

BARD BY THE RIVER

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival delves into comedy and tragedy for its 2010 season

By Eva Lam | July 6, 2010

The play's the thing in Prescott, Ont., this summer, as the town celebrate its bicentennial with a production that transplants Shakespeare's iconic Falstaff to small-town Canada. It's all part of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival, which in its eighth year is presenting *Trouble on Dibble Street* and *Macbeth* as its two mainstage presentations. The former, whose title references a street in Prescott, is a brand new play commissioned by the festival to help celebrate the town's 200th anniversary. London, Ont.-based playwright John Lazurus takes Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* — in which the lovable rascal Sir John Falstaff makes waves in middle-class England during the Elizabethan era — and adapts the comedy for a local setting. "So it's kind of like 'The Merry Wives of Prescott,'" says Ian Farthing, the festival's artistic director, with a laugh. "We've got all of Shakespeare's colourful characters and the same basic plotline as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* but it's all set in Prescott in 1910." Directed by Craig Walker, the production is sure to delight area residents as they pick up on some of the script's familiar names, including Fort Wellington and Wiser's Whiskey (the latter was originally started in Canada in Prescott). "There are all sorts of local references that will make the town feel like it's their own play," says Farthing. And then there's *Macbeth*. Farthing, who is directing Shakespeare's dark epic, says it was chosen to provide a good contrast to *Trouble on Dibble Street*. "Up until now we've mainly focused on comedies — we did do *Romeo and Juliet* four years ago, but this is the first time we've done a full-blown out-and-out tragedy," he says. He notes that while the play is often read in schools, many people don't get a chance to see it on stage. "It's a very different experience watching a production than it is sitting in a classroom studying it," he says. "It's an exciting story — [one] that has been gripping audiences for hundreds of years, and plays don't hang around and still get performed unless there's something to them." Festival first-timers will be wowed by the shows' unique outdoor setting, one of the event's trademarks. "[It's] a beautiful amphitheatre right on the river so people can watch the sun go down and the moon rise during the performance," says Farthing. He adds that the natural environment

helps make the material more accessible to the audience. “There’s a liveliness and a freshness of energy in the performance when you’re outdoors. It immediately makes people a little more relaxed when they’re watching the show and it feels like they get more of a rapport with the actors on stage.” If a thunderstorm hits, which has occurred in past years, the show goes on at an alternate indoor venue. In addition to the two mainstage Shakespeare productions, audiences can also look forward to the Sunday Series. In previous years, the festival has brought in productions from elsewhere but this year the focus is on showcasing the talents of its ensemble through their other projects. The world premiere of *m* on July 18 will feature SLSF veteran Alix Sideris in “an original Greek Odyssey” as a woman explores her colourful Greek heritage. Then on July 25, the Toronto-based comedy duo Bain and Bernard (Warren Bain made his professional debut with the festival last year) will present a vaudeville comedy hour — with a twist. “They’re going to Shakespeare-ize it for us, so that’s going to be a lot of fun,” says Farthing. Returning this year is the Reveler’s Showcase (Aug. 1), which is the culmination of the festival’s week-long Young Artists Training program for budding thespians aged 13 and up. “Each day they have a workshop in the morning with one of our professional actors, doing things like voice or movement or text work or even a little bit of Shakespeare, and then in the afternoons we work on them with their monologues and scenes,” says Farthing. “At the end of that week they get the chance to strut their stuff on stage [with] monologues and scenes that they’ve been working on during the week.” Finally, Sonnet & Song will fill the air with sweet music and poetry on Aug. 8. The performance, in partnership with the Village Voyces choir, will feature music from Shakespeare’s era interspersed with sonnets read by members of the festival ensemble. Farthing says feedback to the festival has been hugely positive, and the numbers prove it: Attendance has increased by 400% over the first seven years. Last year was a record-breaking year for the event, drawing more than 4,000 people — from locals to international tourists — over the five weeks. Farthing credits the festival’s popularity to both the unique riverside location and the high calibre of the cast and crew. • “A couple of years ago for one of our productions, I got the same question from five different audience members at five different shows after the performance and it was, who did the modern adaptation?” he recalls. “I think that’s a huge testament to the skill of our actors and directors in bringing Shakespeare to life because we don’t do anything to it — it’s Shakespeare’s original language — but they are good enough to make it come alive and seem fresh and seem

contemporary.” *The eighth annual St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival runs from July 10 to Aug. 14. More info can be found at stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.* Main photo by Lynne Chagnon