

Shaking up Shakespeare

Playwright adapts Bard's comedy to celebrate 200th anniversary of waterfront town

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PRESCOTT — Opening its eighth season Saturday, the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival has finally gained an air of permanence — even though its stage is a weather-dependent outdoor amphitheatre overlooking the St. Lawrence Seaway.

As the show must go on, thunderstorms drive the players and the audience to a nearby church. Until this year, the main stormy night option was a large tent which has been abandoned as too expensive and impractical.

Launched on a shoestring budget in 2003, the company now has a permanent office on King St., a stone's throw from the stage. It has a board of directors, made up of prominent area residents and chaired by Sandra Lawn, a former mayor and one of the town's biggest boosters, and it has a paid artistic director, general manager and third staff member.

As another sign of durability, manager Jessie De Vries was recently honoured for five years of service, which board members noted is no longer common in any business.

The company has become solid enough to be recognized by various government funding agencies which have assisted it with specific grants instrumental in allowing it to continue to build a following.

Although it has been a slow process, the festival fan base is expanding, with twice as many advance tickets sold this year compared to the same period in 2009. That's quite a testament in what is essentially a blue-collar town and surrounding area, where residents have traditionally relied on a dwindling supply of industrial jobs.

One of the festival's biggest boosters is mayor Suzanne Dodge, who makes a point of attending all of its events and who helps ensure it receives a yearly grant from the town. Like many other residents, Dodge is billeting a visiting actor for the duration of the season.

The festival boasts a coterie of solid professional actors who keep coming back for more. Many have become well known around town, and their return for rehearsals every spring is greeted with house parties and requests to participate in such community events as the Canada Day parade.

But there isn't too much time to socialize, with most of the actors simultaneously rehearsing parts in two different plays.

Another sure sign of maturity is the fact the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Company, for the first time this year, has commissioned an original play to help recognize the town's 200th anniversary.

Noted Canadian playwright John Lazarus has crafted a comedy loosely based on the Merry Wives of Windsor called Trouble on Dibble Street. It depicts imagined shenanigans along one of Prescott's main thoroughfares 100 years ago. Today, Dibble St. is lined with some of Prescott's most imposing residences, not to mention its town hall.

Lazarus has worked many of Shakespeare's tricks of the trade into the piece, along with various local references which should keep spectators well entertained.

"Trouble is a living, breathing creature," said artistic director Ian Farthing. "John was tweaking it right up until last week as he saw ways of making it better while attending rehearsals."

The 2010 season kicks off Saturday at 7 p.m., at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre with Trouble on Dibble Street. The play will preview Friday night when tickets are \$12, compared to the full festival rate of \$25 per adult.

This season's second play is the famed Shakespearean tragedy Macbeth, which opens July 14. Macbeth and Trouble will alternate until the festival closes Aug. 14.

Lead actors in both productions would be welcome on any stage. They include Kris Joseph as Macbeth, a member of last year's resident acting company at the National Arts Centre; Kerry Ann Doherty as Lady Macbeth, who's been nominated for a number of professional awards; Mo Bock as Falstaff, who has played more than 100 roles at Gananoque's Thousand Islands Playhouse; and Ottawa's one-man show wizard Pierre Brault as Macduff.

"The new season is shaping up very well," Farthing said. "The buzz on the street is terrific with area residents looking forward to both an original production and to what many feel is Shakespeare's greatest play."

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