

THEATER

Politics takes center stage at the Stratford Festival

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Politics is at the center of several plays this year at the Stratford Festival in Stratford, Ontario.

But politics, as we see from reading the newspaper or watching television, often involves private issues and personal relationships.

Two plays at the Festival Theater concern defiance to a king and the consequences of those acts. In neither case are the answers easy and straightforward.

A Man for All Seasons.

Robert Bolt's "A Man for All Seasons" is a modern play set in the period just before Shakespeare. Bolt was a political radical who found a hero in a man dedicated to rule of law and loyalty to church, Sir Thomas More.

Bolt's play tells the story of More's objection to Henry VIII's divorce and remarriage.

Though More was opposed to Henry's actions, he was willing

to say nothing and stand aside. It was only when Henry forced him to accept the Act of Nullification that More would not act against his conscience and went to his death a martyr.

Though this is serious material, More was a witty man and Bolt makes his wit and progressive ideas an integral part of the play. Also by creating a Common Man narrator, Bolt undercuts any saint making for More.

Director Marti Maraden makes exciting theater out of a battle of ideas, and she lets the humor flow freely, realizing that it was More's greatest weapon.

Douglas Rain is the calm center here as More. He projects the quiet strength, the easy professorial manner, the decidedly unheroic presence that contrasts with the underlying strength that carries him to death.

Brad Rudy's Common Man both chides and admires More. Rudy plays him as blunt, gruff and crudely funny.

More's antagonist is not old friend Henry. As all leaders do, Henry lets someone else do his

dirty work. In Bolt's retelling, that someone else is Thomas Cromwell, whose unctuous personality might remind some of Kenneth Starr. John Dolan's carefully modulated voice and false, oily civility perfectly capture the political man, all false sheen hiding ugly motives.

Henry struts his time on the stage in one great flourish that Bolt uses to show the arrogance of such power and its brutality. Benedict Campbell projects all that bigger-than-life, better-than-you attitude.

"A Man for All Seasons" runs through Nov. 6.

Julius Caesar

Shakespeare's retelling of Caesar's assassination and its aftermath is probably the first Shakespeare that young people encounter. One of Shakespeare's earliest plays, it has simpler language, more direct plot and lots of action. Since it also deals with a historic event, the play is also a good history lesson.

Director Douglas Campbell's Festival Theatre production is

generally straightforward, clean-lined and vigorous. When it strays it becomes noisy and excessive without adding anything.

There is always this temptation at Stratford to change the Bard. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. A production of "Much Ado About Nothing" this year features Benedict and Beatrice as a much older couple in the late 19th century. But since Benedict and Beatrice are Brian Bedford and Martha Henry, chances are good it will work out fine.

This "Caesar" adds some Greek theater touches, crowd meaning and odd costuming, but generally these don't distract from the overall impact of the work.

Tom McCamus is a noble but posturing Brutus, who wrestles with his conscience and great Caesar's ghost. Stephen Quinette is a "lean and hungry" Cassius, but also an oddly sympathetic one. Stephen Russell is actually a dashing Caesar for once, not an old politico as usually portrayed.

Benedict Campbell, again, is a strong Marc Antony, though his powerful oration gets swallowed at the end by hubbub.

Any students who are studying the play would find this a good introduction.

"Julius Caesar" runs through Nov. 7. For ticket information, call 1-800-567-1600.



Julius Caesar: Benedict Campbell, left, as Marc Antony advises Caesar (Stephen Russell) in the Stratford production of Shakespeare's tragedy.

Backstage Pass celebrates 4th

BACKSTAGE PASS



ANN DENNIS

We're coming out on the big Fourth of July weekend, a long weekend for many, an odd weekend for all. It's the only American holiday that boasts a tradition of mixing alcohol consumption with explosives, which angers

many militia members—they'd like every American holiday to combine beer and fireworks. ("Merry Christmas, Bubba! Here's a six-pack and some M-80s!")

