

The play's the thing at Shakespeare festival

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PRESCOTT -- This summer, theatregoers can find both comedy and tragedy at the Prescott amphitheater.

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival kicks off this weekend, with the opening of Twelfth Night on Friday. The play will be balanced by a second production of All's Well that Ends Well.

"It's not something I thought to pair with Twelfth Night," said Ian Farthing, artistic director for the festival, about the lesser known All's Well. "It's a beautiful story. It's like a fairy tale."

This is Farthing's sixth summer as director for the festival, where he's also acted several times. He'll be doing both again this season, as he takes on the character of Malvolio in Twelfth Night -- a dream come true.

"The role was on my bucket list," he said.

"It's a part that I really think is very well suited for him," said the play's director Craig Walker.

Walker has been involved with the festival for six years, either directing or acting or both. While he oversees Twelfth Night, Cornwall native Janet Irwin takes on All's Well.

"I thought it was a really intriguing script," she said, adding that she was an assistant director for a National Art Centre production of the play. "It's not a play that gets shown often, it's not one of the ones that everyone knows."

Rehearsals for the two productions began a couple of weeks ago, with the cast holding a role in both -- except for Farthing and one other actor.

"We have a very strong cast," said Irwin. "They're able to keep two plays in their head, which I think is remarkable."

She said the Irish accent Walker asked for in Twelfth Night only makes rare appearances in All's Well, proving the actors are able to keep them separated during practice.

But that doesn't mean it's not difficult.

"It always is a bit of a challenge, but also a bit invigorating," said Walker, a professor at Queen's University.

"It's really tricky because you have to find people who are right for both roles," added Farthing. Thankfully, he has plenty to choose from -he said he receives roughly 800 submissions from actors hoping to catch a job at the festival every summer.

The season begins Friday with Twelfth Night, and the productions alternate until mid-August. A full schedule, including the Sunday Series of various productions, is available at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

With a wide open outdoor venue (and a church as backup in case of rain) and condensed versions from the famous playwright, Farthing said they remain committed to their goal of keeping the festival family-friendly.

"We want to encourage families to come out for it," he said. "We want to get them excited about . . . theatre at a young age."

The addition of Tuesday presentations before the production will also make Shakespeare more accessible, said Farthing. He called the pre-curtain talks a "dummy's guide to the play".

He's hoping for an increase in attendance this year, after last year's record of 4,700 visitors throughout the season; advance sales are already up 150% over 2010.

"I hope that's an encouraging sign for the summer," he said.

Irwin said she's looking forward to seeing her production on stage -when her job is done and the stage manager takes over to run the season -even though it means her favourite part of directing is over.

"Really just what I love is the rehearsal periods," she said. "It's stressful in a creative way. When that's the . . . work you love to do, you enjoy that kind of stress."

Walker said he's also loving the prep time, as he sees all of his ideas for the production come to life.

Farthing said he also enjoys the rehearsals as everyone works hard and laughs a lot, though it's a juggling act to balance being both actor and artistic director.

"I'm looking forward to being on stage in Prescott again," he said. "I enjoy the connection you get with live theatre . . . it's more satisfying."

* The Upper Canada Playhouse production of Weekend Comedy began Thursday and runs until the end of the month. The play follows two couples that accidentally book the same cottage for their vacation weekend away from it all and have to try and get along with their various opinions and pet peeves. Shows begin at 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, and at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. For more information or to book tickets, call 613-543- 3713 or visit [www.uppercanadaplayhouse. co m](http://www.uppercanadaplayhouse.co m).

* The Lost Villages Museum in Long Sault is hosting a collection of local art on Saturday, July 9. A variety of artists will display their work, including paintings, photography and jewelry for residents to check out.

* Festival Alexandria continues this weekend, with Eleanore Altman, Aaron Saloman and Terry Tufts taking the barn stage. The singer/songwriters will perform starting at 3 p.m. on Saturday. At the same time on Sunday, world music band Strada will be the festival guests. Tickets are \$20.

* Cornwall's teenagers are invited to a free screening of Star Trek: the Future Begins on Thursday, July 14, as part of an anti-smoking campaign.

The Eastern Ontario Health Unit is hosting the movie at Galaxy Cinemas as a way to promote films that don't include or promote smoking.

The movie starts at 5:30 p.m. and admission will be given out on a first-come, first-served basis.

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