
Big year for the Bard: TSF turns 25

By Jana M. Russell

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A quarter-century later, the state's premier Shakespeare festival casts a giant shadow.

The Kilgore-based Texas Shakespeare Festival is celebrating kicking off its 25th anniversary season with a full slate of comedy, from July 1-August 1.

The organization has much to celebrate, said founder and director Raymond H. Caldwell. "It's our 25th season; it's a real milestone for us – and for a very small town behind the Pine Curtain. I think the festival adds a completely different cultural level to this area. It adds to the economy – more than 50 percent of our audience drives more than 50 miles to get to the Texas Shakespeare Festival," he said.

A funny thing happened on the way to a quarter century – the festival came to be home to some of the best live theater on the continent. Celebrating that calls for funny, Caldwell said – so don't look for drama or tragedy on the program. "We're doing all comedies – its light-hearted season fit for the whole family," he said.

The festival has its diehard fans, with 7,200 subscribers. And now its own headquarters building, at 1100 Broadway, given earlier this year by Kilgore College.

"We've never had a space like this, where you could have everything under one roof – so that's great news," he said.

While the Texas Shakespeare Festival is a credit to Kilgore College, which gives it a home (no other junior college in the country has one of these) conveying the professional nature of the festival is an ongoing P.R. battle for festival organizers.

"After 25 years, we still have trouble communicating to the public that these are NOT Kilgore College students. We have students as interns, but these TSF actors are paid, hired in from all over the country," Caldwell said as he showed the new building, where dozens of actors, set designers, costume designers and prop masters were engaged Wednesday in a theatrical beehive of industry preparing for the upcoming season.

In addition to shows, theater going gets even more fun with backstage tours, an intensive limited admission acting workshop July 10-24, pre-show introductions before Thursday and Friday productions, an open changeover of the

set and lights after the matinees, and post-show talk back with the directors, designers and cast members following each opening night performance.

The Texas Shakespeare Festival is more popular than ever. “We had our best opening day box office ever – several thousand dollars ahead of last year’s,” Caldwell said.

“Over 700 tickets were sold on the first day – that’s almost 10 percent of all tickets sold,” he said. Tickets alone don’t cover the cost of bringing in professional talent. The good news is that local donations from around the immediate East Texas area have not gone down – but the bad news is that a flattened economy has impacted arts organizations nationwide, and the TSF is among them, Caldwell said.

“It’s been more difficult this year to solicit donations and grants – although ticket sales are up. I’m sure it’s the economy – my cohorts across the country say the same thing,” he said.

To celebrate the international event’s 25th season, the TSF Foundation has revived the fundraising gala to ensure the festival’s longevity in East Texas and sustain the quality of its productions. Susan Coppedge and Delisa Barbee, co-chairs of the original Gala, are recreating the magic at Meadowbrook Country Club June 19, 7-10 p.m. The TSF cast will provide spontaneous entertainment, and the Meadowbrook Country Club staff will prepare a cocktail buffet under the menu direction of Coppedge.

For more information or tickets call 903.984.3038. Invitations are open to the public and tickets are available in person for \$70 each at the Kilgore Chamber of Commerce and Barron’s in Longview.

The 25th Season of the Texas Shakespeare Festival:

Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” has been set in 1770s – the era of Marie Antoinette – so look for elaborate costumes crafted by the expert seamstresses of TSF.

As You Like It

By William Shakespeare

July 1, 8*, 10*, 15, 17, 23*, 25*, 30; August 1

A common Shakespearean theme – women masquerading as men – runs through “The Two Gentlemen of Verona.” It was convenient at the time of the Bard, since most actors of his day were men. Set in the Tinseltown glamour of Hollywood of the 30s, the TSF version features music by Gershwin and Porter, a very lighthearted play, with some moral lessons in it as well.

“Two Gentlemen of Verona”

By William Shakespeare

July 3, 9*, 11*, 16, 18, 22*, 24*, 29, 31

Moliere’s “The Learned Ladies” has been set in the elegance of 1915 New York. While given a contemporary twist by adaptor Freyda Thomas, it has been kept in rhyming couplets and is one of the few classical plays where the dominant roles are for women. “The Learned Ladies”

By Molière

July 2, 8, 10, 16*, 18*, 23, 25, 29*, 31*

The musical comedy, “Two By Two,” with music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Martin Churnin, is based on a Clifford Odets play, “The Flowering Peach.” It’s a modernized version of the biblical story – it’s clever, and it makes full use of anachronisms and good family fun.

“Two by Two”

by Richard Rodgers, Lyrics by Martin Charnin

July 4, 9, 11, 15*, 17*, 22, 24, 30*; August 1*

Every year the TSF presents a children’s play; this year, look for special prices on “The Tortoise and the Hare,” based on “The Great Cross Country Race” and adapted by Raymond Caldwell. This play is not included in season tickets, and special discount rates are available.

“The Tortoise and the Hare”

Based on “The Great Cross Country Race”

by Alan Broadhurst

July 21, 22, 24, 27, 28, 29, 31 at 10 a.m.

July 20, 21, 27, 28 at 2 p.m.

* denotes matinee 2 p.m. performance

All other performances are at 7:30 p.m.

The TSF box office can be reached at (903) 983-8601. For more information, visit www.TexasShakespeare.com