

July 8, 2011

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**Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents *Romeo and Juliet***  
*Old-time Chicago World's Fair quirky setting for classic tragedy*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- The [Nashville Shakespeare Festival](#) will perform *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the Bard's best-known and most beloved dramas, from Aug. 18 through Sept. 18 in Centennial Park.

The play, which marks the festival's 24th annual Shakespeare in the Park, will be performed Thursdays through Sundays and Labor Day Monday starting at 7:30 p.m. each evening. The pre-show entertainment gets underway at 6:30 p.m. with food and drink available at the park. There is no admission charge, but a \$10 donation is suggested and greatly appreciated.

The Nashville Shakespeare Festival's last full production of *Romeo and Juliet* was in 2003, and the story remains as relevant as ever, said Denice Hicks, the festival's artistic director.

"The first half of this play is a comedy with every character living fully, but a few harsh words that trigger violently impulsive actions can thrust a world into tragedy very quickly," Hicks said. "*Romeo and Juliet* holds Shakespeare's proverbial mirror up to our caustic, contentious and cruel habits. The parents in this play learn this lesson in the most extreme way -- through the loss of their children. This story serves as a brilliant reminder to us all to forgive, love and listen carefully."

This year's production of *Romeo and Juliet* is directed by David Wilkerson, who has set the story in the midst of the aftermath of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Since the main themes of *Romeo and Juliet* concern opposites – love and hate, war and peace, black and white, life and death -- he wanted a setting that mirrors similar themes. "The Chicago World's Fair of 1893, which was called the White City, was a staggering achievement with beautiful, classical architecture, the first outdoor electric lighting and the gravity-defying Ferris Wheel," he said. "But all around the White City, the filth, crime and corruption remained. There was also a financial crash at the time with scores of bank failures and thousands of unemployed workers descending on the city looking for work."

Wilkerson noted that politics were notoriously corrupt in 1890s Chicago, and he sees an opportunity to impose those dynamics on the Montague/Capulet feud. "In addition to mirroring the theme of dualities and contradictions that are inherent in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Chicago World's Fair setting gives us a loadstone to guide our endeavor," he said. "We hope to create a real, compelling world with this concrete setting."

Romeo will be played by recent Lipscomb University graduate Matthew Raich while Emily Landham stars as Juliet. Landham was a member of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's Apprentice Company during the 2002 and 2003 seasons and played Perdita in the NSF 2005 production of *Winter's Tale*. She recently graduated from New York University.

"I cast them and all of the actors for a simple reason," Wilkerson said. "They are wildly interesting to watch on stage. The production has a wonderful mix of very familiar faces with some new ones. They all share that quality of being compelling onstage in addition to being able to tell a good story." The supporting cast includes Martha Wilkinson as the Nurse, Chip Arnold as Lord Capulet, Shannon Hoppe as Lady Capulet, Jeff Boyet as Friar Laurence and Peter Vann as Mercutio. In addition, the Apprentice Company, which consists of talented students who are age 13 and older, has the important task of helping create a three-dimensional, living world, Wilkerson said.

Paul Carrol Binkley will serve as musical director and the cast is fortunate to have several accomplished musicians. These include Ben van Diepen as Tybalt, Tom Angland as the Prince, Brad Brown as Peter, Randy Lancaster as Montague and Boyet as the Friar. A rare official song and chorus book from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair has been found and will play an influential role in this year's music. "Every song will be from that specific event in that specific time," Wilkerson said. "The Capulets and the Montagues will even have campaign songs. As soon as you hear any of that music, it instantly transports you back to that time."

Costume design is by [June Kingsbury](#), who has been costuming area theater productions since 1998. Set Design is by [MadeFirst](#) and Light Design is by [Anne Willingham](#).

Hicks noted that the mission of the Nashville Shakespeare Festival is to educate and to entertain the mid-South region through professional Shakespearean performances year round. These include school as well as business workshops and an annual winter production. "One of the best ways to learn about Shakespeare is to see it performed live," she said.

A sign language-interpreted performance is scheduled for Aug. 20.

For more information, go to [www.nashvilleshakes.org](http://www.nashvilleshakes.org) or call 615-255-2273.

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