

Solange De Santis

The Stratford Festival

Originally Published in the Wall Street Journal

STRATFORD, Ont. – It's opening night at the Stratford Festival, North America's largest summer repertory theater, and artistic director Richard Monette is standing on a lawn near a large white party tent, greeting wealthy and important guests and recalling his arrival seven years ago.

"People kept asking me about my vision. What was my vision? Like I was a prophet. I had no vision. My vision initially was to keep the doors open," he recalled.

In 1994, reeling from the early '90s recession, the festival nearly closed one of its three theaters, he said.

Now, as Mr. Monette exchanges a word with Canadian actor Christopher Plummer, who recently joined the board of governors, and welcomes Canadian author Timothy Findley, who has a play running this year, the scene couldn't be more different.

A few yards away, the main venue, the Festival Theatre, glitters after a \$10 million renovation. Near the theater, a stone monument bears the names of donors to the festival's endowment campaign, which has already collected \$12 million two years after its launch and aims for a goal of \$33 million by 2008.

The 2001 program is Stratford's most ambitious in years: 14 productions, including five Shakespeare plays, four new Canadian plays, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, modern classics *Private Lives*, *Inherit the Wind* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*.

Around North America, some 100 theaters offer Shakespeare as part of their summer programming, according to the Shakespeare Theater Association of America. Stratford is the biggest – its fiscal 2000 revenues of \$28 million put it atop major festivals in New Jersey, Alabama, Utah, Oregon and Georgia. It isn't the oldest – Oregon is in its 66th season – but it is certainly one of the oldest. Stratford celebrates its 50th season next year.

On the Canadian cultural scene, Stratford holds a far more significant place than its counterparts do in the United States, where summer Shakespeare rep is often seen as a pleasant, seasonal adjunct to the heavyweight offerings in the fall on Broadway or at the major regional theaters. True, Stratford has its picnic baskets for sale, the town is choked with charming restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts and every summer, the swans are let loose on the Avon River. You can even buy a little bag of swan food.

But Stratford has more in common with Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company in the sense that it is a major cultural institution that has had a far-reaching effect on its nation's theater. "The development of the Stratford Festival ... has done more than any other single factor to make Canadian theatre truly professional in its attitudes," wrote Canadian author Robertson Davies, a member of its first board of governors, in 1984.

In 1953, Stratford journalist Tom Patterson, concerned about the decline of the railway industry in his town and mindful of the name's connection with Shakespeare's birthplace in England, Stratford-upon-Avon, thought a summer theater festival would be a good idea. He and his Stratford supporters convinced British director Tyrone Guthrie that they wanted a Shakespeare theater to equal any in Britain. Mr. Guthrie, in turn, brought noted stage and costume designer Tanya Moiseiwitch and convinced Alec Guinness to star in *Richard III*.

While many could not conceive of such an enterprise succeeding in a small, southwestern Ontario town some 150 miles northeast of Detroit and 90 miles southwest of Toronto, others were concerned it would be too successful.

"The first year, the criticism was that it would be the *death* of Canadian theater, that it would draw all the actors away from the regions. But it stimulated the arts across Canada," said Mr. Monette, who has been associated with Stratford as an actor, director or artistic director for 29 of its 49 seasons. The festival today also draws a significant number of patrons from across the border – 40% of its audience comes from the U.S.

This year's season, he said, fulfills a number of goals. One is mounting a cycle of Shakespeare's history plays in the same season – *Henry IV, Part 1*, *Henry IV, Part 2* (also called

Solange De Santis

Falstaff) and Henry V. Festival stalwart Douglas Campbell, who was a member of the 1953 company, plays Falstaff and young star Graham Abbey plays Prince Hal/Henry V.

Another theme was exploring the concept of justice. The season opened on May 28 with *The Merchant of Venice*, which contains a famous trial scene and which Mr. Monette scheduled because veteran Canadian actor Al Waxman wanted to play Shylock. Mr. Waxman, perhaps best-known to American audiences as Lieutenant Samuel in the TV show *Cagney and Lacey*, had scored a critical success at Stratford in 1997 as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and had directed *The Diary of Anne Frank* last year.

Mr. Monette agreed to direct, at Mr. Waxman's request. But Mr. Waxman died suddenly last January, following heart surgery and Canadian character actor Paul Soles was engaged to take his place. It was the sort of wrenching development that keeps Mr. Monette working some days, he said, from 8 A.M. to midnight. "I have no personal life," said Mr. Monette, who is single, and whose current contract runs to 2004.

The festival has grown so big and has so many mandates – Shakespeare, Canadian works, productions that appeal to families, a musical, training actors in the classics, education programs for students, lectures by famous authors – that Monette quips, "We are turning into an all-purpose hospital and I am the chief paramedic." But when asked if Stratford might be losing its focus, he emphatically declared that "the core idea is classical work," citing the five Shakespeare plays and the Chekhov work as examples.

Mr. Monette, who resembles a superannuated cherub with large expressive eyes and a cleft chin, is an articulate, elegant and amusing champion of the power of theater who is clearly popular with major donors and whose programming choices are selling reams of tickets. (The festival recorded a profit of \$2.9 million last year.)

But no Stratford director escapes unscathed in Canada. He's also criticized for dumbing-down some productions and pursuing the almighty dollar. Toronto *Globe and Mail* critic Kate Taylor, a frequent Monette adversary, opened her review of *Merchant* with: "The Stratford Festival, in its current populist incarnation, is not the place to go looking for deep thinking."

But they do go, seeking the eternal soul-nourishment of great theater. In the middle of another lukewarm review of *Merchant*, Toronto *Star* critic Richard Ouzounian noted that one scene was "nothing more than two skilled actors and the words of William Shakespeare, but it's sheer magic, and it's what you come to Stratford for."

For reproduction rights, contact me at:

solange@solangedesantis.com