

# Solange De Santis

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Outsiders and matters of the heart at Stratford, Shaw

By Solange De Santis

TORONTO – A Christian saint, a driven filmmaker, a half-crazed king and a wronged Jew – this summer, major shows at Canada's two largest repertory theaters focus on compelling individuals who change their worlds.

Ensemble work is certainly part of the programs at the Shaw Festival, in Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Stratford Festival, in Stratford (both in Ontario), but dramatic fireworks are being set off by star performers.

In line with current marketing trends and following a now-established practice, both artistic directors – Jackie Maxwell at Shaw and Richard Monette at Stratford – have given their seasons themes. At Shaw, it's "Matters of the Heart" and Stratford's is "The Outsider."

Actress Tara Rosling ignites the stage as Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, a choice that expands the idea of "heart" beyond romantic love. "It is about her heart and her spirit. Twice, they say in the play (after Joan is executed), 'Have you burned her?' 'Her heart would not burn,'" Maxwell told TheaterMania in an interview.

The 15<sup>th</sup>-century teenager, responding to voices she said were from God, led successful military campaigns to reunite France but was betrayed by both her monarch and her church. "The play is about the beginning of nationalism and religious fervor and what people fight for. It's more and more pertinent each day," said Maxwell.

The moviemaker that's also drawing enthusiastic reviews is the Canadian-born Mack Sennett in *Mack and Mabel*, brought to life by Shaw veteran Benedict Campbell in a performance that's being compared favorably to the 1974 Broadway original by Robert Preston.

The heart in this story is Sennett's love affair with silent pictures (he directed the Keystone Kops series, among many others) and with his leading lady, Mabel Normand. While the score is said to be composer Jerry Herman's favorite, the staging has been problematic, noted Maxwell. "Scenes in the movies were done as movies onstage, on a screen. (Director) Molly Smith and (designer) William Schmuck are doing those scenes live onstage and it makes the piece more cohesive and gives it a real weight," she said.

Shaw's season runs from April 3 to October 28 and the 10-play program also includes an early Shaw, *The Philanderer*, featuring his very pointed views on the follies of love and courtship. Fifteen performances will include a fourth act that Shaw ultimately cut. "The original version had a third act that dealt with the notion of divorce. It was considered very shocking, but he never got rid of it and now it's called the fourth act," and adds about half an hour to the play, Maxwell said.

Canadian writer-director Morris Panych has adapted and directed a George Feydeau farce, *Hotel Peccadillo*, with "doors banging and a lot of middle class people trying to get sex and never getting it," but it's been reset to reflect the consciousness of the age of AIDS, said Maxwell.

The playbill also includes a new musical based on a Thomas Mann story, *Tristan; Summer and Smoke* by Tennessee Williams; *A Month in the Country*, by Brian Friel from the Turgenev story; *The Circle*, by Somerset Maugham; *The Cassilis Engagement* by St. John Hankin and *The Kiltartan Comedies* by Lady Augusta Gregory.

Stratford's mainstage sees two Shakespearean stalwarts, *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*. "The outsider" theme encompasses Lear, whose disastrous desire to give away his kingdom to his three daughters eventually leads him to wander literally outside in a raging storm, and Shylock, the Jewish moneylender crushed in a deadly conflict with gentile society.

"Artists are by nature outsiders in society" and the season is a tribute to all artists, said Monette, who is entering his 14<sup>th</sup> and final season as artistic director with a 14-play program running from April 10 to November 4.

Stratford and Broadway veteran Brian Bedford tackles Lear as both star and director and theatrical design legend Desmond Heeley returns as set consultant after a huge success last year designing *London Assurance*, which also starred Bedford.

"Shakespeare wrote for particular actors and you can't do these plays without a particular actor in mind. It was time for Brian to do Lear," which is set in the late Elizabethan/early Jacobean period, said Monette.

When it came to *Merchant*, the play didn't choose the actor; the actor chose the play. In an unusual piece of casting, native Canadian actor Graham Greene, who is of Oneida heritage, plays Shylock. "I offered Graham Greene several titles and he chose Shylock. I think it's the first time a native-born actor has played

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a leading Shakespearean role at Stratford,” said Monette. It is Greene’s Stratford debut and his first stage appearance in 16 years. He is also playing another consummate outsider a bit later in the season, the strong but childlike Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*.

As a number of events celebrate Monette’s tenure – he has opened a new theater, refurbished two others, launched a conservatory for classical theater training, established an endowment and a new play development program – this year’s playbill includes Stratford’s 200<sup>th</sup> Shakespearean production. Ironically, perhaps, this 54-year-old theatrical institution chose *The Comedy of Errors*.

“What you are going to see is slapstick. It’s Shakespeare’s only farce and there is nothing more difficult and less respected than farce, but it has a heart,” said Monette, who is also directing. *Errors* is based on a play by the Roman dramatist Plautus, who adapted a Greek story, and Monette said he was inspired by a trip to the ancient Turkish city of Ephesus, the setting of the play. “Our setting is a takeoff on the library in Ephesus. When I was there, I saw the theater where St. Paul delivered his talks to the Ephesian people and the play is full of quotes from St. Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. I saw a hand print that pointed ‘this way to the brothel,’ and there is a courtesan in the play,” he recalled.

Two outsiders push the social conventions of race relations in *Othello* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philip Akin, the artistic director of Toronto’s Obsidian Theatre Company, which focuses on playwrights of African descent, stars as Shakespeare’s ill-fated Moor. It is the first time Stratford has presented a Canadian actor in the part, Monette said.

*Mockingbird* has been a popular stage play in regional theaters around North America for the past 20 years, although it is possible that more people are familiar with the Gregory Peck film. The 1960 novel on which both film and play are based examines a small Alabama town riven by the drama of a white lawyer defending a black man wrongly accused of rape.

Two musicals this year don’t quite fit “the outsider” theme, but Monette freely admits “you can’t get Cinderella’s shoe on every foot.” *Oklahoma!*, directed and choreographed by Donna Feore, has never been staged at Stratford and is one of those “major titles that will sell tickets,” said Monette. The Gershwin vehicle *My One and Only* is punctuated by a great deal of tap dancing, he said – not the usual fare for a Stratford stage.

The remainder of the program is rounded out with Edward Albee’s *A Delicate Balance*, Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* and newer works *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead, The Odyssey, Shakespeare’s Will and Pentecost*.

Looking back on his tenure, the longest in the festival’s history, Monette said theater is more powerful than ever in the electronic age. “It’s one of the few places you can meet real actors in a real room with real people watching. When I took this job, I said, ‘There is nothing wrong with what Stratford is doing; it just needs a paint job.’ We just needed to bring the excitement back.”

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