

Queens thespians turn Shakespearan love into successful theater troupe

Joy and Jason Marr see dramatic growth after six years performing in the borough

BY IRVING DEJOHN / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

The couple that plays together, stays together.

That philosophy has not only led to a healthy marriage for two Queens thespians, but also spawned one of Queens' preeminent theater troupes.

When Sunnyside residents Joy and Jason Marr founded the free Shakespeare company Hip to Hip in 2007, they had a shoestring budget and modest ambitions. They set up in two parks and had a budget for one play.

Now, as they enter their sixth season, starting on Wednesday, they are showing off their dramatic growth buoyed by Queens' interest in the classic.

"The community where we're taking the plays seems hungry for it," said Jason Marr, 37.

Hip to Hip and its troupe of paid actors has extended its reach to 12 parks, adding three southeast Queens locations including the Rockaways this year.

"You're just coming to see a timeless play," said Joy Marr, 36. "There's still something magical about that."

The group reached a "tipping point" last year when they realized an actor's voice would project only so far, the husband said.

"Planes and trains and automobiles have always been a challenge for us," he said of the ambient din of the city.

They invested in \$13,000 worth of audio equipment so they could reach the throngs of new theater lovers.

"That's exciting," said Joy Marr, who will act alongside her husband during this year's performance of "Hamlet." "I'm used to getting out there and shouting my head off."

But before they were the team behind bringing Shakespeare's works to Queens, the two were star-crossed lovers.

The duo met while they were starring together during a production of "Twelfth Night" in Ohio in 1997. Their chemistry on the stage sparked a real-life romance.

When the two moved to Queens, they wanted to share their love of classical theater with their adopted home, which they said is clamoring for performances that don't require a trip to Manhattan.

Now, six years in, they don't appear to be slowing down, especially right before the curtain rises on Wednesday.

"Ever since we started rehearsal it's gone in warp speed," Joy Marr joked.

Hip to Hip will perform in parks throughout Queens from July 25 to Aug. 18. For more information and a full list of performances, visit hiptohip.org.

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