

Taming of the Wild Outdoors

by Mark Lord, Qboro Contributor
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One of the primary concerns of performers who ply their craft in open air venues is the threat of tempestuous weather, frequently leaving them in “to be or not to be” mode until the very last moment.

Last Sunday evening, such thoughts were uppermost in the minds of Jason and Joy Marr, a married couple who founded the Hip to Hip Theatre Company, a Woodside-based nonprofit Shakespeare troupe scheduled to perform in Forest Park.

On-again, off-again downpours prevailed, and the performers found themselves, for only the third or fourth time in the group’s four-year history, having to cancel Sunday’s performance because of the weather.

The Marrs, he originally from Ohio, she from Maryland, met in 1997 while performing the bard’s work in Cleveland.

“We decided to start a family,” recalled Jason, “We had a baby who is now 2 and a half years old. We decided we really should start to set some roots here.”

Using the traveling theater that ran years ago under the auspices of the New York Shakespeare Festival as a model, the couple created their company, naming it after an expression lifted from “Comedy of Errors.”

“We wanted our name tied to Shakespeare and to the fact that theater is a collaborative art form,” said Jason.

The pair established an annual summer program of free Shakespeare performances, presenting “As You Like It” at two outdoor venues in 2007. In 2009, the group toured two full productions, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “Romeo and Juliet.”

This season’s plays, “The Taming of the Shrew,” a quintessential battle of the sexes, and “Macbeth,” a thriller focusing on a brave soldier who dares to tempt fate, have been playing in repertory, with most of the company’s members appearing in both.

The lone exceptions are the Marrs, who play sparring partners, the lead roles, in “Shrew.” “To be able to bring parts of our relationship onstage is wonderful,” said Joy, “There’s a level of trust. We have a similar sensibility. It helps our onstage relationship.”

Joy was pleased that the couple’s daughter sat through a recent performance of “Macbeth” when Jason subbed for an actor called away on a family emergency.

“I wanted her to play a Macduff child,” she said, referring to a young character in the play. “The logistics were just too complicated.”

The company’s members are all professional actors, ranging in age from 18 to 60-something; several have Broadway credentials. Experience comes in handy, as the actors must contend with challenging audibility issues outdoors, even when planes are not roaring overhead, as they sometimes are.

As a general rule, the actors perform without microphones. “The human voice makes a big difference in Shakespeare. The energy needed to be heard is the same energy needed to bring the characters to life,” Jason said.

Each performance runs 90 minutes, thanks to some judicious trimming, and this season, all are preceded by a 15-minute “Green Show,” consisting of period songs, dances and pantomime.

Viewers are encouraged to bring blankets and low chairs, along with picnic baskets to the troupe’s remaining performances, “The Taming of the Shrew” on Aug. 26 at the Voelker Orth Museum, 149-19 38 Ave. in Flushing at 7:30 p.m. and “Macbeth” on Aug. 29 at Socrates Sculpture Park, 32-01 Vernon Blvd. in LIC at 5 p.m. For further information, call (718) 729-8567.

