

A PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE THEATRE TOUR

“The Shaw and Stratford Festivals”

July 7 – 11, 2009

Description of Plays

THE SHAW FESTIVAL

“Plays about the beginning of the modern world”

The Shaw Festival is one of the largest repertory companies in North America, and the only theatre in the world that specializes in plays written by Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries (1856-1950). Enjoy performances by one of the world’s finest acting companies, in a beautiful village 20 minutes down river from Niagara Falls.



“Sunday in the Park with George” – (music/lyrics by Stephen Sondheim). This is a heartfelt love story, and it has been called Stephen Sondheim’s most personal musical. *The New York Times* called it “an audacious, haunting and, in its own intensely personal way, touching work.” On legendary musical writer Stephen Sondheim: “The words ‘intellectual’ and ‘Broadway musical’ were seldom mentioned in the same breath until the era of Stephen Sondheim, the dominant artistic force in the American musical theatre since the 1970s.” In the park, ‘George’ is the painter Georges Seurat, who at 26 caused an art world sensation with his pointillist masterpiece *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Sondheim, with writer James Lapine, wrote the musical after his own artistic struggles and his announcement that he was leaving musical theatre to write mystery novels. Lapine coaxed him back with this painting and the idea of imagining the life of an artist who was at times misunderstood, but who also loved to create.

“The Devil’s Disciple” – (by George Bernard Shaw). Set in a New Hampshire town during the American War of Independence, this is Bernard Shaw’s only full-length play set in America. In it, he takes all of the essential elements of a standard melodrama, and the notion of the ‘romantic hero’ in the form of Dick Dudgeon, and turns them inside-out. Bernard Shaw was approached by the actor-manager William Terris to write something for him to perform on his world tour. His idea was that Shaw could take all of the stock melodrama situations – the evicted widow, the befriended orphan, the swapped identity, the heroine’s swoon, the reprieve from the scaffold – and string them together in a play. Shaw was not interested in that idea but was keen to write a play for Terris using the elements of melodrama. “A good melodrama,” he wrote to Ellen Terry, “is a more difficult thing to write than all this clever-clever comedy: One must go straight to the core of humanity to get it, and if it is only good enough, why, there you have *Lear* or *Macbeth*.”



“In Good King Charles’ Golden Days” – (by George Bernard Shaw). The play’s subtitle, “A True History that Never Happened,” gives us an insight into Shaw’s almost whimsical approach to this fascinating and humorous play. In writing it, he took the opportunity to play the ‘what if’ game: what might have happened had several prominent men of history met at the height of their powers? What if a leading scientist had a painter, a religious leader and a King to his house for a good discussion? And what if this discussion was, on occasion, interrupted by one or several of the King’s mistresses? The result was this witty and decidedly Shavian take on some great men (and women) of history. The men that gather in the play include the host for the gathering, the great philosopher and scientist Sir Isaac Newton. His guests are leading portrait painter Godfrey Kneller, religious rebel and founder of the Quakers George Fox, and King Charles II. Between them they discuss almost everything – questions of leadership (all of them being leaders in their fields) along with arguments of art versus

science versus religion. Even King Charles expresses his excitement in anticipation of the discussion.

THE STRATFORD FESTIVAL

"Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On"

Stratford, Ontario is the home of the largest classical repertory theatre in North America. In the years since its first season, the Stratford Festival of Canada has set benchmarks for the production not only of Shakespeare, Moliere, the ancient Greeks and other great dramatists of the past, but also of such 20th-Century masters as Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. In addition to acclaimed productions of the best in operetta and musical theatre, it has also showcased, and in many cases premiered works by outstanding Canadian and other contemporary playwrights.

"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" – A musical with its roots in both vaudeville and ancient Roman comedy, Forum makes free use of bawdy humor, though in a manner more suggestive than explicit. In ancient Rome, the slave Pseudolus yearns for freedom, while his young master pines for the girl next door. In exchange for his freedom, Pseudolus promises to find a way to unite the young lovers. But even in musical comedy, the course of true love never does run smooth. Mistaken identities, frantic chases, lascivious husbands, men in dresses, long-lost children, mixed-up potions and more – it all adds up to one of the funniest musicals ever.

(Optional Matinee – limited availability)



Ben Carlson as Marcus Brutus and Geraint Wyn Davies (background) as Julius Caesar

"Julius Caesar" – This is a political drama that turns on the assassination of a public figure. Julius Caesar, the most popular general in Rome, is assassinated, leaving two men – the honorable Brutus and the ambitious Cassius – to divide the spoils. But they've reckoned without Mark Antony, Caesar's devoted follower and determined successor, and soon the republic all have sought to preserve is brought to the brink of anarchy. A tense and tightly plotted political thriller that raises a timeless question: is the killing of an aspiring tyrant justifiable in order to avert dictatorship?

"Cyrano de Bergerac" – Romance, comradeship, heroism and self-sacrifice are the dominant themes here. Despite his swashbuckling heroism and rapier wit, Cyrano thinks himself unworthy – because of his enormous nose – to be loved by the beautiful Roxane. Instead, he uses his gift for language to woo her for his comrade-in-arms, Christian. But when tragedy strikes, will Cyrano take his secret to the grave? One of the 19th-century theatre's most heartbreakingly romantic tales, packed with exhilarating swordplay, grand passion and dazzling repartee.



Colm Feore as Cyrano de Bergerac



Brian Bedford as Lady Bracknell

"The Importance of Being Earnest" – Here is a light-hearted comedy of manners of the best kind. Dashing men-about-town John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff pursue fair ladies Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. Matters are complicated by the imaginary characters invented by both men to cover their on-the-sly activities – not to mention the disapproval of Gwendolen's mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell. One of the funniest comedies in the English language – and a critique of love, sex and social hypocrisy that remains stingingly pertinent even today.

We have as our leader, Christopher Rawson, drama critic of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

You won't want to miss his expert commentaries during the motorcoach drive, and throughout the trip! Please join Chris for this celebration of live theatre, performed by some of the world's finest acting ensembles!