

2012 REPORT FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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We not only did it, but we did it with style. Our 2012 season was our most ambitious to date. At its conclusion, I felt as I imagine a long distance runner feels upon completing a marathon, totally exhausted and totally exhilarated. I am happy to report that we achieved many of the goals we set for our sixth season of programming, and we made good progress towards the goals left unmet.

Our foremost goal was to build upon our program of "Free Shakespeare in the Park," and toward that end, we increased the reach of our programming, we enhanced the quality of our productions in a big way, and we solicited and won greater involvement from the community and the City of New York.



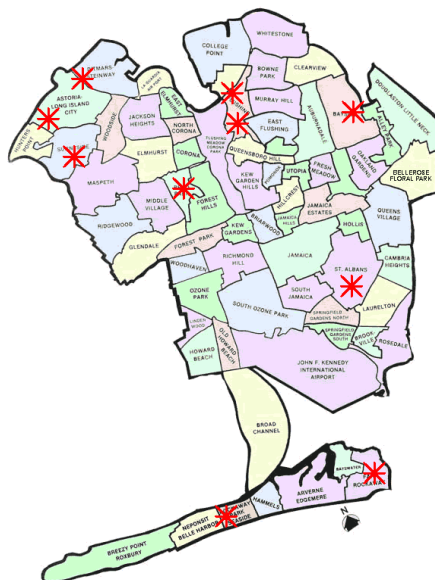
Hamlet at Gantry Plaza, photo by John Frisbie

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Jason Marr

FIVE NEW VENUES: As in prior years, we aimed to expand the reach of our programming while at the same time further developing the audiences of our mainstay venues in Queens and Southampton.

In early 2012, I sat down with Dorothy Lewandowski, the NYC Commissioner of Queens Parks, and I showed her a map of Queens County. On that map, I had marked little red stars in each of the 8 communities we toured our plays in 2011. As was my hope, the Commissioner noticed the absence of red stars in southern Queens. Dotty, as she insisted I call her, put me in touch with the park managers in that area, and after visiting the sites and sizing up the logistics, we nailed down two great new venues. Now, not only does the Commissioner of Queens Parks know who we are and what we are doing, but we can boast that we are covering every geographical area of Queens, New York City's most diverse borough.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Nina Szarkowski Jones
Daren Kelly
Jason Marr
Joy Marr
Katie O'Sullivan

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At the same time, we were approached by Vivian Carter, a loyal supporter from The Rockaways, which is a peninsula of Long Island. Many people do not realize the peninsula is located within the borough of Queens. Though Vivian was busy promoting her new book, *Rockaway Beach (Images of America)*, she tirelessly worked to solve our logistical challenges, the biggest of which was getting the acting company to The Rockaways, which is rather remote.



Photos by Mark Wyville

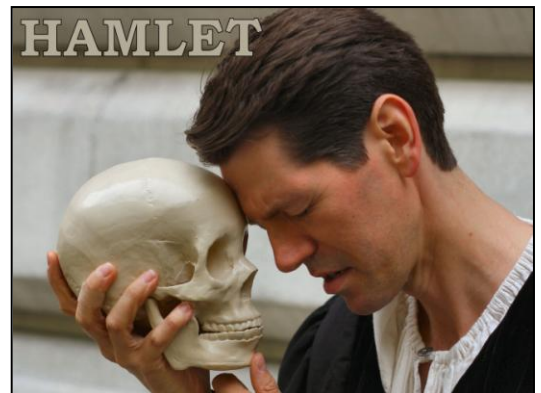
Thanks to Vivian's perseverance however, we found two excellent venues on either end of the peninsula, and we were very warmly received in both. Parenthetically, our hearts broke when we saw the aftermath of hurricane Sandy, which hit The Rockaways very hard. If our audiences were any indication of the spirit of the whole community, I know they will soon be back on their feet.

