

2013 REPORT FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

met-tle *noun* \ 'me-t^əl\

: strength of spirit
: ability to continue despite difficulties

-Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The 2013 season tested our mettle. It was our most ambitious to date: we toured two full Shakespeare productions and a children's program to twelve diverse parks, covering every geographical area of Queens, with gala performances in Newport, New Jersey and Southampton, New York; and though we had our largest production crew to date, many of the burdens of the tour (i.e. daily unloading and loading of sets, costumes, lights, and audio equipment) continued to fall on the dedicated members of the acting company. I am happy to report that the spirit of ensemble playing and the strength of our mission saw us through the challenges, and not only did we produce an impressive season of theatre, but we gained a clearer sense of how to solve some of our most pressing challenges next season. Here are some of the highlights from 2013:



The Tempest at Gantry Plaza State Park



Season Poster 2013
Photo by Julian Voloj, Design by Nina Jones

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Jason Marr
Joy Marr
Katie Dugdale O'Sullivan
Gabourey Sidibe

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING
Dawn Clarke

RESIDENT COSTUME DESIGNER
Nancy Nichols

- Award-winning actress Gabourey Sidibe joined our Board of Directors.
- We were named "Best Theatre Group" in the Queens Tribune's annual "Best of Queens" survey.
- We met our fundraising goal of \$45,000.
- We strengthened our overall organization by creating four new staff positions, and by recruiting a more robust production team.
- We expanded the size of our audience by twenty percent, playing to 6,600 people over the course of our 4-week, 12-park tour.
- We enhanced the quality of our productions with a new multi-level, modular touring set, which included 58 wooden pieces, 80 Bolts, 52 screws, 14 clamps, 20 feet of rope, and a 7-foot walk-through scaffold.

- We handed out 487 diplomas to children who participated in the pilot program of “Kids & the Classics”.
- We were again featured on NY1 News, and we were written about in The New York Times, The Times Ledger, The Queens Tribune, The Southampton Press, and many online periodicals and blogs.
- We blazed new promotional trails with t-shirts, professional playbills, and community outreach.
- We won public funding for the fifth consecutive year from Queens Council on the Arts; we expanded our base of support to include new foundations; and for the first time we won funding directly from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs thanks to our increased profile and the advocacy of New York City Council Member, Jimmy Van Bramer.



Guy Ventoliere as Caliban, Photo by Julian Voloj

A GROWING TEAM

Because of the many advances we have made in way of technical elements of production (i.e. wireless microphones, bigger sets, more sophisticated lights, etc.), a larger production team was a necessity. I am thrilled to report that we successfully built our largest production team to date, including a production stage manager, two assistant stage managers, two assistant directors, two assistant costumers, a set designer, a technical director, and five interns. In addition, we announced four new permanent volunteer staff positions: these individuals have been instrumental in furthering Hip to Hip's mission over the past several years, and I am excited to officially have them on the roster:

Guy Ventoliere, Managing Director

You may know that Guy gave hysterical performances as the twin Dromios in 2012's *Comedy of Errors* and Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, and fascinating turns as Caliban in this past season's *The Tempest* and Costard in *Love's Labor's Lost*, but you may not know that Guy has been responsible for many of Hip to Hip's technical advances over the last three years. His endless energy, and his many years of arts management and theatre development, make him an ideal addition to the Hip to Hip team. In September, he sat down with Anita Gaffney, the executive director of the prestigious Stratford Festival of Canada; in November, he introduced us to our newest Board member, Gabourey Sidibe; and in December, he spearheaded a major campaign to find new sources of funding through private foundations.

David Mold, Associate Artistic Director

You may know that David Mold directed smashing productions for us in 2012 (*Hamlet*) and 2013 (*Love's Labor's Lost*), but you may not know that David had a big hand in building the aforementioned production support team this past season. David's leadership in arts organizations with missions and programming similar to that of Hip to Hip's makes him an asset to our development, and his long history as a theatre arts educator provides us with a bridge to the current crop of aspiring theatre artists.

