

Shakespeare in the Park Near You

by Paula Neudorf, Associate Editor

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A Queens-based acting troupe called Hip to Hip is performing two Shakespeare plays, "Othello" and "Much Ado About Nothing," in nine different locations around the borough this summer, all for free, beginning this week.



The goal is to bring Shakespeare to as many Queens residents as possible, said Jason Marr, the nonprofit theater company's director and cofounder. For the last five years, Marr and his wife, Joy, a fellow thespian, have been staging these summer Shakespeare productions with fifty percent of its funding coming from Queens Council on the Arts "Arts in Communities Grant Fund" and the other fifty percent coming from private foundations grants and individual donations.

This week saw the troupe's inaugural performance of the summer, a presentation of "Othello" at the Socrates Sculpture Garden on the East River in Astoria. The Sculpture Park provides backdrop views of the river, and beyond, Roosevelt Island. This waterfront backdrop proved especially apt during the play's opening scenes, when the black general Othello (Damon Kinard), wages war by sea and travels to the island of Cyprus. Beginning promptly at 7 p.m. in front of a crowd of people lounging on blankets or sitting on fold-out chairs, the summer light faded as the play progressed, matching the plot's emotional trajectory.

When the play begins, an eloquent Othello seems almost beside himself with joy to have married Desdemona (Joy Marr), who defied her father by loving him. Disbelieving, her father asks how Desdemona could "fall in love with what she feared to look on?" Much is usually made of how the play addresses race. Othello and Desdemona must be one of the first and possibly most famous mixed-race couples prominently featured in a work of art. But it's easy to forget race when focusing on the play's near-anatomical deconstruction of jealousy, at it hooks on to Othello's mind.

This is set in motion when Iago, Othello's right-hand man who secretly hates him, decides to destroy Othello by convincing him that Desdemona is cheating on him. While skeptical at first, Othello can't shake the idea.

Marr, the director, said he paired "Othello" with "Much Ado About Nothing" this year because in the latter, a woman is also wrongly accused of being unfaithful, but the play has a happy ending.

In the former, "Shakespeare says, 'What happens if the woman's innocence is not discovered until its too late?'" Marr explained.

The result at the Socrates Sculpture Garden was tragic and very well-played. And luckily for Marr, the course of love seems to have run smoother for him and Joy. They established the Shakespeare company and settled in Queens so they could start a family, he said. They now have two children, a 3 year old and a 6 month old.

"It's a labor of love," he said of the company.