

Hip to Hip Theatre Co. presents Shakespeare at parks across the borough

By Kevin Zimmerman

On a rainy Monday evening in April, Joey Lozada slipped into an L-shaped rehearsal room on the 12th floor of Manhattan's Pearl Studios and frantically looked for shelter from the storm. As he ran around the space flailing his arms and bemoaning the fact that "neither shrub nor bush" was in sight, theater directors David Mold and Jason Marr broke into hysterics. The crazier Lozada acted, the louder the two men laughed. "Man, you've got the biggest voice," Marr said.

Cut to another rainy night last week at Sunnyside Gardens Park and Lozada repeated that inane search for a hiding place but instead of just showing off his vocal skills, the young actor had the benefits of props, costumes and fellow thespians to round out his manic scene as the jester Trinculo in Hip to Hip Theatre Co.'s production of "The Tempest."

Shakespeare performed in a park setting is as much a part of summer in New York as tanning beneath the Unisphere or riding the A train out to the Rockaways.

And for the seventh summer, Queens-based Hip to Hip plans to do its part by bringing the Bard to the borough with rotating performances of "The Tempest" and "Love's Labor's Lost" at 10 parks through the third week of August. Marr, who performs double duty as actor and director for "The Tempest," started Hip to Hip with his wife Joy after the two actors grew weary of the bus and truck tours and wanted to stay home and raise a family. The couple settled in Sunnyside. Acting gigs in the city between their day jobs sated the two for a while, but eventually they gave in to their desire to put on a show for the neighborhood.

"My expectation was it would be a diversion for us and keep our hands in the theater," Marr said. "But that first year, there was an overwhelmingly positive response and we were warmly received. But I had no idea it would ever come to this."

And this has become a major production involving more than a dozen actors, along with crew members, interns, wardrobe personnel, set designer, assistant director and, new this year, educators. After receiving a grant, Hip to Hip has added a pre-show program titled "Kids and the Classics." It consists of about 30 minutes of theater games and activities geared toward the under-12 set to help them enjoy the show a little more.

Before last week's final dress rehearsal at Sunnyside Gardens Park, high school drama teacher Caitlin Cassidy, teaching artist Kathy Adely and actors Andrew Benowich, Christina Pagan and Dawn Clarke do a quick run-through of "Love's Labor's Lost"'s pre-show program while the director of the kid's component, Guy Ventoliere, who also serves as the company's managing director, watches.

The performers read through their lines, then stop and redo the exact scene but this time in modern English.

Another game in this show before the show includes splitting participants into two groups where one bunch plays the groundlings, those ruckus audience members in the cheap seats, and the other half takes on the roles of performers. As groundlings shout and point, the actors have to maintain their composure. All of this unfolds in front of a set of flats — canvas and wood frames used in building the sets — decorated with pictures of words Shakespeare is credited with coining such as alligator and skim milk.

“It is fun for kids and adults. We have to entertain both,” said Ventoliere. “This is how we are able to tie it all in together.”

The sense of camaraderie spills over to the cast and crew members of Hip to Hip as well. Actors take on parts in both productions — usually a leading role in one and a smaller one in the other — but they also help load in and strike the sets at each venue.

At last week’s dress rehearsal, Jason Marr and Holly Chou, who plays Miranda in “The Tempest,” rushed around the park with crew members hammering and drilling the modular set into place. Behind the scenes in a couple of pop-up tents being used as dressing rooms, Costume Designer Nancy Nichols and her assistant, Sarah Dixey, struggle with a portable clothes rack as actors arrive and begin to don their outfits. Over in a panel truck used as a movable storage room, “The Tempest” Co-director S. C. Lucier shows Elisabeth Preston the proper way to pull back the string on an archery bow for the actress’ role in “Love’s Labor’s Lost.”

Lucier went from assistant to co-director of “The Tempest” after that play’s lead left for a Broadway show and shifts in the cast forced Jason Marr to step into a larger performing role. “The theater gods have been on our side and we have gotten good replacements,” Lucier said. “We also lost a week of rehearsals because of rain. But this time crunch has lit a fire under us artistically and really brought us together.”

This cohesion increases as the season rolls on and actors settle into their parts and get more comfortable with cast mates.

“The shows grow as we perform them,” said Marr. “They develop more nuances and richness and get tighter through repetition and working with an audience.”