

Head outdoors, it's showtime

By Kevin Zimmerman

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Anyone who made it through a 10th-grade English class knows in Shakespeare's time men performed the roles written for women. Today such casting is unusual and — as in the case of the recent Broadway run of "Twelfth Night" — cause for celebration. In current productions of Shakespeare's work, audiences are more likely to find women playing male characters.

"I've been cast as a man a few times in Shakespeare plays," Katie Kerr said. Kerr, who recently moved to the city from Los Angeles, takes on another masculine role in Woodside-based Hip to Hip Theatre Co.'s production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," as Slender.



Well, masculine may not be the right word. The young actress has adopted an exaggerated lisp accompanied by limp-wristed hand gestures to portray one of three suitors vying for Anne Page's hand. Although favored by Anne's father, Slender has a slim-to-none chance of winning the girl's heart. "He is a very effeminate man," Kerr said. "But it is such a fun role. It's unlike anything I ever done."

It is also extremely different from her part in Hip to Hip's other show, "The Merchant of Venice," where she gets to be the ingenue, Jessica, daughter of main character Shylock.

In another gender-bending bit of casting, Chaunice Chapman, who lives in Jamaica, will also portray characters that were written as men.

Chapman steps into the role of businessman Salanio in "The Merchant of Venice." She will also play the Host from the Garter Inn, where much of the action of "The Merry Wives of Windsor" takes place.

Although she has been acting since she was 14, this is her first foray into William Shakespeare territory.

“I haven’t really had the opportunity before,” she said. “It’s exciting. The language is unique and fun to say.”

Hip to Hip co-founder Joy Marr, who plays Portia in “The Merchant of Venice” and Mistress Page in “The Merry Wives of Windsor,” acknowledges the uniqueness of the lines but considers the dialogue to be more than just something amusing for the actors to speak.

“There is a dark side to this play [Merchant], but it is so beautiful,” Marr said. “And I get to say such beautiful things.”

With opening night less than a week away, actors cram to learn lines and cast and crew members are hunkered down in rehearsals at Pearl Studios in Manhattan and Spaceworks in Long Island City — the recent string of unsettled weather has forced them to abandon their usual spot in Central Park near Strawberry Fields.

During one of these sessions, Merchant’s director David Mold — Murray McGibbon is at the helm of Merry Wives — confers with Will Watkins, who plays Bassanio, one of the leads.

In order to woo the wealthy Portia, Bassanio borrows money from Antonio, who in turn had to take a loan from Shylock to help his friend. Now the note is due. Antonio, who has suffered business losses, cannot make the payment, but Shylock doesn’t care and wants his money.

Mold wants Watkins to stress certain words in one particular speech, which he believes will better explain Bassanio’s motivation for seeking money and how that has had a ripple effect on the other characters.

This is Watkins’ first time working with Hip to Hip and one of the few professional-level Shakespeare plays in which he has been cast.

“I’m having a blast,” Watkins said. “It’s one of those things where you’re too busy to worry about doing something wrong. Which, in rehearsals, I’m doing a lot wrong.”

But that is OK in this environment, where the company founders as well as the two directors encourage actors to make choices without being afraid to fail, Watkins said.

“Very quickly they have created a safe cocoon to play in,” he said.

For Evangelia Kingsley, who jumps into the slightly-off-kilter role of Mistress Quickly in Merry Wives, Hip to Hip means more than providing actors a place to experiment while honing their acting skills. It was created by Joy and Jason Marr to bring Shakespeare to under-served communities.

“Their art and their heart is in the right place,” she said. “They are clear about their mission. And I love seeing the reactions of people who wouldn’t normally be exposed to this. It is really gratifying.”