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Parks to Parking Lots: All the City's a Stage

By [STEVEN McELROY](#)

"Don't I have a nice theater?" Stephen Burdman asked as he stood in a green field in Central Park near West 103rd Street on a recent Saturday afternoon. During a rehearsal break he was pointing out sites used in past productions by his company, New York Classical Theater.

"This was the heath in 'Lear,'" he said, and then, "This was the forest of letters in 'As You Like It.'" Ten minutes later Mr. Burdman, along with cast and staff members working on Molière's "School for Husbands," were huddled under a tree during a downpour.

So it goes for providers of outdoor entertainment.

Clouds loomed over Riverside Park in Manhattan the next day, but the stars were better aligned for the cast of this month's Hudson Warehouse production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." The weather was chilly but dry as the company rehearsed, and though every so often a dog and its walker traipsed across what stood for the stage, things went smoothly.

New York Classical and Hudson Warehouse are among a number of companies preparing free outdoor productions of classic plays — mostly Shakespeare — for performance this summer in parks from Inwood to the Battery in Manhattan, and in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, too. The smaller companies may find themselves competing for attention not just with the Public Theater's shows at the Delacorte in Central Park, but also with the Royal Shakespeare Company, presenting a five-play repertory at the Park Avenue Armory (where tickets are decidedly not free) as part of the Lincoln Center Festival.

"I try to think of it as a fantastic boon that there is continued interest in exploring Shakespeare's work," said Hamilton Clancy, artistic director of the Drilling Company, which offers Shakespeare in the Parking Lot (literally) on the Lower East Side.

Some other artistic directors had a similarly glass-half-full view of the crowded theatrical field. "Good

theater benefits all theater," said Judith Jarosz, a producing artistic director (with David Fuller) of Theater 2020. "If somebody on the Upper East Side goes to the Armory and has a positive experience, it's all the more possible they'll go to the park and see something else."

Jason Marr's feelings about the Royal Shakespeare Company's coming to New York from Britain are a bit more complicated.

"To be honest, as a theater artist, I'm always left feeling very torn about the projects that are of this scope and scale," said Mr. Marr, the artistic director of Hip to Hip, a Queens company. He acknowledged wanting to see some of that company's shows himself, "but at the end of the day, I feel that they're preaching to the choir," he said. "Sometimes these sorts of projects are for the culturally elite."

Mr. Marr's mission, similar to those of several artistic directors interviewed recently, is inspired by Joseph Papp, who started presenting Shakespeare more than 50 years ago and saw his work as anything but elitist.

"I always felt that we should travel," Papp is quoted as saying in "Free for All," the 2009 book that provides a history of the Public Theater through interviews with Papp and others. "I wanted to bring Shakespeare to the people, that was the whole idea. I had to reach the thousands of people who lived and died in their neighborhoods."

But today it can be tough to get even a free ticket to the Public's summer shows at the Delacorte. Fortunately, though, we live in New York, where there are myriad theatrical options, so in the coming months enthusiasts of the classics can try to check out the productions of the Public and the Royal Shakespeare Company, but can also find plenty of free alternatives, including an all-female "Henry V," one of at least three productions of that play (another involves a boat ride to Governors Island), and a whole lot more.