

Impact Story: Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan

by
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Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance



SHAKESPEARE
SASKATCHEWAN
Summer is here!

*Bringing classics to the community:
Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan is a vital
piece of the province's artistic landscape.*

When the white tents go up on the western banks of the South Saskatchewan River, it only means one thing: the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan festival has arrived, and with it, summer.

“People start saying, ‘summer has officially started,’ when they see the tents on the riverbank,” said Will Brooks, the Artistic Producer of Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. “Because of that, the festival holds this wonderful place for the wider community in that it represents summertime.”

This summer will look a little bit different though, as the 2020 festival was cancelled due to COVID-19. As a staple for both the local arts community and theatre-goers alike, Brooks says they’re

working hard to be ready for whenever people are able to gather again.

With a rich and vibrant history, Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan dates back to 1985 when the festival was started by the first Artistic Director Gord McCall and a group of upstarts, many hailing from the University of Saskatchewan. Although the selected works of Shakespeare change over the years, Brooks says many things remain constant.

“It’s always been in a tent on the riverbank, and it’s always taken Shakespeare’s works and flipped them on their head a bit, setting them in different time periods or using current events,” he said. “During some of the early years

they did some really innovative work. They did a production of Romeo & Juliet and partnered with Robert Lepage where they split Romeo & Juliet into two languages. One family spoke Shakespearean English, and one family spoke very old French. That production got remounted and it toured across the country and went to Stratford.”

Brooks himself has been involved in the festival for many years, initially starting as an actor for the company. He took over as Artistic Producer in 2014.

One of the truly unique elements of the festival is that it marries classic theatre with a casual, comfortable experience. Brooks says this is the reason why the festival is so important, helping to bring new



Frame for new tent by Norseman Structures | Rendering of new amphitheatre. Credit Group2 Architects.



patrons to the theatre world.

“Because the festival is outdoors, it provides an opportunity for people to come to classical theatre without being afraid of it. Many people feel like theatre isn’t for them or that it’s foreboding because you have to dress up,” he said. “With us, we want people to wear shorts and sunglasses and drink a beer — there’s just nothing threatening about it. We are often the place where people get their first taste of theatre. They find out that there actually is something for them and then they become patrons of other theatres. So it’s got this unique sense of developing the patron community.”

The set-up of the tents also allows the audience a rare peek into the backstage world, and the audience sits very close to the actors, sharing a close physical space. Right now, Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan is also in the midst of a \$7 million project to redevelop their whole site. They’re looking forward to working with the new space once it’s safe to do so.

Beyond providing the community with a wonderful summer experience, Brooks says Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan has always been a bedrock for the arts community in Saskatoon, as it’s one of the longest contracts for actors in the province. When COVID-19 is

over, he says it will be important that the community comes out to show their support.



Will as Horatio holding dead Hamlet (Matt Burgess) in 2002. Directed by Mark von Eschen, Set and Lighting Design by Stephen Wade, Costume Design by Beverley Kobelsky
Photo credit: Debra Marshall Photography.



“When it’s possible to do theatre again, we need people to attend shows. It’s going to be so crucial for us as an arts organization, and the arts in general, that people show up and get things back up and running as quickly as possible,” he said.

Overall, Brooks says theatre is unique because it happens in-person, leading to an intimate and memorable experience.

“You can’t record theatre and send it out. It happens in person and it’s about a communal experience. There is an actor and an audience member, and they share an experience. Bringing people together forms community and that’s why theatre is vital to creating a vibrant community. It gathers people together, they share something, and then they go off into the wider community with what they’ve learned.”



Cast of Comedy of Errors in 2019. Directed by Joshua Beaudry, Set design by Stephen Wade, Costume Design by Miranda Hughes. Photo credit: Debra Marshall Photography

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