In addition, with an eye toward finding new avenues of income in the form of performance fees, an enthusiastic supporter put us in contact with The LeFrak Organization, a prestigious real estate developer that owns and manages LeFrak City, a 5,000-unit apartment complex in Queens, and Newport, a utopian 600-acre neighborhood of commercial, residential, and retail properties on the Hudson River waterfront in Jersey City. After some initial meetings, it was decided that we would do a trial run at Newport. I am thrilled to report that it was a big success. The Newport audience was one of our largest and most enthusiastic, and it is our hope to return there in the seasons to come.

Hence, in the summer of 2012, we toured *The Comedy of Errors* and *Hamlet* to twelve diverse park venues, and played to approximately 5,100 people, young and old, and of countless nationalities. This number would have easily exceeded 5,100 if it wasn't for the pesky forecasts of rain on nights that ended up being perfect for outdoor theatre. Alas, we have yet to figure out a way to control the weather, or to convince people that a 30% chance of rain is just that, a 30% chance :) When the forecasts were clear, our numbers beat our expectations.

THE PRODUCTIONS: As in prior years, both shows offered vibrant period costumes, sets, lights and properties, they featured a professional company of actors, they were geared to appeal to lovers of Shakespeare and to those experiencing Shakespeare for the first time, and, in the proud tradition of Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, both productions were family-friendly, free and open to the public.

Our biggest technical challenge has always been audibility: as our audiences have grown in size, so has our need for acoustic support. Our new Board Member, Nina Szarkowski Jones, lead the research in finding a feasible solution for our problem. We explored acoustic tents, sound boards and microphones, and each had to be weighed against our logistical limitations (i.e. multiple and diverse venues, short set-up and strike time, etc.).



Photos by Julian Voloj



Comedy of Errors, photo by Nina Jones

the need for more support staff to handle these new technical elements of production.

It was concluded that a sound system utilizing discreet wireless microphones would give us the best shot at guaranteeing our audiences wouldn't miss a word.

I proudly report that after a diligent fundraising campaign, we purchased a professional-grade wireless sound system, and put it to use. Even as we worked out the "kinks," many audience members shared their gratitude for the vocal amplification. This was a major step forward for us, even though it presented us with a whole new set of challenges, the most glaring of which was

Another way in which we enhanced the quality of our productions was by hiring a guest director. After a three-month search, we found the perfect director for our flagship production of *Hamlet*. David Mold, the chair of the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at Marymount Manhattan College, proved to be a perfect fit for Hip to Hip. He directed a stellar production, and his fresh ideas and years of experience added integrity to the company as a whole.



Comedy of Errors, photo by Nina Jones

The best gauge of our productions' effectiveness is the feedback we receive from the audience members. I am delighted to say the refrain was that this was our "best season so far." Take a look at this letter we received from a young audience member:

I am writing this letter to your company after attending your performance of *Comedy of Errors* at Lost Battalion Hall recreation center. I would like to commend the cast and director on a very excellent performance. It was evident that months of preparation and hard work had been put into the performance. My father, brother, and I really understood what you were saying, not only because your enunciation was excellent, but because the corresponding actions really helped us decipher what was going on where Shakespeare's language left us otherwise confused. You guys are certainly very dedicated and the cast had very good chemistry. I appreciated seeing such talent from a local group and on behalf of my family, would like to thank you for a nice night out.

Warmest Regards,
Vishal Balani, Age 13

Needless to say, feedback is extremely useful for an arts organization, and when that feedback is positive, it certainly feels good. However, more important than the praise is the confirmation that our programming is reaching its target audience.



