

Bag&Baggage Theatre Company *continued from front page*

of performers would arrive in small towns around the state with everything they needed to put on a show in their “bags and baggage...” (hence our company name, which comes directly from Shakespeare’s great pastoral comedy *As You Like It*).

The company quickly earned a reputation for artistic quality,



Bag&Baggage Artistic Director Scott Palmer.

affordability and a very quirky sense of humor. In 2007, the company was approached by Denzil Scheller, the owner and operator of the then soon-to-be opened Venetian Theatre. Originally built as a vaudeville stage, and used as a movie theatre throughout the 1980s, the Venetian had been refurbished by Denzil in partnership with the City of Hillsboro. Now a state-of-the-art, 400-seat performing arts theatre, Bag&Baggage is proud to call the Venetian their primary performance venue. Currently they sell approximately 15,000 tickets to their productions each year.

With a reputation of producing highly inventive, original, and provocative shows, Bag&Baggage follow a standard yearly schedule, opening each new season with an outdoor summer Shakespeare event at the Tom Hughes Civic Center Plaza. Next, they return to the Venetian for four consecutive shows beginning in September with an American classic, followed in December by a holiday themed production, then a major literary adaptation of Shakespeare in March and, finally, closing their season in May with a classic of English drama.

“We focus on the classics-titles

and writers that people know and were forced to read in high school,” says Palmer. “We try to reinvigorate and reinvent those classics in a modern, provocative way. We look at these pieces of work as living literature, not a museum piece. We believe Shakespeare has something to say to modern audiences and that theatre should provoke strong feelings.”

Palmer, a native of Hillsboro, was the founding Artistic Director of Bag&Baggage. He has directed and produced critically acclaimed theatrical productions across the globe. As the Artistic Director of Glasgow Repertory Company, he produced an earlier version of *Lear*, which was critically acclaimed. Bag&Baggage’s production in Hillsboro will be the North American premier of Palmer’s adaptation.

“We’re very excited to bring this to the Venetian,” says Palmer. “This is a version that has rarely been produced any place in the world. This production is very representative of the kind of work we do.”

The story of the mad king and his faithless daughters told by William Shakespeare in *King Lear*, is in fact, a much older tale. Shakespeare relied on a number of older sources for his play, including the anonymous play *The True Chronicle History of King Lear and His Three Daughters* which was published and performed 12 years before the first recorded production of Shakespeare’s sweeping political tragedy.

Palmer explained that Shakespeare adapted his version of *King Lear* from those earlier classic plays, creating his own massive production with numerous additional characters and subplots.

Palmer returns to this original source material as the inspiration for his adaptation “I originally adapted the play in 2003,” said Palmer. “We’ve



Kevin Connell as Lear playing at the Venetian Theatre in Hillsboro, March 6-23. Photo courtesy Casey Campbell Photography.

gone back to the original scripts and made the relationships between Lear and his daughters the heart of our story,” says Palmer. “We’ve created a small, drawing room, family tragedy. Some of this script has not been performed on stage, anywhere in the world, for over 500 years.”

The other sources Palmer used were Geoffrey Monmouth’s 1135 text *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Raphael Holished’s *Chronicles* in 1577, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* 1590 and the later, Georgian-era adaptation *King Lear’s Wife* the nearly completely forgotten playwright Gordon Bottomley.



Stephanie Leppert as Cordelia and Kevin Connell as Lear. Photo courtesy Casey Campbell Photography.

Palmer’s *Lear* has a cast of only five actors who play King Lear, his three daughters (the beloved Cordelia and her less-favored sisters Goneril and Regan) alongside the nearly forgotten character of Perillus (featured in the original

sources) who is Lear’s foster son and was the inspiration for Shakespeare’s character Kent. *Lear* has many of the original storylines from Shakespeare’s original, but is much more focused on the intimate family dynamics between Lear and his daughters as they grapple with the implications of their father’s madness and the chaos it creates within their lives and the kingdom.

The many subplots around Edmund and Edgar have been cut, replaced with snippets of a range of original materials and texts inspired by Shakespeare.

“It’s like a jigsaw puzzle,” says Palmer. “There are all of these amazing pieces of text, snippets of long forgotten poetry and verse, all of which influenced and shaped Shakespeare’s tale. I love the challenge of putting them back together and seeing what kind of new picture will be made.”

Palmer also mentioned another unique aspect of Bag&Baggage’s *Lear*. Their production will feature an original score, composed by Taylor Neist and performed live by members of Bridgetown Orchestra at each performance.

“There are so many places to look for Shakespeare’s inspiration, and so much incredible and interesting material out there, and that is all before you start adding in live music and an original score,” says Palmer.

Hopefully, now that more Vernonians have heard of Bag&Baggage, locals will accept the invitation and make the trip to Hillsboro to experience live theater at the Venetian Theatre for themselves.

The Venetian Theatre and Bistro is located at 253 E. Main Street in Hillsboro. Tickets available at Bagnbaggage.org or call 503-345-9590.

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