

Free Shakespeare, Queens-style

By Tammy Scileppi

Are you dreaming of something different to do on a midsummer afternoon or evening that won't break the bank?

Then check out Free Shakespeare in the Park — in Queens. Hamlet, Macbeth, Ophelia and the rest of the gang will entertain you and your family and friends at 10 different parks around town, including Sunnyside Park and Flushing Meadows Corona Park, through Aug. 18. Why schlepp to Central Park in the heat when you can experience the bard's works close to home?

As Queens gradually adopts more Manhattan-style experiences, Hip to Hip Theatre Company celebrates its sixth year of producing free Shakespearean productions, while injecting a healthy dose of theatrical vitamins wherever it's needed.

Several years ago, actors Jason and Joy Marr of Sunnyside noticed that their borough was missing a valuable cultural element: Shakespearean theater, something Manhattan had plenty of. So, the husband and wife team got busy spreading the "S" name throughout their nabe and beyond.

It all started with their pint-sized Sunnyside theater production in 2006 of "As You Like It," and it just took off from there.

"We founded Hip to Hip in 2007, when we decided to have children and put down real roots in the Sunnyside area," said Jason Marr, who is artistic director of the company. He runs its day-to-day operations, including selecting the season, booking the venues in partnership with the city Parks Department, fund-raising, casting the plays, directing and sometimes acting.

A real-life Romeo and Juliet, the young couple met in Ohio doing Shakespeare back in the summer of 1997. "We were cast in the romantic leads in 'Twelfth Night,' and fell in love. We have done Shakespeare together ever since," said Jason Marr. They now have two kids: Sabrina and Axel, ages 4 and 1.

"It was our aim to share our enthusiasm for the plays of Shakespeare, and our love of the theatre, with our community," he said.

Joy Marr said, "There are so many things I love about Shakespeare. Despite being over 400 years old, the words are still fresh and exciting to interpret anew with each play we tackle. Through his amazing use of words and brilliant insight into human behavior, there are thousands of ways to play each role, which makes it so exciting to return to these plays as audience and actors, again and again, to see and explore new interpretations."

The thirtysomething's said their main goal is to offer free, professional, family-friendly cultural entertainment to the many theatrically underserved communities here.

"Last year, we had an attendance of roughly 4,400 over the three-week tour," Joy Marr said. "This year, because we'll be touring for four weeks and because of increased get-out-the-word

efforts, including partnering with New York City Council members in whose districts we perform, we anticipate drawing an audience of 5,500 or more.”

Free Shakespeare in the Park’s reach is truly boroughwide this year. “We tour two full Shakespeare productions, ‘Comedy of Errors’ and ‘Hamlet,’ covering every major geographical area, including the Rockaways,” said Jason.

The troupe

Hip to Hip has a company of 12 professional actors, seven based in Queens, who receive a small stipend “nowhere near commensurate with the amount of time and energy they commit to the plays,” said Joy Marr.

They are a mix of seasoned veterans and actors just getting started in the business, including three apprentices who are recent graduates of Marymount Manhattan College’s bachelors of fine arts theatre program, where Jason Marr is an adjunct professor of acting. He also juggles office work at a law firm in Manhattan.

This season, he will be busy directing “Comedy of Errors,” and playing small parts in it, while his wife plays the female lead in the play.

“I’ve split my time between producing, directing and acting,” he said. “Because we’ve brought in a guest director, I’ve also taken on the role of Hamlet; Joy will play Ophelia.”

Jason Marr’s television credits include, “Law & Order: Criminal Intent,” “Law & Order: SVU,” and “As the World Turns.”

Beyond Queens

The Marrs have always presented plays in Queens and formerly in Southampton. This year they’re actually adding another non-Queens stop to their tour: the LeFrak Organization’s new development in Jersey City: Newport. “We play these non-Queens venues as a source of income. And while the plays are free, we welcome donations.”

About a quarter of Hip to Hip’s funding comes from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts, administered by Queens Council on the Arts, and the other three quarters comes from individual contributions and foundation grants.

The costumes are designed by Nancy Nichols; she pulls them from a variety of sources. She builds some from scratch and some from her theatre company’s stock. The Marrs also rent from TDF Costume Collection at Kaufman Astoria Studios.

So, what do they like most about Shakespeare?

Above all, the Marrs have one goal in mind:

“Our approach with Shakespeare is to make the plays highly accessible — which they were for Shakespeare’s audiences,” said Joy Marr. “So, we go for vibrant characterizations, clarity of thought and embrace the audience as much as possible. Our productions are for Shakespeare lovers and those experiencing Shakespeare for the first time.”

Hip to Hip’s Free Shakespeare in the Park runs from July 25 to August 18. For a full schedule of plays, visit www.hiptohip.org.