

TRAVEL

The play's the thing in nearby London, Ontario

BY MARY AUGUSTA RODGERS
SPECIAL WRITER

One door closes, another opens. The stages are dark now at the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford and the Shaw Festival at Niagara-on-the-Lake, but London, Ontario, and its Grand Theatre, are ready and waiting.

For a get-away winter weekend built around a play, London deserves more attention than it gets.

"We went the first time ten years ago, out of curiosity," said Julie Candlor of Bloomfield Hills. "And we've gone back every year since then. It's fun and the plays are always excellent. Steve Martin's 'Picasso at the Lapin Agile' was one of the best productions I've ever seen anywhere."

London isn't Toronto, but that's part of its charm. It's an easy drive - two hours from the Canadian border - less expen-

sive and easier to cope with.

If you stay at a downtown hotel, you can walk almost everywhere. There are good restaurants, shops and places to stay, all with a subtle but distinct Canadian flavor.

The restored Grand is an elegant old theatre, built in the early 1900s, with murals, chandeliers, even (to avoid a resident ghost). Plays range from classic favorites to new works by Canadian playwrights.

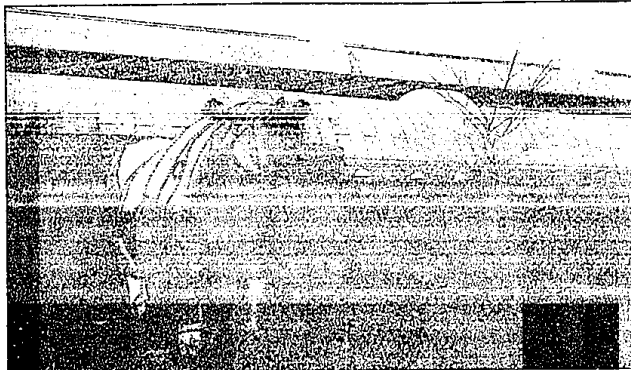
This season's schedule includes "Patience," a contemporary play Feb. 18 to March 4; "Communicating Doors," a comedy, March 17 to April 1. And a bonus performance, "Mom's The Word," May 9-27.

Special deals for each production: actors will discuss the play, and theater in general, in a question-and-answer format after the third Saturday matinee. And, one hour before the first Saturday matinee, the box office will sell all remaining tickets at \$5 each.

London is a business and medical center as well as a university town, with the University of Western Ontario, The London Regional Art & Historical Museum, a striking building all glass and steel tubing, with an aluminum rhinoceros guarding the grounds, has interesting exhibits. An Innox Theatre is at 900 King St.

Also open to winter visitors: the 1834 Eldon House, at 481 Ridout Street North, and the London Museum of Archeology at 1600 Attawandaron Road, off Wonderland Road, south of Highway 22.

Downtown Victoria Park, once the drill ground for a British garrison during the Revolutionary



Imposing: This metal rhino sculpture sits in front of the London Regional Art & Historical Museum, London, Ontario, Canada



This season: Here's the program cover for the current theater season at the Grand Theatre.

War, has a public ice-skating rink.

London's downtown is a mix of Victorian brick buildings and sleek glass towers. The Delta London Armouries Hotel combines both styles; a

contemporary building with a steep glass roof, tucked inside the shell of an 1890 brick military armory.

You see a similar mix of people: for instance, a Queen Elizabeth lookalike in a tweed suit, having tea and a cozy chat with a purple-haired teenager wearing a noog ring.

Last year, the waiter at a favorite restaurant remembered us. "Welcome back," he said. Then he disappeared and returned with something wrapped in tissue paper. It was small, limp, worn. "Madam," he said. "Your glove. Left here last year."

Can you imagine that happening in an American restaurant? I can't, either.

Here's our schedule for a London theatre weekend. We leave Birmingham (five couples, three cars) about 8:30 on a Saturday morning, arriving in London in time to check in at our hotel and have lunch at the Gallery Cafe in the London Regional Art & Historical Museum. The cafe has

a good lunch menu (carrot-ginger soup, guiche, almond chicken salad) and the best view in town - you look out at the snowy woods of Harris Park, the Thames river, and a castle that is, in reality, the Middlesex County building.

After lunch, we walk to the Grand Theatre on Richmond street, in time for a 2 p.m. play. Afterwards, we explore the shops along Richmond Row, checking out antiques, books, fancy chocolates, sweaters, tweed caps, vintage dresses.

Then we walk back, often through a soft, scenic snowfall, to our hotel to rest up before going out for dinner.

The next morning begins with a brisk walk along the Thames River. Then we treat ourselves to a lavish brunch at the Delta Armouries Hotel. Canada is another country, after all.

Mary Augusta Rodgers is a Birmingham resident who has written for Family Circle, Woman's Day, and Smithsonian magazines.

Travel details for London, Ontario

Ticket information: the Grand Theatre box office: 519/672-8800

Restaurants: The Blue Ginger at 644 Richmond St., has food with an Asian accent; 434-5777.

Bon Appetit, across from the Grand Theatre at 476 Richmond St., is a French-Italian bistro; 439-2660.

The Gallery Cafe is at 421 Ridout St.; 672-4588; Garlic's at 481 Richmond St. has many good, garlic-flavored dishes; 432-4092.

The Mariebud restaurant, with Czech and Hungarian specialties, is at 122 Carling St.; 679-9940.

The Village Cafe, at 716 Richmond St., features continental cuisine; 432-2191.

Where to Stay: both the Delta London Armouries Hotel, 325 Dundas St. (800-688-9929) and the Westin at 300 King St. (519-439-1611) have indoor pools and fitness centers. The Idlewild Inn, a handsome Victorian house at 36 Grand Ave. (800-267-0525) has charming rooms, suites with fireplaces, and a free breakfast. Good budget choices: Quality Hotel by Journey's End, 374 Dundas St.; (800-228-5151). London Executive Suites, 362 Dundas St.; (800-265-6955).

Sweets: Hatemead's Tea Room serves tea, scones and desserts at Richmond St. North in Alva (just outside London); 660-8424.

Lively bars: Joe Cool's Sports Bar at 595 Richmond St. and Jim Bob Ray's at 686 Richmond St.; both have pool tables.

General tips: drive with your car lights on during the day as Canadians do. Remember that radar detectors are illegal in Canada. To get the best exchange rate, use your credit card whenever possible. For more information, call: Tourism London, (800) 561-4574.

GREAT ESCAPES

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■ The West Michigan Travel Association's winter fun "Get-away Guide" is available at (800) 442-2084. Also, check their Web site, www.wmta.org

■ A free Lake Erie Islands Travel Planner is available at (800) 441-1271. The Ohio islands are a popular destination for about 5 million visitors a year. The

■ Major Islands in the Bay, Middle Bass Island and Kelleys Island. Other attractions nearby include Cedar Point and Marblehead Lighthouse State Park. Web site is www.lake-erie.com. The booklet includes coupons, information on restaurants, lodging, ferry boat times and detailed maps.

■ Solo travelers looking for something different can choose from several singles-only bike or walking tours of Europe. For a free, large, four-color booklet about Europe and the tours, call (800) 321-6060 or check their Web site at www.eurohike.com. Their season runs April through October.

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The Grand Haven/ Spring Lakes Area visitors bureau is offering a two-for-one winter lodging coupon now through March 31. The only non-availability date is Valentine's weekend. Advance reservations required. Call (800) 688-0897 for the details. Grand Haven is on Lake Michigan about three hours from Detroit. Among its well-known tourist events is the annual Coast Guard festival held every summer.

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