

Hip to Hip brings outdoor Shakespeare to Queens

by Kristen Guglielmo, associate editor Aug 10, 2023



Theater lovers needeth not spend hundreds on a Broadway ticket to see a performance, or wait hours on line to secure a discounted or free pass.

Hip to Hip Theatre Co., now in its 16th year, is touring free Shakespeare in the Park performances across Queens, Staten Island, Long Island and New Jersey, through Aug. 26.

Queens locations include Crocheron Park, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Gantry Plaza State Park, Cunningham Park, Socrates Sculpture Park, Sunnyside Gardens Park and the Voelker Orth Museum.

Audience members are encouraged to bring foldable chairs and picnic blankets, though some locations will provide their own seating.

The two shows in the tour's rotation are "The Tragedy of Richard II," directed by Hip to Hip's founding director, Jason Marr, and "The Comedy of Errors," directed by Hip to Hip Co-founder Joy Marr. The same cast of actors performs in both shows.

Thirty minutes before each performance, Hip to Hip holds an interactive workshop for children ages 5 to 12, called "Kids & the Classics." The workshops, which are written and directed by Antonia Cruz-Kent, give children a preview of the story and help to create links between the text and their own lives through games and close reading.

At a performance of "The Tragedy of Richard II" at the Voelker Orth Museum on what was expected to be a rainy evening, only one child was in the audience — a young girl named Marina. The actors still engaged with her, introducing themselves in character and creating a mini workshop — that somehow

thoroughly explained the intricacies of iambs, the two-syllable lyrical measurement — just for Marina's amusement.

Though the Bard is known for his extravagant wordiness, the theater company makes "The Tragedy of Richard II" easy to follow and enjoy, with the performance being only 95 minutes long.

In a press release, director Jason Marr said of the play, "Imagine an insurrection bringing a model of government to the brink of collapse. Though this sounds like recent political events in America, it was England in the late Middle Ages. Written entirely in verse, 'Richard II' explores timeless themes of power, pride, family and identity. Think 'Game of Thrones' with rhyming couplets."

Marr's plot comparison to the HBO series is not far-fetched. The tragedy focuses on the titular character, played by Joy Marr, after he banishes his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, played by Katie Fanning, from England. Bolingbroke later returns after his father's death, with a plan to overthrow Richard II and lay claim to the throne.

The most notable parts of the performance come from Marr and Fanning, who play off each other brilliantly and often bring a touch of humor to their tone and body language for a tinge of comedic relief. Both actors use their talent to make the audience root for the otherwise unlikable, entitled, power-hungry royals.

Other standout performers include Chaunce Chapman, who plays multiple roles, offering a huge range of comedic and dramatic talent, and Cruz-Kent as the Queen, who has a number of scene-stealing moments in the second half of the play.

Overall, the performance was an amazing take on a Shakespearean classic. Seeing it performed in the Voelker Orth Museum's garden, a grassy, floral and fresh environment, is something special in itself.

There is something so quintessentially Queens about watching a group of talented actors perform Shakespeare outdoors, ignoring the bugs flying around, the chatter from passersby on the street, the car horns honking and the planes that seem to fly overhead every 20 minutes.

It would be remiss to not see it in person, especially at the free price tag. Donations, however, are accepted and encouraged.

The remaining Queens Shakespeare in the Park performances are on Aug. 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23 and 24 at various times and locations. For more information, visit hiptohip.org.