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Stars return for two Shakespeare comedies

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PRESCOTT -- The Bard returns to Prescott next weekend, with two plays that remind us how reality, unlike comedy, is often ambiguous.

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's ninth season features two romantic comedies, Twelfth Night and All's Well That Ends Well, plays that add, each in their own way, a nuance to the usual comedic structure.

The season runs from Saturday, July 9 through Saturday, August 13 at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre. Twelfth Night opens Saturday, July 9 at 7 p.m., while All's Well opens Wednesday, July 13 at 7 p.m.

"We've got a strong, popular comedy (Twelfth Night) and then we can balance that out with something that's not as well known to the audience," said artistic director Ian Farthing, who makes his acting return this year as Malvolio in Twelfth Night.

It's the first time in the Prescott festival's history that a play is being brought back: Twelfth Night, as it was titled then, first ran here in 2005.

This time, director Craig Walker is giving the play an Irish setting, seeing in Twelfth Night a mix of exuberant joy and melancholy quite similar to Irish music.

Following the comedic frame of Shakespeare's earlier works, the story involves twins caught in a shipwreck, with the young Viola believing her brother Sebastian is lost at sea, and confusion, as she dresses as a man to make her way in Illyria.

There is misplaced love and mistaken love, but that's not the whole story.

"It's not a knockabout farce."

Twelfth Night shifts between the poles of order, enforced maniacally by Malvolio, and hedonistic excess, embodied in the character of Sir Toby Belch.

A key message is that neither of those extremes makes for a complete human being.

The play features the return of Quincy Armorer as the smitten Duke Orsino and Canadian Idol finalist Elena Juatco as Viola.

Armorer, who played Orlando in the festival's 2008 production of As You Like It, has spent the two intervening seasons in Stratford, but is also happy to be back with the smaller Prescott festival, where the theatre group has been well received.

"The work is of high calibre, so it's great," he said.

Juatco, who in this festival's double-cast system also plays the female lead Helena in All's Well, is thrilled with the arrangement.

"I get to play two really wonderful women this summer, play two unrequited loves but very different," she said.

Walker quickly decided he wanted Farthing for the role of Malvolio and told the artistic director he would direct Twelfth Night this year if Farthing agreed to take on the role.

Luckily, that role is one of the items in Farthing's "bucket list."

"It's such a gem of a part because it combines the opportunity for some good comic business with a tinge of serious undercurrent," said Farthing.

"There's something to be said about mocking self-righteous fools, and I don't mind being the tool of that."

Meanwhile, Janet Irwin, who directed *The Taming of the Shrew* in 2009, returns to take the helm of *All's Well*, which is a fairy tale with a twist.

She believes it is a lesser-known play because it, too, is not unambiguously comic.

"The happy ending is a bit modern," said Irwin, noting that, while the play ends with a wedding, it is less of a "happily ever after" scenario and more uncertain.

In *All's Well*, Helena, whose late father was a famous doctor, uses her inherited arts to heal the ailing King of France. In return, she is granted the right to marry whoever she wants.

Helena is madly in love with Bertram, a newly-minted count, who will have nothing of her because she is below his social station.

Returning actor Warren Bain, who plays Bertram, said the character is a 19-year-old who refuses to obey the king.

"I don't like being told what to do," joked Bain.

Bruce Beaton, who plays the king, describes that character as an older man who envies the youth around him, even as he is deathly sick.

"He is offered a new lease on life, almost a magical new lease on life... and he is reborn."

The play examines honour, which for the king means the obedience of his subjects, said Beaton.

"People have different ideas as to what honour is," he added.

Along with the plays, the festival is adding three new initiatives this season, starting with the addition of a Wednesday matinee each week. The festival is also adding two pay-what-you-can previews, on Friday, July 8 at 7 p.m. for *Twelfth Night* and Tuesday, July 12 for *All's Well*.

Also new to the festival are "Tuesday Talks." At 6:30 p.m. each Tuesday, Farthing will offer a lively 15-minute introduction to the plays, discussing the story, the characters and themes of the play -- and maybe some backstage gossip.

The festival's Sunday Series, featuring local and emerging talent, also returns. Performers will include Brockville operatic stars Christopher Coyea and Alex Fleuriau Chateau, local choir Village Voyces, returning festival actor Daniel Giverin and the participants from the Young Artists Training Program.

Tickets are \$25 for adults, \$20 for students and \$80 for a season pass. Children 12 and under get in free. Performances run Tuesday through Saturday, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday.

More information is available by calling 613-925-5788 or at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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