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Macbeth, a touch of Prescott share the stage

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The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival is finally ready for tragedy.

As it prepares for its eighth season at the waterfront Kinsmen Amphitheatre, the festival that has, for many, irrevocably transformed summer in Prescott is about to exceed its boundaries in two significant ways.

For starters, there's a Shakespeare play that isn't actually a Shakespeare play.

And then there is the play that, for the more superstitious members of the dramatic community, cannot even be named.

The festival opens a week from today, July 10, with *Trouble on Dibble Street*, an adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* commissioned to mark Prescott's bicentennial.

And on Wednesday, July 14, the festival opens its first-ever bona fide Shakespeare tragedy, *Macbeth*.

"I think we're giving our audience a very balanced season this year," said the festival's artistic director, Ian Farthing, pointing to the polar opposites to which this comedy and tragedy go.

The festival has offered thematically dark productions before, and even one play, *Romeo and Juliet*, that can be classified as tragedy, although adulterated somewhat by comedy.

Macbeth, however, is the first true venture into high Shakespearean tragedy, and Farthing believes the local audience is ready for all that violence, death and punished hubris.

"I've had so many people come up to me and say: 'Macbeth is my favourite Shakespeare play,'" Farthing said during a media event Friday introducing the two productions.

The festival runs until Aug. 14.

Trouble on Dibble Street, written by Kingston playwright and Queen's drama professor John Lazarus, is as far from Shakespeare as this Shakespeare festival has gone so far.

"I deliberately wanted it to be a new piece and a play that's meant for Prescott," said Farthing.

Hence, Lazarus took *Merry Wives*, a play he describes as "a mess," and set it in 1910, Prescott's centennial.

In his playwright's notes on the show, Lazarus recounts the story that Queen Elizabeth I, having seen one of the Henry plays, commanded the Bard to produce a comedy about Sir John Falstaff in love, and only gave two weeks for it to be put together, which explains the flawed nature of *Merry Wives*.

Despite this, Lazarus sees much to admire in *Merry Wives*, and much to connect it to Prescott.

"*Merry Wives* is a sort of love letter from Shakespeare to the world he grew up in, a small town in a farming community," said Lazarus.

Dibble Street, however, not only excises almost all the Shakespearean language, opting instead for 1910 Upper Canadian English, but also changes the story, said Lazarus.

"Shakespeare would have understood that," he said. "Shakespeare stole all his plots."

Director Craig Walker, a Queen's drama colleague of Lazarus who is now on his fifth theatrical collaboration with the latter, said *Dibble Street* aims primarily to entertain.

"The whole intent of the play is to create a fun and joyous experience for the audience," he said.

Alix Sideris, like Walker a festival regular, and newcomer Colleen Winton, respectively play Alice Ford and Meg Page, two Prescott women who engage in a devious plot to trap the amorous Falstaff at his own game.

Winton, a Vancouver neighbour and friend of actor David Adams (who played Shylock in Merchant of Venice here in 2008) has directed Merry Wives in the past, but welcomes the opportunity to give the play the Prescott treatment.

Unlike some purists, Winton believes one should not be "precious" about the original text.

Sideris, who played the far more strident Kate in last year's Taming of the Shrew, is enjoying the role of Alice Ford.

"She's a hoot," said Sideris. "She has quite a beautiful arc in the play."

Ford, said Sideris, goes from a conservative and proper woman to a far more interesting person once Falstaff comes along to "mess everything up."

"A spark of impishness goes through her character for the first time," said Sideris.

"She goes through this journey of finding her inner imp."

Macbeth, of course, is nothing like an impish comedy.

And while Dibble Street is deliberately Prescott-specific, the tragedy is deliberately unspecific in its time and place.

It is, of course, the Scottish Play, but Farthing, who directs this production, has taken pains to underline the story's universality.

Kris Joseph and Kerry Ann Doherty, who play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, are dressed in costumes that leave the audience deliberately confused about their era.

These sober outfits evoke suggestions of classical attire, while at the same time seeming at home in dystopian science fiction. (Think of the neo-Nazi-inspired outfit Joseph wore as the moralistic despot in last year's Measure for Measure.)

"We deliberately wanted it not to be set in a particular time period," said Farthing.

Macbeth is a play about the consequences of getting what you wish for through evil means, as the ambitious title character, who dreams of power, sees it handed to him at a startling pace.

Although Lady Macbeth is read as the ambitious wife who prods her reluctant husband into having the king murdered, festival newcomer Doherty prefers to see her character as a bit more nuanced.

"She desperately loves her husband and she knows that it's his desire and she helps him fulfill his destiny," she said.

Joseph is intrigued by the question of whether Macbeth is to blame for his own fate, or whether he is ultimately the plaything of supernatural forces he cannot control.

But once the ambitious Macbeth starts on the arc that puts him on the throne before dooming him, events unfold at a rapid pace.

"Once it starts to go, it's relentless."

Joseph says ironically he thinks he will have mastered this towering tragic role sometime after the run ends.

On a more serious note, he notes that, even now, each rehearsal leaves him a little off-kilter as he discovers yet a new wrinkle in this complex character.

"It never ceases to amaze me how it continues to surprise," said Joseph.

One cannot, of course, mention Macbeth without invoking superstition.

The play is arguably the best-known source of theatrical superstition. According to the Wikipedia entry: "If an actor speaks the name Macbeth in a theatre, he or she is required to leave the theatre building, spin around three times, spit, curse, and then knock to be allowed back in."

There will be no such antics in Prescott, however -not even if the three witches cause trouble on Dibble Street.

Farthing said he got the actors to repeat the word "Macbeth" several times at the start to get any of its evil spirits out of their system.

"We do take full responsibility for the earthquake in Ottawa," jokes Joseph, who along with the rest of the cast was rehearsing the play when the ground shook last month.

More information about this season and its schedule is available

online

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