James Howaniec: Bringing Shakespeare to the banks of the Androscoggin

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Back in the summer of 1979, I was 20 years old and skinny, and was studying Shakespeare and Victorian history at Cambridge University in England. We used to take the one-hour train ride into London to watch some of the greatest actors in the world, including Glenda Jackson as Cleopatra at the Aldwych Theatre, and Derek Jacobi as Hamlet at the Old Vic (with Charlton Heston sitting next to us in the audience). It was a thrill that has stayed with me all of these years later.



James Howaniec

In 1992, I was the mayor of Lewiston, and Jim and Tom Platz flew me and Auburn Mayor Dick Trafton in their private jet to Montreal. We met with the top brass of the Canadian National Railroad and, for a few thousand dollars, bought the railroad trestle connecting the two cities, along with the abutting acres of land on either side of the Androscoggin River. Beautiful parks and walkways have since been developed on each side of the river.

On the Lewiston side, down near the river, there is a wonderful little stage area with a lawn before it that graduates upward. It is a perfect spot for summer theater under the stars.

One of my recollections from those performances on the scepter'd isle back in '79 was their simplicity. Here we had some of the greatest Shakespearean actors in the world, but the sets and costumes were bare-bones. There were no fancy props or annoying modern interpretations. On the banks of the Thames, we were transported back two thousand years

to the ancient plains where Antony's armies were routed. Was young Hamlet mad when he saw his father's ghost on the bare stage at the Old Vic, or was the pale apparition really there from the netherworld, warning of treachery ahead?

My vision for the "Lewiston-Auburn Summer Shakespeare Company" is based on keeping it simple:

1. Let's do three performances each year, starting at 7 p.m., on the last Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings of July — a perfect segue into the balloon festival a week later.

2. We'll cull down the plays to no more than two hours each, with a half hour intermission for socializing. (Hamlet can get a little tedious after four hours.) Performances will be traditional and simple, with no modern adaptations.

3. We'll round up a few business sponsors and maybe get the cities to kick in a little bit, but overhead should be relatively low. The stage already has lighting built in. Perhaps we'll charge $10 for a ticket but won't turn anyone away if they can't afford it, and sell refreshments during the break.

4. We'll recruit a small troupe of actors each summer. Maybe someday this will become a bigger thing; perhaps we can eventually get Bates College involved, and integrate the theater into our local school program. As with anything related to Shakespeare, we are limited only by our imagination.

Last year, I saw Glenda Jackson, now in her 80s, performing the lead role in King Lear in an avant garde performance on Broadway. I got to talk to her for a couple minutes after the performance and told her what a thrill it was to watch her as Cleopatra, 40 years before, in London. She told me: "We got you hooked, didn't we."

She sure did. My exposure to Shakespeare in my youth helped inspire a lifetime of learning. The lessons of Shakespeare are timeless and connect the centuries. An annual summer Shakespeare theater, under the stars on the banks of the Androscoggin, will add yet another attraction to our beautiful riverfront.

It truly has the potential of a midsummer night's dream!

Jim Howaniec is a local attorney and a former mayor of Lewiston.

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