective brother Delray and from Huey's disapproving Mama (Julie Johnson), but one quickly forgotten attack by racist goons aside, there's not enough sense of the pervasiveness of racist sentiment in the midcentury South. Still, Bryan's R&B pastiches are infectious, and Sergio Trujillo's choreography thrums with energy. Fenkart and Boswell, who previously understudied their roles on Broadway, bring winning charisma and chemistry.—*Kris Vire*



**RADIO FOR HELP**  
Fenkart crusades for R&B.

PHOTOS: LEFT, UZ LAUREN; RIGHT, PAUL KOLNIK