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Summer in the borough means Shakespeare

By Kevin Zimmerman

If it's summer in Queens, then the borough's parks are once again filled with free Shakespeare, courtesy of Hip to Hip Theatre Co.



Now in its eighth season, the Woodside-based theater group — founded by husband-and-wife acting team Jason and Joy Marr — kicks things off July 23 at Flushing Meadows Corona Park with “Cymbeline.”

One of the bard's later works, “Cymbeline” may not have the name recognition of a “King Lear” or “Macbeth,” but it fits nicely into Hip to Hip's mission of balancing a silly comedy with something more dramatic.

“There is definitely a dark side to it. But it's similar to the dark side of a fairy tale,” Jason Marr said. “And we had a decision to make. Do we start recycling titles or do we begin working through the canon?”

This year's silliness comes by way of “Two Gentlemen of Verona,” which has its first performance July 24 at Crocheron Park in Bayside.

Considered by scholars to be Shakespeare's first full-length play, “Two Gentlemen of Verona” tells the story of the foolish way people in love usually act. Hip to Hips plans on staging the comedy in the classic Commedia dell'arte style, including the use of stock characters in masques.

The titles may be new, but at least one encore from last summer is on tap, the Kids and the Classics program.

Offered 30 minutes prior to each performance, the workshops geared for children include games and word play to help the younger audience members get a better grasp of the language and story line.

But the program earned praise from the older audience members as well.

“We had a lot of good feedback from parents that they enjoyed the opportunity to brush up on their Shakespeare, too,” said Marr.

During the 2013 season, almost 500 kids received a certificate after completing the course, said Managing Director Guy Ventolieri.

Ventolieri, who oversees the pre-curtain children's program, plans on tinkering a bit with the format after making changes on the spot in 2013.

“Last year we got the older kids to work with us and help the younger ones,” Ventoliere said. “When you have a 5-year-old and a teenager show up, you have to do that.”

Another change on tap for this year includes the addition of a welcome tent, flags and sandwich boards advertising the show at park entrances, all of which will create a festival-like atmosphere, the organizers hope.

“It will create a cohesion to the event,” Marr said. “The audience will feel they are part of something.”

The experience will be more than that of just attending a play, Ventoliere said.

“It’s an event,” Marr said.

Schedule:

“Cymbeline”

July 23, 7 p.m., Flushing Meadows Corona Park

July 26, 7 p.m., St. Albans Park

July 30, 7 p.m., Voelker Orth Museum

Aug. 1, 7 p.m., Sunnyside Gardens Park

Aug. 3, 4:30 p.m., Socrates Sculpture Park

Aug. 7, 7 p.m., Crocheron Park

Aug. 9, 7 p.m., Gantry Plaza State Park

Aug. 14, 7:30 p.m., Cunningham Park

“Two Gentlemen of Verona”

July 24, 7 p.m., Crocheron Park

July 25, 7 p.m., Lost Battalion Rec Center

July 31, 7:30 p.m., Cunningham Park

Aug. 2, 7 p.m., Gantry Plaza State Park

Aug. 6, 7 p.m., Flushing Meadows Corona Park

Aug. 8, 7 p.m., Sunnyside Gardens Park

Aug. 10, 4:30 p.m., Socrates Sculpture Park

Aug. 13, 7 p.m., Voelker Orth Museum