



Timeless, first-rate and free: outdoor Shakespeare

by Mark Lord, qboro contributor

A cool summer evening, a tree-lined park and the words of William Shakespeare make for a memorable combination, as exemplified by the July 26 opening night performance of “Measure for Measure,” a dark comedy being performed for the next three weeks by the Hip to Hip Theatre Company in repertory with the Bard’s “Henry IV, Part 1: The Prince and the Rebel.”

The two plays, marking the troupe’s 11th annual season of free Shakespeare In the Parks, will be performed 10 more times in Queens over the next two weeks, as well as several times elsewhere in the city, Southampton, LI, and New Jersey.



Last Wednesday in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, a group of about two dozen youngsters participated in the pre-show “Kids and the Classics” workshop, an introductory treat offered half an hour prior to each performance. Teaching artist Jacob Gordon, along with cast members Joshua David Scarlett and Emily Song Tyler, interacted with the pre-teens, who took their places on a makeshift playing area.

The session opened with the question, “Who was William Shakespeare?”

At the outset, none of the kids could answer, but, by the end, they not only knew who he was, they were conversing in fluent Shakespearean English — bandying about insults inspired by phrases from his plays.

In between, they learned about what it takes to put on a play and what the result would be if actors didn't respect each other. Lesson: It helps to be respectful.

As the main attraction got underway, the youngest members of the audience got front-row spots on the grass, close enough to touch the actors during the performance. On more than one occasion, they spoke directly to the cast, often inadvertently announcing the approach of other characters who were supposed to be in hiding!

The actors, performing yards from the iconic Unisphere, had to contend with the sounds of the dancing waters in the nearby fountains, casual onlookers who carried on cell phone conversations during the performance, and swarms of mosquitoes that sometimes stole the spotlight.

But all of that only added to the accessibility of the play, a wonderful introduction for young and, perhaps, old alike.

"Measure for Measure," like much of Shakespeare, remains as relevant today as it must have been 400 years ago, with its exploration of the dangers of placing power in the wrong hands.

The intergenerational, ethnically diverse cast of nearly two dozen (many of whom are members of Actors Equity, the professional actors' union) immerse themselves fully in their characters, even as they subtly interact with the audience from time to time. Some actors double or even triple up on their assignments and adapt commendably.

Under the tight direction of Owen Thompson, who keeps the action moving continuously in this intermission-less, 90-or-so-minute rendering, several performers stand out: Jason Marr, the company's artistic director, is Vincentio, the Duke of Vienna, who spends most of the play's running time disguised as a friar, the better to observe his surroundings; Joy Marr, as the chaste Isabella, who faces a difficult decision when her brother is sentenced to death; and Alexander Nero, Colin Wulff and Sam Leichter, who provide much of the comic relief. Brief musical interludes also prove entertaining, as do the colorful period costumes.

"Henry IV," a coming-of-age story that proves its lasting appeal as it asks the question, "What makes a good leader?," is a fine companion piece for the season.

The next Queens performance of "Measure for Measure" will take place at 7:30 p.m. tonight, Aug. 3, in Crocheron Park, at 35th Avenue and Corbett Road in Bayside. "Henry IV" next plays the borough at 5 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 6, in Socrates Sculpture Park, at 32-01 Vernon Blvd. in Long Island City. The pre-shows begin 30 minutes earlier. For the full schedule, visit hiptohip.org.

So, pack your blankets or low chairs, along with your picnic basket, and enjoy the shows!