

Bringing Shakespeare to Life

By

Jane Barry

The Greater Saint John Community Foundation

For a community the size of Saint John to have a charitable organization specifically dedicated to unfolding the wonderful world of Shakespeare to us is a remarkable accomplishment. The Shakespeare Society of Saint John was founded in 2004 and registered as a charitable society in 2005 as a supporter of the Saint John Shakespeare Festival. Since 2002, they have presented the classics: *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry IV Part One*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *All's Well that Ends Well* to appreciative local audiences. Dr. Sandra Bell, a professor of Renaissance literature at UNB-Saint John, volunteers as their President. She states, "Our mandate is to bring awareness, appreciation and enjoyment of one of the greatest playwrights in the English speaking world. Education and entertainment are our top priorities".

One of the shaping ideals of Shakespeare's age was the humanist belief that the arts could teach and delight, and thus effect a positive change. They maintained that at many levels, art was an essential component in shaping an enlightened, progressive society. The Shakespeare Society promotes these ideals through the works and times of Shakespeare and by organizing a variety of engaging events throughout the year help expose the broad appeal of Shakespeare to all ages and interests. With lavish period costumes and a wealth of talent, against the backdrop of our beautiful Imperial Theatre, the works of the master playwright come to life for a broad spectrum of the public. The group is also increasing their focus on educational activities for middle and high school students, making the world-renowned plays take on real life significance.

For those with a real thirst for an in-depth understanding and analysis of Shakespeare's works, a couple of events each year focus in on one of Shakespeare's plays. Audience members are invited to participate in discussions on the historical context of one of his plays and examine its characters, language and theme. They evaluate audio and visual examples and read a selection of speeches. For a complete change of pace, they have also offered two Renaissance Cooking Classes, and this November, will once again hold a Renaissance Feast, at the Delta Hotel's Trinity Royal Room. As expected, a four-course feast of foods from Shakespeare's time, complete with period music entertainment and excerpts from the bard's plays is planned.

The Shakespeare Festival is the major feature in the series of events offered during the year by the Shakespeare Society of Saint John. The two groups are partnering with Fortis Properties, Legio XXI-Rapax and The Saint John Arts Centre to present *Antony and Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Chase and Brian Dobbelsteyn on Oct. 16 and 17 at the Imperial Theatre. The Artistic Director for the Festival is Elizabeth Chase. She has a degree in Theatre and English from Dalhousie University and has participated in theatre production in Saint John for many years. She has served as an actor and as a director, with the Saint John Shakespeare Society, the Saint John Theatre Company, as well as Saint John High School's theatre program. This year, she will not only be directing the show, but will perform the role of Cleopatra. She terms the company's show "its most exciting performance yet". Patrons are invited to "Witness the greatest love story in history, with fully-armed and armoured Roman soldiers, exquisite Egyptian courtiers, and Shakespeare's glorious language." The billboard proclaims "*ANTONY and CLEOPATRA: He wanted only to retire in the lap of luxury...Egypt. She wanted only to give her children the world...Rome*". The Roman Legion re-enactment group will be a highlight involving the group, Legio XXI-Rapax. Elizabeth Chase adds "We have a September 17th pre-play event, a panel of three discussing its various aspects and the historical period."

Since inception, the Society and Festival have received much-needed support from the province of New Brunswick, the City of Saint John, the Greater Saint John Community Foundation, JD Irving Ltd., Fortis, the Saint John Arts Centre and Interaction Children's Theatre. The ten member Board of the Society shape and organize the year's events along with a strong base of dedicated volunteers and a growing membership of all ages. They welcome new members and volunteers.

For more information on the Shakespeare Society of Saint John, visit www.saintjohnshakespeare.ca.



Elizabeth Chase is the Artistic Director of the Saint John Shakespeare Festival and Dr. Sandra Bell heads the Board of Directors of the Shakespeare Society of Saint John. The groups partner to enrich Saint Johners' appreciation one of the world's greatest English-speaking playwrights.

Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca

