

Ms. Cheap: Shakespeare festival one of few free in the nation

BY MARY HANCE • mscheap@dnj.com • August 23, 2010

Middle Tennessee always has a lot happening on the cultural front.

But did you realize that Nashville is one of fewer than a dozen cities in the whole country that has a free professional Shakespeare [festival](#)?

Yes, siree. Our Shakespeare in the Park is a rare treat, especially when you compare it to [festivals](#) in other cities that charge \$15 to \$50 or more for a performance.

This year's Centennial Park offering, "Love's Labor's Lost," is officially described as "a witty romantic comedy of almost fairytale proportions about Cupid, courtship and confusion."

If your Shakespeare recall is a little rusty, the plot is that King Navarre and three of his young nobles take an oath to dedicate three years strictly to study and not give in to the company of women. And, of course, as luck would have it, on the day they take the pledge, a princess and three [beautiful](#) ladies hit town.

Performances of this romantic craziness continue through Sept. 12, and you just show up and enjoy the show. No tickets, no assigned seats, no lines. (But you will be more comfortable if you bring a blanket or chairs and maybe a [picnic](#).)

Last year, a whopping 14,000 people attended this free festival, and by all reports, the [event](#) is a perennial crowd pleaser.

"We try to go every year," said Melinda Welton, who says she and her husband and another couple usually pack a picnic and go early enough to enjoy the pre-show music or entertainment.

"It's never not been a great show. It really has the feel of a festival. Even if you are not a (serious) Shakespeare fan you'll have a good time," said Welton, an ornithologist who puts herself in that

non-academic Shakespeare category.

New twists

You can always count on Nashville Shakespeare Festival artistic director Denice Hicks to come up with a fun and [fresh](#) twist, and this time she works her magic on several levels to make the show appeal to adults and children.

Not only are the costumes more lavish than usual, the "broad physical humor" has a lot of punch. "There are clowns in the show, one dressed like a bumblebee and a Spanish braggart dressed like a matador. Everybody in this play makes fools of themselves," Denice said.

As you might imagine, it costs a lot to put on a production that involves 19 actors — nine professionals and 10 apprentice company members.

Expenses

Denice estimates that the total cost of this production is about \$250,000, with much of that coming from in-kind gifts, grants and corporate and individual contributions. She says there is always a fiscal gap, and several years ago, the festival started asking for a donation (suggested amount is \$5) as an alternative to charging admission.

Denice said the audience response last year was overwhelming, with the average donation being

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between \$2.50 and \$3 per attendee, which was almost twice what the festival had gotten in donations in the past.

Five bucks for a show like this is still quite a deal and it would clearly make a big difference in the financial picture for the festival if everybody tried to do it. So I'm breaking **tradition** by telling you to not be too cheap on this one.

When to go

Performances are Thursday-Sunday nights and on Labor Day. The least-crowded show nights are Thursdays and Sundays. Pre-show entertainment begins at 6:30 p.m. with the performance at 7:30 p.m. at the band shell at Centennial Park. Details: www.nashvilleshakes.org or call 615-255-2273.

Stay cheap!

Reach Ms. Cheap at 615-259-8282 or mscheap@dnj.com. Check her out at [facebook.com/mscheap](https://www.facebook.com/mscheap) and on her blog at Tennessean.com/mscheap. Catch her every Thursday at 11 a.m. on WTVF-Channel5's Talk of the Town.



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