Nancy Nichols, Resident Costume Designer

You may know that Nancy Nichols turned in several stellar performances for Hip to Hip (Gertrude in *Hamlet*, the Nurse in *Romeo & Juliet*, and Maria in *Twelfth Night*), and you may know that she designed the vibrant costumes for five of our seven seasons, but you may not know that Nancy is one of the hardest working, most charitable artists you will find in New York City. Her experience in all aspects of the theatre, from producing to performing to designing, makes her an insightful adviser and strong leader for Hip to Hip. In September, Nancy's designs for the 2013 season were featured by MFTA (Materials for the Arts).



Love's Labor's Lost, Photo by Julian Voloj

Dawn Clarke, Director of Marketing

If you saw one of our posters hanging in your neighborhood the past two seasons, Dawn Clarke likely put it there. She has a feel for Hip to Hip's grassroots programming, and her marketing savvy is already paying dividends as we tripled our outreach and promotion in 2013, and for the first time, we provided our patrons with professional playbills.



KIDS & THE CLASSICS

Thanks to the generous support of The Davee Foundation, The Josephine Foundation and Joyce Chelberg, we were able to launch a pilot program aimed to give children of all ages a taste of the magic of live theatre by introducing them to classical text and performance. Directed by Managing Director Guy Ventolieri, the goals of the program were to not only entertain children, but also to enrich and empower them.

30 minutes before each performance, we brought the kids up on stage, and, through a series of fun theatre games and activities, we introduced them to the elements of theatre (script, scenery, lighting, makeup, costumes, acting, and actors), we got them excited about the words and imaginative stories of William Shakespeare's plays, we taught them a little audience etiquette, and finally, we had the kids act out lines and scenarios from the plays that they then watched a professional company of actors perform. "Kids & the Classics" aims to inspire the next generation of theatre makers and theatre goers, and I am happy to report that the program was a huge success. We received an overwhelming thumbs-up from the parents, who not only enjoyed seeing their children engaged, but who appreciated the brush-up on their Shakespeare as well.

We reached out to over 200 schools in Queens, and developed positive contacts within many of those schools. From school groups to neighborhood kids to random children who just happened to be riding their bikes through the park at the time of the show, all of the children seemed genuinely engaged by the programming, and their enjoyment of the mainstage show seemed enhanced as a result.



Kids & the Classics in Rockaways and Socrates Park, Photos by Julian Voloj



T-SHIRTS

As a fundraising and branding tool, we produced our first ever company t-shirt. Lead by board member Katie O'Sullivan, we hired a professional designer, and created a t-shirt that captured the spirit of our programming. The t-shirts were sold online and at all performances, and I am pleased to say we made a small profit from the sales. Our secondary goal of branding and outreach was also met, as can be seen by the number of people around town wearing the t-shirts, even during the off-season.

THE PRODUCTIONS

The 2013 season included Shakespeare's early romantic comedy *Love's Labor's Lost* and his final masterpiece *The Tempest*.

As in prior years, both shows offered vibrant period costumes, sets, lights and properties; they featured a professional company of actors; they were geared to appeal to lovers of Shakespeare and to those experiencing Shakespeare for the first time; and, in the proud tradition of Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival, both productions were family-friendly, free and open to the public. In addition, our production of *The Tempest* featured original music composed by Harry Jones.

Our professional sound system, including discreet wireless microphones, held up well in its second year, and our beefed-up production team did a fantastic job of more smoothly operating it.

Hip to Hip has always been committed to giving its audiences a bit of spectacle. Even though we have a short load-in/load-out time, and a limited number of helpers, we have always pushed ourselves to bring our audiences sumptuous costumes and theatrical sets. This year was a no exception. Thanks to increased funding, and because we had a few more "hands on deck", we were able to actualize a dream of having a fully functional, multi-level, modular set. By hiring a professional set designer, and by hiring a professional carpenter to effectuate the design, we were able to get the most bang for our buck, giving us an impressive-looking, yet manageable, structure that allowed for much more dynamic staging.