And for a lot of us growing up, the Fourth of July was the only day of the year that our fathers cooked. This person whose only demonstrable kitchen skills on any other day of the year had to do with rooting around the refrigerator for leftovers was suddenly shoeing mom away from the grill and cooking for you and your cousins. The flame could never be too hot or too high for Dad. The hibachi threw off so much heat it affected the sun spots. Any food that didn't fall through the grill looked like an unused charcoal briquette with a light coating of caramelized barbecue sauce sitting on your paper plate, which would succeed in holding the tasty entree for all of thirty seconds before losing all rigidity and allowing it to fall to the concrete, off which it actually bounced before the dog gulped it down.

The lack of food, combined with the heat, made you feel downright anemic, which didn't deter the never-ending posse of

moquebaes from attempting to totally exanginate you, the best one-word summation of the day: "sticky." Inflatable pools always look better in the store, except to your briquette-engorged dog, who brought in with him every unbagged blade of grass from your lawn.

So I love the big Fourth of July holiday! And this week on Backstage Pass on Detroit Public Television, we've put together a downright patriotic show! Starting with some of the best and most popular political satirists in America today, the Capitol Steps. They bill themselves as "the only group in Washington that attempts to be funnier than the Congress," and they succeed with consistently hilarious musical parodies of the days head.

We all had a great time when the Steps visited our studio in the Spring. I even got to interview President Clinton (or a close facsimile thereof).

The Capitol Steps Fourth truly enjoy what they do. They had us all in stitches during their visit, not just in the studio, but in the greenroom, in the halls, in the lobby. They ran amok at Detroit Public Television studios doing impressions of recent Presidents by request. You can catch them on the Fourth when they perform at the Ann Arbor Summer Festival.

A word on the Summer Festival: this is the 15th anniversary of the event. From the Power Center Mainstage Series to the free music and films outdoor at the Top of the Park (located on the top level of the Power Center parking structure), the Ann Arbor Summer Festival has consistently presented top perform-

ers of both national and local talent. This year they have another great lineup. From Backstage Pass alumni like the Capitol Steps and blues greats Madcat and Kane, to talents like George Bedard and the King Pins, to great films on a huge outdoor screen, it's one of our area's top summer events. And this season inaugurates a new feature for the event — the Festival Youth Arts Showcase, which gives students from area schools and organizations the opportunity to present their talents to their own community on the Power Center stage.

Also on the big show, we'll present music by the honorable Judge Myron Wahl. Judge Wahl sits on two benches: the piano bench and the bench of the Michigan Court of Appeals. He's played with the likes of Marcus Belgrave and Ursula Walker locally, and even toured Europe with Lionel Hampton. Judge Wahl was one of our most memorable guests in the studio. He loves to play jazz, and his zeal is contagious. We were so wrapped up in listening to his stories that we almost forgot to tape a show! As a justice on the court of appeals, he's renowned for his commitment to public service. So it's not at surprising that as a musician, he continues to help those in need. All proceeds from Judge Wahl's first CD, "You Be the Judge" benefit cancer research at Henry Ford Health System.

All that plus the music of Ties and a trip to the Elaine L. Jacobs Gallery airs tonight on Backstage Pass at midnight, repeated Friday, at 7:30 p.m. on Detroit Public Television.

Southfield Library presents film series

The Southfield Public Library's nine-week summer movie series begins Monday, July 6, with the film version of Noel Coward's ghostly play "Blithe Spirit," starring Rex Harrison, and continues every Monday evening through Aug. 31.

Movies are shown in the Marcotte Room of the Library at 7 p.m. Admission is \$1.

In addition to the 1946 comedy, the series features: The 1957

musical "Silk Stockings," July 13; the 1950 film adaptation of Jane Austen's "Emma," with Gweneith Paltrow, July 27; the 1950 Spencer Tracy-Elizabeth Taylor comedy "Father of the Bride," July 27; the story of West Point in the 1955 "The Long Gray Line," Aug. 3; Geraldine Page in her Oscar-winning performance in "The Trip to Bountiful," Aug. 10; the Cole Porter story with Cary Grant in the 1946 "Night

and Day," Aug. 17; the acclaimed film version of Tennessee Williams' "Streetcar Named Desire" with Vivian Leigh and Marlon Brando, Aug. 24; and Robert Duvall in his Oscar-winning performance in "Tender Mercies," Aug. 31.

The Southfield Library is in the Southfield Civic Center, 26000 Evergreen Road. For more information, call (248) 948-0470.

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