

Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks announces 'Cymbeline' for 16th season

By MJ LaRocque, Staff Writer

Two women stood in the middle of a bar playing an improv game where they created a new Shakespeare play they called "The Sisters of Atalanta." The two acted as a father and his boss, trying to reach a marriage agreement between the man's daughter and a pile of sand.

The theatrics were part of Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks' Valentine's improv game night in Bloomfield last Tuesday. Celebrating its 16th season in 2020, the organization performs Shakespeare for free in City parks, including Schenley Park in Oakland, Arsenal Park in Lawrenceville and Frick Park in Squirrel Hill. Each autumn since 2005, the company presents one play during four September weekend afternoons.

The goal of Tuesday night's fundraising event was to create a Shakespearean-style comedy by marrying two characters at the end. To win the game that night, judges awarded points for crossdressing, giving a good aside and declaring a toast among others actions characteristic of Shakespeare's comedies. But before the games began, Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks founder Jennifer Tober kicked off the evening by announcing their fall show, "Cymbeline."

According to the Royal Shakespeare Company, "Cymbeline" is set in Britain on the brink of disaster. Its queen, Cymbeline, is at her wits' end after the death of her children, while the only heir, Innogen, marries her love, Posthumus, in secret. A power-hungry figure plots for the murder of the queen and heir. Posthumus is exiled and schemes to have Innogen murdered. Innogen discovers these plots and disguises herself as a man fleeing Queen Cymbeline's court.

Jonathon Dreatr, a 1991 Pitt alum, attended PSiP's event as a lover of Shakespeare after studying theater arts. He said he has gone to PSiP productions in the past and loves what the actors can do with a script. However, he was especially excited to see what they could do without one Tuesday night.

"I came because these are all really good actors and I like to see them do improv," he said. "Because usually you see them doing Shakespeare and now they get to play with that idea and show off their acting skills, which is very entertaining."

When Tober founded Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks in 2005, she said she started the company not because there was a lack of Shakespeare in the area but simply because it's what she wanted to do. Tober said she wanted her work to be something she loved so she decided to start a company that would perform Shakespeare for free.

"As a producer and the artistic director, I really want to level the playing field to make more equality for our audiences," she said. "Theater is not just something rich people can go to and that you can do theater and you can enjoy theater anywhere at any time."

This year's stage director is Jeffery Chips, 36, who has worked as an actor and director for PSiP on and off since 2006. In the past 15 years, Jeffrey has performed, directed and/or produced 30 productions of Shakespeare's plays. He said he is thrilled to return to PSiP and finds Shakespeare's work as literature that needs to be performed, not merely admired.

"I approach Shakespeare in general as something that is very urgent," he said. "It's not something you put on a mantel and admire, it's not a museum piece."



Courtesy of Catherine Aceto

The Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Park group stages an improv performance called "Sister's of Atlanta."

Looking back to when he first saw a performance of "Cymbeline," Chips said he finds it to contain a multitude of disjointed scenes, to the point where it is difficult to recall the entire plot because so much is happening at any given time. As the director, he said he plans to bring these elements together to challenge the notion of what a happy ending by Shakespeare looks like.

"['Cymbeline' is] really kind of full of conflict, full of emotion and full of extraordinary challenges that people are going through," he said. "Every moment that any character is on stage there is a sense of life or death stakes."

Among one of the only non-PSiP members, Nathaniel Brodsky, 24, from Shadyside went to PSiP's event because he likes Shakespeare, though he was unaware that they would be announcing their fall show. He knows little about "Cymbeline" but described the play as a different kind of Shakespeare.

"Jealous lovers, a Roman god randomly appearing on the stage, a girl dressed as a boy, dying and coming back to life, thinking her husband is dead and realizing he's not dead," he said. "Lots of weird Shakespearian things."

In order to keep their performances free, PSiP does a series of events throughout the year. One such fundraiser is the celebration of Shakespeare's birthday for a week in April. The festivities begin on Sunday, April 19, with a tribute from Mrs. Shakespeare, performed by 1989 Pitt alum Yvonne Hudson, at the Shakespeare Statue on Forbes Avenue. Following her tribute, there will be a celebration under Schenley Plaza Tent with birthday cake and a microphone for people to recite Shakespeare.

Last year's fundraising went to producing an all-female version of "Julius Caesar" last summer. Harper York, 41, a Lawrenceville resident, acted with PSiP for the first time during their 15th season as part of that production of Julius Caesar. York said that when she moved to Pittsburgh six years ago, PSiP was still fairly new and she was starting her own company, Pittsburgh Classic Players, in Hazelwood. York said she joined PSiP because she wanted to support other actors.

"That's what I love about being an actor, is being part of [a group]," she said. "So when I come to actual performances and rehearsals, anything I can do to support the other people, even if it's not my own character work, is something I really love."

Though the plays take place outdoors, preparing for them is no walk in the park, according to Sharon McCune, 49 of South Hills. McCune, who first performed with PSiP in "Julius Caesar," said she was particularly surprised by the emotional toll of playing a male character.

"The mental exhaustion that came with doing that play, I was not prepared for. Because even if you have a lead ... it still did not occur to me the emotional toll it would take," McCune said. "Most of the time, and we all know this, women don't have parts like that, we don't have a Hamlet."

McCune, who also was a part of an all-female production of "The Tempest" in 2019, said she was surprised at how popular all-female casts have become recently. According to McCune, women have always been actors, but only getting recognition now because they are playing male parts.

"I get it but I don't get it. Why is it such a big deal that it's all female? So what?" McCune said. "We don't go off the deep end when it's an all male show because they're almost always all male. So who cares? Why is it such a huge deal? Women are suddenly playing Othello and Caesar and Prospero and Hamlet, so what?"