

Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Park puts new spin on old works

By Anoushka Parnerkar, For The Pitt News

Baguettes, wigs and hip-hop aren't usually what come to mind when 17th century English playwright William Shakespeare is mentioned. But Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks is breaking out of the norm with a quirky retelling of the classic playwright's well-known works.

PSiP's most recent spring production, "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) [Revised]," is a 97-minutes comedic interpretation of all 37 Shakespearean plays, including "Romeo and Juliet," "Macbeth," "Othello" and "Hamlet." The play, which the Reduced Shakespeare Company wrote in 1987, is PSiP's first non-Shakespeare original play in its first indoor venue during the springtime — as opposed to their typical late summer plays.

The show premiered last Wednesday, and will run until Saturday at the Threadbare Cider House in Pittsburgh's Spring Garden neighborhood. The event is ticketed and all attendees are required to be masked and vaccinated. The company also employed a COVID-19 safety manager, Skylar Rella, who ensures that all pandemic guidelines are followed.

Charles "Chuck" Beikert, who directs the show and has been with the company for seven years, said while PSiP typically sticks with plays that are written exclusively by Shakespeare, they decided to go with this play written by the Reduced Shakespeare Company.

"However, the company has made its own changes to the script, hence the addition of the words "[Revised]" to the title of the play," Beikert said. "They have incorporated quirky musical scenes, and niche Pittsburgh comedy, and have even integrated themselves into the script."

The play's three-person cast includes artistic director Jennifer Tober, along with actors Aaron Crutchfield and Charles "Stoney" David Richards, who each play themselves and rotate through nearly all of Shakespeare's characters with a satirical twist.

The Threadbare Cider House is an ex-industrial warehouse now converted into sleek and stylish breweries serving up house-made ciders, locally distilled whiskey and pizza. Beikert said it was a perfect place for the company's first indoor production.

"It's not outdoors. It's indoors, it's in a hip place ... this threadbare joint over in a spring garden spot," Beikert said. "It's a cool place, a repurposed light industrial building. So I dig that kind of stuff."

Tober, the founder of PSiP as well as a producer, actress and artistic director, wanted to add a second show to the company's lineup for the year.

"We've done things here before and we've just loved it. And so we decided that it was time for us to add a second show, every year, instead of just doing one show a year," Tober said.

Beikert said he sees the production as the perfect way for the company to grow beyond their current sites in Pittsburgh parks.

"For a while, I have been quietly hopeful that they would grow and expand," Beikert said. "That's how it goes. If you, if you perform in more than one park. You're performing on more than one day, you're reaching different people. If you go to a different type of venue and you perform a different kind of show, you're reaching even more people and it's all in line with what you want to do with the company."

Judy, an audience member from nearby Forest Hills, said she thought the play was amusing.



Image courtesy of Catherine Welsh Aceto

Members of Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks perform "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged) [Revised]."

"It was fun. It was clever," she said. "And, yet it is Shakespeare all the way through."

Tober said she worked with each of the actors and the production team prior, and hand-picked them for the production.

"I asked Chuck Beikert to direct and then Stoney and Aaron to be in it with me. And we took it from there," Tober said.

While Tober said it was easy to find her ideal cast, putting on the production was challenging.

"Complete works are so prop and costume heavy. I'm thinking maybe we'll just do a rehearsed stage reading next time where we can read the script," Tober said. "The script was a daunting task too. To learn the combination of the contemporary language and then the Shakespeare language. Wait, when, how does this all dovetail together? That was really hard."

Beikert said PSiP's reopening was a success with the opening night and evening performances completely sold out. Following the COVID-19 pandemic-induced break, Tober said the company is just glad to be back together.

"You know, being able to have fun and to perform in front of people," Tober said. "It's just, it's the best feeling in the world."

Tober said one of the most enjoyable aspects of making these plays is the collaborative aspects shared between members of the production, especially for new interpretations like this one.

"It's just so much fun to think that we had this group of great people and everybody has his or her or their own job," Tober said.

"Together, we create this collaborative piece of art that hopefully entertains and educates and builds community. It's just such a great feeling to think we're doing this."