Production Posters, Photos by Julian Voloj, Design by Jason Marr



Joey Lozada in *The Tempest*, Photo by Julian Voloj

CONCLUSION

Our audiences, our profile, our funding, and the scope of our programming have experienced extraordinary growth over the past seven years:

- In 2007, we served approximately 720 people; in 2013, we served 6,600.
- In 2007, our annual operating budget was \$2,700; in 2013, it was \$45,000.
- In 2007, we took one play to two venues; in 2013, we took a children's show and two handsomely produced productions to twelve diverse parks.
- In 2007, our set consisted of a drape backdrop; in 2013, our productions featured a multi-level modular set, including tent dressing rooms for the acting company and a tent tech booth for the production crew.

- In 2007, the actors competed with planes, trains and automobiles to be heard; in 2013, we toured with a state-of-the-art sound system to ensure that our audiences heard every word.

Another sign of our growth is the extremely positive exposure we've received in the press. Hip to Hip was recently named "Best Theatre Group" in Queens by the Queens Tribune. The New York Times recently wrote that Hip to Hip is proudly carrying the mantle of the legendary Joseph Papp, by taking cultural activity into the boroughs, "where people live and die in their neighborhoods". Hip to Hip has twice been featured on NY1 News (New York City's official 24-hour news channel). Hip to Hip has been featured in Newsday, The Daily News, The Queens Tribune, and The Queens Times Ledger. In 2013, six New York City Council members endorsed our programming, and Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer went so far as to write: "One of Hip to Hip's guiding principles is that theatre is a celebration of community spirit. I share this principle and I am happy to support this great institution."

Finally, and perhaps the most flattering sign of our growth, is that our programming has been replicated by other companies: both Chicago Shakespeare Theatre's free park performances, and Ocean City, Maryland's "Shakespeare at the Beach" were modeled after our program of "Free Shakespeare in the Park".

Hip to Hip has grown so much, so quickly, that we have reached a critical stage in our development. We have an abundance of demand, but due to limited resources, we have maxed out how much we can supply. We have tripled the size of our volunteer staff in an effort to effectively administer the old and new components of our programming, and to keep pace with our organization's growing administrative responsibilities. In addition, we have built a stronger and more effective board, which now includes Oscar-nominated actress, Gabourey Sidibe. In 2013, we stretched every cent of the \$45,000 we raised, to cover the costs of our programming and support this growth.



Andrew Benowich in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Photo by Julian Voloj



James Parenti in *The Tempest*, Photo by Julian Voloj

Hip to Hip has worked hard to develop a strong base of financial support, and in 2014, we anticipate receiving donations and grants totaling \$50,000 from government funding, private sector sources, foundations and private donors. However, we find ourselves at a point where simply sustaining is not enough.

Despite our fundraising efforts, our program budget is far from balanced. Cuts in government financing continue, with more expected, especially those affecting our beneficiaries, in lower income communities. The challenge at this stage is to continue attracting new sources of funding, especially private foundations.

On the logistical front, we have two pressing challenges that must be solved in 2014:

First, we must find a way to become self-sufficient concerning electricity. Because our power needs have greatly increased over the past three years, many of our park venues simply cannot accommodate us. We have already written several grant proposals aimed directly at helping us acquire two (quiet) power generators that will make us totally energy independent, and if we do not win one or more of these grants, we are committed to finding other means to make this necessary purchase.

Second, we must find a way to assist the cast and crew in traveling to and from the farthest venues. Now that we are covering such a wide geographical area, it has become overly burdensome for the team to travel exclusively via public transportation, and our impromptu car pools leave far too much to chance.

These are just a couple of the challenges we face heading into 2014, and I am happy to report that we are already chipping away at them. The coming season promises to be another one for the record books.

We have now selected the plays for our eighth season of “Free Shakespeare in the Park”: *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Cymbeline*; and we have announced the return of “Kids & the Classics.” One iron we have in the fire for spring 2014 is an application for a joint residency with The Shakespeare Society and The Public Theatre in which we would explore the influence of the Italian commedia dell’arte tradition on Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. 2014 promises to be another exciting year for Hip to Hip Theatre Company, full of opportunities to further test our mettle, and I hope you will come along again for the ride.

Jason Marr
Artistic Director



Jason Marr in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Photo by Julian Voloj



Love's Labor's Lost in Flushing Meadows