

Small Town Shakespeare

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Tucked away in an alcove of trees, a few weeks out of each year, a sanctuary for theater provokes wanderlust in the most timid of dreamers. An outlet— for theater, expression, for human connection— reveals itself as a community's light. One that shows no signs of burnout.

The Flint Hills Shakespeare Festival of St. Marys has amassed itself an annual following that triples the 2,700 people who call the town home. Family-themed appetizers suffice ravenous crowds who await the main course: community theater.

Renaissance-themed games, rustic food choices, artists and craftspeople align a dirt path that twists inside woods on the outskirts of town, leading to an outdoor stage where the magic truly blooms. With each passing year, it gets bigger. It gets better. A triumph that can only flourish because of people that make it be. That is, a rural community flowing together to prove what it can offer brazen art culture in the modern world.

To be, or not to be

The tale begins in Wamego, slightly over 10 miles from the festival's base. St. Marys resident Ben Moats strolled downtown and idly entered the historic Columbian Theatre where the theater's director was openly meeting with the board. As circumstance would have it, Moats was offered to audition for the next play.

The Columbian quenched a thirst in Moats. Among other roles, he notably reoccurred as the Lion in in *The Wizard of Oz*. The theater also introduced him to technical crew member Eric Stevenson and director Tim Akers.

Their collaborative, imaginative spirits bred life to the idea of a Shakespearean sanctuary in St. Marys. With two high schools and a two-year liberal arts college, the town offered enough vibrancy to warrant a try.

A main concern shared by the three founders was that it would not just be a play, but an experience. Over the course of three nights, 600 patrons attended the first festival held at the St. Marys Public Golf Course, with the highlight being a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

That number only grew. Five-thousand fans experienced Shakespeare in St. Marys last year. According to Emilie Jordan, a local who acted in every play, the growth from year one to present is astounding.

"There's simply no comparison between our humble but enthusiastic beginnings and the recognition we've worked so hard to achieve as a vital community force since," she said.

After the second season, Stevenson and Akers ventured down other paths. Moats remained as organizer. It was then determined necessary to move to a larger area. A serene meadow on the north side of the St. Mary's Academy grounds became home to an outdoor amphitheater. The unpolished charm of Sir William's Hollow (its nickname) inspired ambitious dreams to build on.

Upon first hearing of the idea of a festival, Patrick Murtha, another local who acted in every production, believed that the event could be a hit. He also had misgivings.

"There is a great love in St. Marys for the art. There was no doubt in my mind that the festival would be well received by the community," he said. "Perhaps my true skepticism could be found in two questions: will the festival really become a reality and will it last more than a year or two?"

The production is now in its seventh season.

Be not afraid of greatness

Advertised as a “classical arts village festival, focused on William Shakespeare, his plays and his era in Europe” the event draws a crowd beyond those seeking medieval attraction.

“It adds a definite cultural dimension that’s a little higher level, and that’s not a bad thing,” Moats explained. “There’s plenty of other entertainment out there, but this is something on a more elevated plane.”

The Shakespearean model undoubtedly aids attendance. The idea is nothing fresh. Its charm is that of consistence.

“You know exactly what to expect. Because Shakespeare himself and his works are timeless, he is as good as you can get in the English language in terms of playwriting,” Moats affirmed.

Bringing a community together through creativity is the main drive. Those inspired are the makers of its success. For Jordon, it begins with Moats.

“[He’s] labored behind the scenes, and some years onstage too, to make every production possible long before the actors start rehearsing. His vision truly has made the festival a reality,” she said.

Andrew Clarendon, the current play director, took over in the third season, meticulously detailing a vision in each rehearsal, despite everyday obligations that steal his local actors away from him.

Murtha acknowledged the obstacle: “Summer is a time when schedules are loaded with a variety of extracurricular activities, from summer vacation to summer baseball to simply playing hooky from practice, it is a miracle that each year the play pulls together so well.”

Lend me your ears

All buildings, costumes and stage work is constructed voluntarily by those living and working around St. Marys. The festival committee spent ample time those first years tracking down vendors, but that has since reversed. Fifty-two booths were displayed last year.

Having to turn away demand is one way to maintain vision. Seeking craftspeople such as potters, weavers and leather-makers differ the Shakespeare Fest from other summer activities.

“It’s grown by word of mouth. We don’t go and hunt people down. There’s always just someone who steps into the need that’s there,” Moats said.

The event vows its allegiance to family-oriented fun. Games are enjoyed, novelties purchased and plentiful food is consumed by all ages. Offerings have included brick-oven pizza, lamb kabobs, familiar fair food like potato skins, and specialty drinks, including spiked coffee and craft beer. Business sponsors are the festival’s lifeline.

“We do whatever we can to move forward, but we definitely need the money sooner rather than later,” Moats said before addressing his plan to attempt corporate backing.

All the world’s a stage

Homegrown talent animates the productions. Most cast members are part of the community, although auditions are open to anyone willing to travel for rehearsals. Auditions typically kick off with open monologues in May. For Murtha, it is “the pistol shot at the beginning of the race.” Camaraderie is spread among the actors. An organic need to perform is what feeds their passions.

“For an amateur actor, the love of the theater is found principally, I think, in the love of entertaining people, in holding up a mirror to the world and saying, ‘This is what we look like,’” Murtha detailed. “People can connect with such a vision, and that vision at times can impact their lives.”

The actors spend extensive time researching characters. Jordon did as much when she portrayed her favorite role, Beatrice, in the 2013 production of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

“She’s arguably Shakespeare’s strongest and most compelling female character, infinitely lovable yet perfectly human,” she declared. “I tried to portray a Beatrice whom I’d want to have as a friend in real life.”

To thine own self be true

Lofty aspirations do not warrant stress in Moats, who believes it will all work out if fate intends it.

The Topeka and Manhattan markets are in the early stages of being infiltrated, but the Shakespeare Festival must make improvements to secure a place in Kansas history. Monumental plans are ahead.

Blueprints illustrate a magnificent sight. Towers will pillar into a crescent-stretch, rising over grass-tiered seating where an audience will await to receive actors on a grand wooden stage. Plans of slinking cobblestone paths and rustic-looking booths are intended to create a “simple, but classical” scene, Moats said, to evoke The Globe Theatre in London. It will take time, but all good things do.

Creating is the essence of life

This year’s production will be the festival’s first tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. The decision to perform comedies prior was no mistake. It caused recurring actors to hone their crafts and prep for more challenging roles, and invested an audience that now desires advanced depth.

“We want to show what we have to offer. We have a lot,” Moats said. “We want to really show our local culture as best we can and invite everyone around to come and join in.”

The air of magic dissolves along with the final bows. Costumes are stocked away for future use, the forest clears out, and all that lingers are phantom words penned by the inspiration for a town’s artistic awakening: “Parting is such sweet sorrow.”

The 2016 Flint Hills Shakespeare Festival will ascend on the second and third weekends of September. For more information, go to flintheillshakepspearefestival.com.