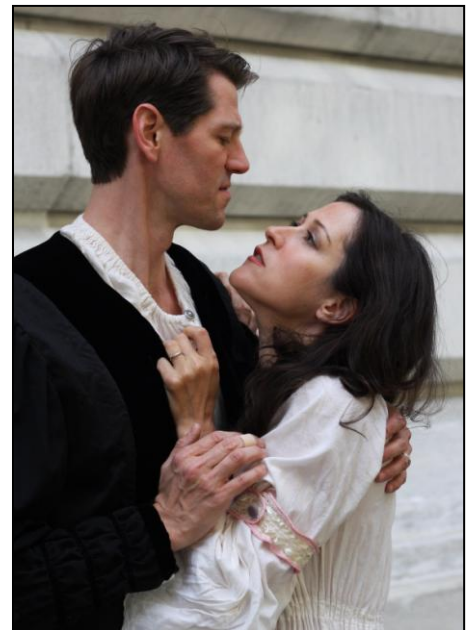
Hamlet, photo by John Frisbie

Our programming's success can also be measured by the amount of positive exposure it receives, and I am happy to report that our sixth season of "Free Shakespeare in the Park" received great coverage. We were again included in The New York Times' round-up of noteworthy summer Shakespeare in the City. We were featured in The Daily News, The Queens Tribune, The Times Ledger, The Queens Chronicle, and Queens Parent. In addition, we received positive press and free listings in many internet-based periodicals and blogs. Our most treasured bit of coverage was a feature story on NY1 (New York City's 24-hour cable news channel). The link to the story can be found on our website, and it is worth watching to get a firsthand sense of what we are actually doing in the community. In fact, it shows us in such a favorable light, that one would think it was a commissioned promotional video. Obviously, something in our formula is working.

FUNDING: In way of funding, we again won public money from Queens Council on the Arts, which administers monies from New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and New York State Council on the Arts. In addition, we expanded our base of support to include new private donors, foundation grant support, and, as discussed above, income from performance fees.

For the first time, we were awarded grants from the Davee Foundation and Partnerships for Parks, a program of City Parks Foundation and NYC Parks. Partnerships does not typically fund programs such as ours, but in the award notification they state: "Your dedication to providing free programming in parks and to underserved communities is really to be commended."

It was our hope to also win discretionary funding from New York City Council in 2012, and toward that end we lobbied six Council Members in whose districts we perform. Though we did not receive funding from their offices, they endorsed our programming and helped us get out the word and, in several cases, came out to see the shows. It is my understanding that this is the typical scenario for cultivating relationships with local politicians—a "getting to know you" period that may yield future funding.



Hamlet, photo by Julian Voloj



Comedy of Errors, photo by John Frisbie

OUTREACH: In the spring, we did a benefit performance as a part of the Astoria Park Music and Performance Festival, in support of the City's efforts to convert Astoria Park's historic diving pool into an amphitheatre. When completed, the amphitheatre would be an ideal venue for us, and it is in a park that we do not presently serve. We also launched two noteworthy initiatives in 2012: "Picnics for Patrons" and "Kids and the Classics"

"Picnics for Patrons" is exactly what it sounds like. Its goals are to enhance our audience's overall enjoyment of the theatre event and increase attendance by making it easy to "grab dinner" at the show. Board Member Katie O'Sullivan lead the pilot program, which included partnering with local food vendors to provide picnic items for purchase at select venues. The experiment went well for us, but not as well for the vendors, who did not find it immediately profitable. Moving forward, the key will be to either find vendors who are willing to grow the program with us, or to develop an "in-house" system of vending, though at first glance, the permitting process seems to be prohibitively cumbersome.

"Kids and the Classics" aims to provide opportunities for youth to be introduced to classic literature and performance, thereby enhancing their literacy, imagination and self-expression within an environment of team playing. Though this initiative is in its infancy, we have begun laying the foundation by sending out letters of introduction to English and Literature teachers in the local schools, and by tailoring our productions to be "kid friendly." It is our hope in 2013 to begin conducting interactive workshops for children during the 30 minutes immediately preceding the performances. These workshops will be geared to both introducing the children to the plays they will see, and to giving them the opportunity to themselves "play" with the language of Shakespeare.



Hamlet, photo by John Frisbie

CONCLUSION: Though we are still relatively small, we have grown exponentially over the past six years. As we head into our seventh year of programming, it will be crucial to continue making our case for larger amounts of public funding, as well as to continue finding new sources of private funding, so that we can stay true to our mission of bringing free quality cultural entertainment to underserved communities.

Planning is underway for our seventh season of "Free Shakespeare in the Park": the plays are being selected, the venues are being booked, the grant applications are being written, and the audiences are being developed. 2013 promises to be another exciting year for Hip to Hip Theatre Company.