



‘A TREASURE HERE IN ROCHESTER’

Acclaimed director Shakes has put his stamp on the city

William Ramsey

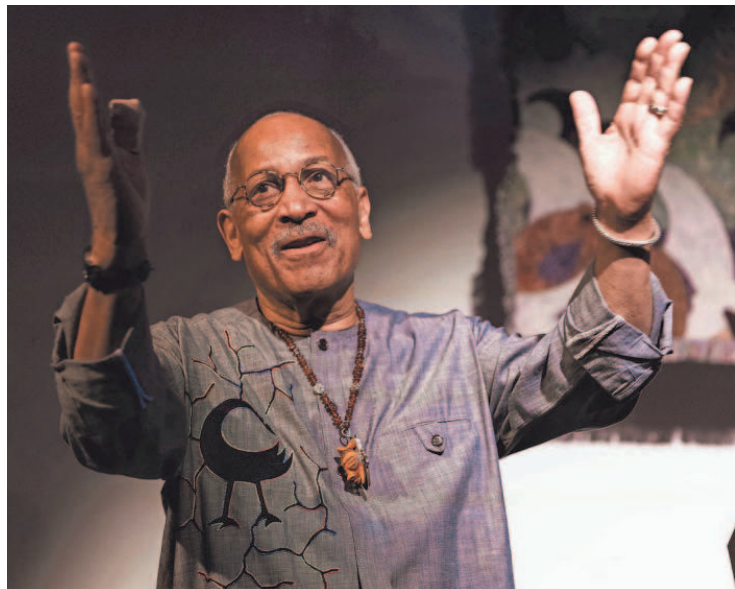
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David Shakes speaks with authority: on theater, on acting, on history. And, of course, Frederick Douglass. So many years in pursuit of knowledge and connection to the historic Rochester and American figure.

He has traveled a long road with Douglass.

David Shakes also speaks with patience and encouragement, in the tones of a teacher, with a strong guiding voice for those who are learning, collaborating, dreaming. He is an actor, a theater director and producer and a historical interpreter for some iconic figures of the past.

Someday, quite a while from now when he is gone, Shakes will be remembered in western New York in a lasting way. But now he is still working and connecting and supporting. And the recognition and appreciation keeps coming.



David Shakes was honored with a key to the city of Rochester by Mayor Malik Evans (at top) on Thursday. ANDY DOSSETT / DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Mayor Malik Evans gave Shakes a key to the city last week, and The Avenue Blackbox Theatre honored him.

Shakes 'a legend' in the wider community

Shakes has worked with Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Samuel L. Jackson and other well-known actors. He also has mentored community theater actors. He has that balance.

Shakes grew up in Brooklyn, got his bachelor's from SUNY Empire and a master's from Syracuse University. He met James Baldwin a handful of times between 1968 and 1970, when Shakes was performing in Harlem with the group Spirit House Movers and Players.

"He said that we have to be strong and steadfast," recalled Shakes.

He was part of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and studied with the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Shakes resettled in Rochester in 1976, and in addition to acting and directing with various local groups, he worked as a counselor and social worker at Lewis Street Center and later as a social worker for RSD.

A historical interpreter of Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King Jr. and Douglass who portrays them and educates the audience in a performance role, Shakes has brought understanding to audiences who care about history.

Douglass, for him, is key — his message of dignity, justice and freedom continues to ring true.

"I'm encouraged when I do it," he once told a group at SUNY Empire. "I am excited to be in the midst of that and it's

an honor for me to share some of those thoughts and some of those words and keep his spirit alive and keep his message alive. ... He's an icon, he's a model for us."

In touch with the Rochester arts community

Shakes has been behind many productions here, exploring the experiences of Black people in America, including the Baldwin Project. He just opened the last play of the fifth season at the Avenue Blackbox Theatre on Joseph Avenue — "Steal Away" by Ramona King.

Reenah Golden, director of the theater, said Shakes embodies a spirit of Sankofa in the Black community — an exhortation to "go back and get it," the history that shaped lives and generations.

"It's what is he best at," she said. "He is great at making real connections be-

tween the past and the present and our future as Black people in America.

"David means so much to the Avenue as a director in residence and to our community. ... An amazing, genuine guy who also happens to be a treasure here in Rochester."

A packed house at the Avenue space stood to applaud Shakes on a recent evening. "In honor of a living legend," Golden began to say into the microphone.

"Yes!" shouted a woman and several men in the crowd.

Snap your fingers if he has been a mentor to you, Golden said.

Many fingers then moved together in unison, including a pair of long, graceful, ivory nails in the front row.

"Yes!"

— *William Ramsey is an editor with the Democrat and Chronicle.*