



Queens' Largest Weekly Community Newspaper Group

Free Shakespeare in the Park is Back for 10th Year



by Mark Lord, qboro contributor

It's a midweek evening in a shady grove in Central Park and a rehearsal is under way. A string tied around small pegs in the grass marks off the playing area, as actors take their places for a scene, while cast mates and offstage personnel sit or meander nearby. This is the world of Hip to Hip Theatre Co., a Queens-based troupe that specializes in the works of William Shakespeare, preparing for an upcoming production of "As You Like It," a pastoral comedy of love and mistaken identity. It's the same play the troupe presented in its inaugural season in 2007, and one of two chosen to help mark its 10th year of free Shakespeare in the park, kicking in on July 27 and running through Aug. 27 here, wrapping up the next day in the Bronx..

Hip to Hip has come a long way since. First time around, the group, modeled after the New York Shakespeare Festival's traveling theater, performed the play in just two outdoor venues. Within two years, a typical season had come to include a pair of plays, performed in repertory, and, over the years, more sites have been added.

This summer, in addition to "As You Like It," the troupe will present "Julius Caesar," that tragic tale of ambition, power and corruption that begs to be performed in an election year, in no fewer than 11 parks, including eight in Queens. As the group's performance schedule has become more rigorous, its roster of collaborators has grown. Numbering around 40 and referred to by Co-founder Jason Marr as "the team," they rehearse in Manhattan, which he said offers the best possible central location for all the participants.

"Every year we've expanded," he said. "We're now citywide," with performances scheduled for four of the five boroughs, as well as the Hamptons. The heart of the work, he said, remains in Queens, where Marr lives with his wife, Joy, the group's other co-founder, and their two young children, in an apartment in Bayside.

According to Marr, the company has added sets, wireless microphones and professional lighting to its productions; each year, he provides audiences with "something they haven't seen before." He promised another surprise is imminent. Many of the performers are members of the Actors

Equity Association, the professional actors' union. As they have since the group's inception, the actors receive stipends for their participation, Marr said.

Performing outdoors presents some special challenges, not the least of which is the omnipresent fear of inclement weather.

"I monitor the radar and make the calls," Marr said, letting everyone involved know the status of a performance. Bugs are another issue, causing Marr and company to keep a supply of insect repellent on hand at all times. And the actors have to work particularly hard at focusing themselves as well as their audiences. "There are so many distractions in the park," Marr said, from airplanes overhead to people playing basketball nearby.

Marr said the shows' vibrant costumes and sets help keep audiences attentive. And each play is abbreviated to 90 quick-paced minutes.

"We don't eliminate any characters or plot lines," Marr said, opting instead to "trim away language. We do it painstakingly. It kills us to cut anything."

One hour prior to each show, the group offers an interactive workshop for children ages 4 to 14 that gives them a chance to learn about the characters and situations and to create links with their own lives. Marr recalled a young girl who "was smitten" when she participated in a workshop two years ago. A few days later, she turned up with friends at another performance venue, part of her birthday celebration. "I was so touched by it," Marr said. "Children are a special part of future audiences." It's not only audiences who keep coming back; some of the actors do, too.

Chaunce Chapman, a native of Queens Village now living in Hollis, has returned for her second go-round, playing multiple roles in this year's productions. "There is such a friendly vibe here," Chapman said. Performing in open-air venues "makes it feel more like break than work. You can't help but be inspired."

Hip to Hip's programming is made possible in part with public funds from the city Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council. All performances and workshops are free and open to the public. Blankets or low chairs are recommended. The season begins on July 27 with "As You Like It," to be performed at the Unisphere in Flushing Meadows Corona Park beginning at 7:30 p.m, followed on July 28 by "Julius Caesar," in Crocheron Park, at 35th Avenue and Corbett Road, at 7:30 p.m. Start times on other days vary, with the complete schedule posted at hiptohip.org. Workshops begin one hour prior to curtain time.