

Solange De Santis

Stratford Festival

(All figures in U.S. dollars)

By Solange De Santis

STRATFORD, Ontario – Justice – the difficulty of defining it, the agony of searching for it and the questions that arise even after it is exercised – will be one of the major themes this year at Canada's Stratford Festival, North America's largest summer repertory theater.

Located in the town of Stratford in southwestern Ontario, about 150 miles northeast of Detroit and 90 miles southwest of Toronto, Stratford is presenting its most ambitious program in ten years: 14 productions ranging from Shakespeare, Chekhov and Albee to Rodgers and Hammerstein.

The season, which began with previews on April 27, opens with *The Merchant of Venice* on May 28 and closes on November 3. Ticket prices range from \$32.00 to \$53.00, with discounts for seniors and students and special family package prices.

The justice theme began as a pragmatic consideration, artistic director Richard Monette said in an interview. "Al Waxman wanted to play Shylock (in *The Merchant of Venice*)," he said. Waxman, a Canadian character actor perhaps best-known to American audiences as Lieutenant Samuel on the TV series *Cagney and Lacey*, scored a critical success during Stratford's 1997 season as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and directed *The Diary of Anne Frank* for the 2000 season.

Waxman was looking forward to rehearsals, Monette said, when he died unexpectedly last January following heart surgery. When asked how he recovered, Monette replied, "One doesn't." Veteran Canadian actor Paul Soles has been retained to play Shylock.

The climax of *The Merchant* is a trial in which the merchant of the title, Antonio, is ordered to fulfill a loan agreement with the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, who demanded a pound of Antonio's flesh should he forfeit the debt. Just as Shylock believes he has triumphed, the judge -- a woman in disguise named Portia -- notes that the agreement does not include a single drop of blood and turns the forces of justice against Shylock.

With *The Merchant of Venice* set, Monette's thoughts turned to other works that featured trials. Canadian actor, author and playwright Timothy Findley rewrote his radio play, *The Trials of Ezra Pound*, for the stage. It's the true story of American poet Ezra Pound's sanity hearing in Washington, D.C. that was to decide whether he was fit to stand trial for treason. Pound, acknowledged as one of the great American poets of the 20th century, made anti-Semitic radio broadcasts from Italy during World War II. Monette noted, as an intriguing coincidence, that Pound died in Venice and the issue of anti-Semitism resonates powerfully, of course, in *The Merchant*.

A famous American trial is the setting for *Inherit the Wind*, based on the case of John T. Scopes, a Tennessee high-school teacher who taught Darwin's theory of evolution in defiance of a state law that mandated the teaching of the biblical story of creation. Two great Stratford actors, William Hutt and James Blendick, square off in the parts based upon real-life defense attorney Clarence Darrow and prosecutor William Jennings Bryan. "In all of these plays, questions of religion and prejudice underlie the legal issues involved," Monette noted in a Stratford publication.

Anti-Semitism also hovers in the background of Stratford's musical offering this year, noted Monette in the interview. *The Sound of Music*, Rodgers and Hammerstein's story of the von Trapp family's escape from Nazism, is proving to be "the best-selling musical we've programmed," he said, despite a popular, campy singalong showing of the *Julie Andrews* movie in downtown Toronto over the winter.

A large helping of English history and a buoyant comedy complete the Shakespeare offerings: *Henry IV, Part I* and *Henry IV, Part II* (also called *Falstaff*), *Henry V* and *Twelfth Night*. "I'm hoping, by the end of my current contract, to do all of Shakespeare's plays, and we had to do all the history plays," Monette said. He's been artistic director since 1994 and his current term expires in 2004. He started the history cycle in 1999 with *Richard II* and noted that he has an excellent Prince Hal/Henry V in Graham Abbey and an equally-fine Falstaff in Douglas Campbell, who acted in Stratford's inaugural season in 1953.

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In the past, Stratford has been criticized for failing to program any Canadian works, though it's based in Canada. This year, Monette has planned the largest Canadian component in some time – four plays, including Findley's Ezra Pound. The others are *Tempest-Tost*, by Richard Rose, an adaptation of Canadian author Robertson Davies' first novel; *Wingfield on Ice* by Dan Needles, another installment in the fictional saga of stockbroker Walt Wingfield's attempt to become a gentleman farmer; and *Good Mother*, by young actor Damien Atkins. The festival is also staging a series of dramatic readings as a tribute to Davies, an early passionate supporter of Stratford.

The season rounds out with Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee and Chekhov's *The Seagull*. The Coward play was meant to be performed two years ago to mark the centenary of Coward's birth, but due to the vagaries of the theater, is being staged this year. Monette said he's been trying to get the Albee work, "a great seminal play of the 20th century," for seven years and finally got the author's consent. The Chekhov work is part of Stratford's mandate, he said, which is presenting classical theater.

That mandate hasn't always been easy to finance. In the mid-1980s, Stratford was staggering under a \$3 million deficit and the early '90s recession was not kind to the theater, either. "We almost closed the Tom Patterson Theatre (one of Stratford's three venues) in my first year," Monette recalled. In recent years, however, the booming economy and stock market coupled with Monette's programming choices and his aggressively charming ability to get people excited about classical theater have resulted in vigorous financial health. His smooth partnership with executive director Antoni Cimolino, who oversees the festival's business affairs, has also been part of the equation.

Revenues for the fiscal year ended October 31, 2000 hit \$28.6 million (larger than any summer repertory theater in North America), with a profit of \$2.9 million. Monette also started an endowment campaign with a goal of \$33 million by 2008. Launched in August 1999, the campaign had collected \$11 million as of the end of 2000.

But Monette, who was an actor and director at Stratford before he became artistic director, knows that there's no sure thing in the theater, that every season the product is reinvented with a brand-new chance for success or failure. "You never, never ever know – ever," Monette said.

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