

A Shakespearean love: Couple brings Bard to Queens parks

BY IRVING DEJOHN
DAILY NEWS WRITER

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These two thespians are the Romeo and Juliet of Sunnyside. Joy and Jason Marr are the founders of the Hip to Hip Theatre Company, a nonprofit group that performs free Shakespeare plays in parks throughout Queens.



The organization, in its fifth year, has assembled a paid troupe of actors for a three-week engagement that will visit nine different locations and run until Aug. 20. "I want to express something that is bigger than what can be expressed in our ordinary lives," said Jason Marr, 36, a native of Ohio. "There's something for everyone in these plays." Each night they alternate between stagings of the Bard's tragedy "Othello" and his comedy "Much Ado About Nothing," both directed by Jason Marr.

But the drama is usually contained to the stage, even though Jason Marr has to give pointers to his wife, who is one of 12 actors in the cast. "We have a great connection and we work really well together," said Joy Marr, 35, who is originally from Maryland.

That bond formed while the two were playing the lead roles in the play "Twelfth Night" in Ohio in 1997. Their chemistry on the stage sparked a real-life romance. "We just hit it off. When we met, it was like we knew each other forever," said Joy Marr. "We fell madly in love with each other," her husband added. "By the end of the summer, we were spending all of our free time together."

When the two moved to Queens, they wanted to share their love of classical theater with their adopted home, which they said is clamoring for performances that don't require a trip to Manhattan. "We definitely have developed a following," said Jason. "People seem to be hungry for it."

The group has seen a steady rise in the number of attendees each year. Joy Marr said her husband showed "vision" when he took the company from its humble beginnings of performing one play and visiting only two parks. Now they have an budget of about \$20,000 and perform for more than 4,000 people, they estimated.

"He really does have the noble aim to bring Shakespeare to Queens," she said.

Officials with the Queens Council on the Arts, which distributes state and city grants to Hip to Hip, applauded their work. "Hip to Hip is consistently highly lauded for the quality and accessibility of their performances," said Katie Tuss, arts fund coordinator. "They bring a high level of professionalism to the theater in the park scene in Queens."

The Marrs will celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary next month. Eventually they hope to add a full-time staff member and stage year-round performances.

Just don't expect any tragic twists of fate like the one that befell the leads of "Romeo and Juliet."

"I like to think that what we have is lasting," he said. "We're one of the comedies, not the tragedies," she joked.