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Taking Shakespeare's Sonnets to the Streets of New York

By *STEVEN MCELROY*

Michael Urie, Lynn Cohen, Joanna Gleason, Austin Pendleton and Chris Sarandon are a handful of the 154 actors who will speak the speech in the yearlong Sonnet Project, an undertaking of the New York Shakespeare Exchange. The company, after raising almost \$50,000 in a [Kickstarter campaign](#), will film all of Shakespeare's sonnets, each performed by a different actor in a New York City location – hence the overall cast of 154. Over the course of the next year, videos will be released singly or in small groups on the Web site [SonnetProjectNYC.com](#), and through a soon-to-be-released mobile app.

“It ties directly back to our mission,” said Ross Williams, the company's artistic director. “Our goal is to try to figure out how to make Shakespeare a part of contemporary culture in more than a pull-it-off-the-shelf-and-blow-the-dust-off way,” he said. The group aims to increase appreciation of Shakespeare – and classical theater in general – and hopes the videos will reach an audience of a million by the time Shakespeare's 450th birthday arrives on April 23, 2014.

The enterprise will have a two-part kickoff starting with a preview at the [Drama Book Shop](#) (250 West 40th Street) on April 26, from 5-7 p.m. The event, free and open to the public, will include a Shakespearean open-mike portion in which anyone can read a favorite Shakespearean passage; a wine and cheese reception; and an early look at the project's first video, featuring Mr. Williams performing Sonnet No. 1 (“From fairest creatures we desire increase”). The bookstore event is co-presented by [Willful Pictures](#), which will present its [third annual Shakespeare's Birthday Sonnet Slam](#) at the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park on April 23, from 1-4:30 p.m.

A more official, invitation-only beginning of the sonnet project is scheduled for May 20 at the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, and a group of 10 videos will be released at that time. The project will conclude with the release of an anthology to include all 154 videos along with a number of special features including behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with participants.