



The magical world of Stratford boasts an exquisite riverbank complete with romantic bridges, serene swans and abundant flower baskets.

Well, one other place: the magical world of Stratford, Ontario, home to the mighty Stratford Festival of Canada—in its 54th season and as strong as ever. First off, Stratford itself is another charmed spot with its delightful village, gorgeous riverbank and gardens, and four marvelous theaters: the world-renowned thrust design of the Festival Stage, the intriguing tennis court rectangular Tom Patterson Theatre, the jewel box restored Victoriana of the Avon and the intimacy of the Studio. Stratford and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival are the two largest theaters in North America, but the quality at Stratford, along with its beautiful surroundings, make it the No. 1 choice between them.

This season, featuring an astonishing 15 productions in constantly revolving repertory, was filled with impressive work. Naturally not everything is superb, and none of the work I saw this year was the equal of last season's truly revelatory account of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, one of the most exciting productions I've seen in the past decade. That said, much of the work this season certainly lived up to Stratford's world-class reputation.

The high points included three rarely produced masterpieces in masterful interpretations. Antoni Cimolino's account of Shakespeare's fascinating *Coriolanus* was exhilarating in its razor-sharp clarity and featured two magnificent performances from Colm Feore as the complex title character and Martha Henry as his ruthless mother. This was Shakespeare at his savage, volcanic best.

The remarkable Henry, one of the festival's treasures, was also the central element in Diana LeBlanc's subtly devastating production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, a play that still retains its ability to stun an audience. Aided by a fantastic supporting cast including Stratford stalwart Peter Donaldson and impressive newcomer Brian Hamman and a haunting design, this was strong and powerfully affecting work.

In a totally different vein, Brian Bedford's elegant production of Dion Boucicault's *London Assurance* was a total delight from start to glittering finish. Sumptuously designed by the legendary Desmond Heeley and blessed with a cast of witty buffoons, the evening was crowned by the deliriously over-the-top theatrics of Bedford as the foppiest of possible fops. Looking like a gilt-edged, bejeweled butterfly, this was an example of the kind of performance you just don't see anymore.

Not everything was stellar this season. Two of the Shakespeares were dreadful bores. A dull, sepia-toned *Much Ado*

About Nothing just sat there like an inert soufflé, and Leon Rubin's British Raj *Twelfth Night* was an embarrassment despite the majestic sight of Bedford's Malvolio rising above the Bollywood antics surrounding him.

There were also the slight pleasures of the summer's two crowd-pleasing musicals, *Oliver!* and *South Pacific*, which seemed deter-

mined to rob these two works of their dark, dramatic souls. Even with Feore's oily Fagin, the passionately sung Nancy of Blythe Wilson and Santo Loquasto's atmospheric designs, this was an awfully cute look at the Dickensian underworld. *South Pacific* was beautifully designed and featured yet another perky turn by Stratford's perpetual ingenue, Cynthia Dale, but aside from Bruce Dow's bombastic yet touching Luther Billis, this was one of those accounts of the piece where everyone is so happy and energetic that they seem to treat such important plot points as racism and World War II as pesky irritations just getting in the way of their fun.

Still, any theater experience that can begin with a walk alongside an exquisite riverbank complete with romantic bridges, serene swans and abundant flower baskets followed by entering into as fully realized a world as Peter Hinton's production of John Webster's splatter classic *The Duchess of Malfi*—featuring a black-on-black realm of leather, blood, nudity, dismembered limbs, flickering candles, deceit, murder, satin and skulls (along with some of the darkest, wittiest poetic dialogue ever written)—is one terrific way to spend an evening.

I can't wait for next season. **JO**

For more information about the SHAW FESTIVAL visit www.shawfest.com. For more information about the STRATFORD FESTIVAL OF CANADA visit www.stratford-festival.on.ca.

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