

ONTARIO: SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL COMPLEMENTS THE CITY'S STAGES

Much more than Shakespeare

Theatre will always loom large in Stratford, but music and fine cuisine are playing supporting roles

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STRATFORD, ONT. -- When I was a high school student studying Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, our class went to the Festival Theatre in Stratford to see a live performance.

Within minutes of the lights going up, I understood for the first time how a play could work without curtains rising and falling between acts. All that garbled inscrutable language suddenly made sense and a lifelong addiction to the Bard's plays began. I know I nursed a crush on the actor who played McDuff for months afterward.

Since then, there have been few seasons that I haven't made the trek to Stratford to see at least one performance. Like many Canadians, I am proud of the world stature that our homegrown Shakespearean Festival in Ontario has achieved.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that there was nothing more to Stratford than *Macbeth* and the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

MUSIC

There's music, for example, and the Bard would certainly approve. It's celestial this year as the **Stratford Summer Music Festival** (1-866-288-4313, <http://www.stratfordsummermusic.ca>) showcases the Sky Concert, the North American premiere of this otherworldly musical experience. On Aug. 5, the skies will be full of music as hot air balloons ascend above the city. The free event takes place at 7 a.m. when seven balloons will rise, each one carrying two iPods and two speakers. The concerto was written by British composer Dan Jones for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Portions of the play, narrated by actor Patrick Stewart, accompany the music.

I plan to be on a blanket riverside, perhaps with a bottle of champagne and fresh strawberries, to witness this unique musical experience. For a truly unusual experience, you can purchase a seat in one of the balloons for \$500 and enjoy the music and the scenery from above. The ticket also includes a champagne brunch afterward at Rundles Restaurant.

Because this is the 75th anniversary of Glenn Gould's birth, the festival is also featuring several concerts and lectures that focus on Canada's greatest pianist. John Miller, director of the Stratford Summer Music Festival, explains that Gould had a long and close connection to Stratford, performing at the festival for the first time in 1953.

During this summer's season, the music festival will present concerts by well-known artists in several different venues, from the Canadian piano trio *Triple Forte* performing Gould programs from the 1950s and 60s in the Victorian Town Hall to the casual joy of Toronto's *Swamperella* playing Cajun tunes on a barge on the Avon River which winds through the city.

According to Miller, the music festival is not in any way in competition with the theatre festival, but rather is intended as a supplement.

One of the most popular events is the series of late-night cabarets at the Church Restaurant, an enjoyable combination of comedy, music, wine and good food. It is the perfect post-theatre wind-down. "Actors from the festival often show up and do an impromptu turn on stage," Miller says. "The finale that wraps the cabaret season is always a sellout."

DINING

Music may be the food of love, but real food is a necessity and Stratford has developed into one of the best food scenes in the country, in large part because of the presence of the **Stratford Chefs School** (519-271-1414, <http://www.stratfordchef.on.ca>). Graduates have taken their places in the city's kitchens, often going on to open their own restaurants.

The Church Restaurant (70 Brunswick St., 519-273-3424, <http://www.churchrestaurant.com>) is one of the best, a perfect example of how the culinary offerings have measured up to the sophisticated clientele who visit. Chef Amédé Lamarche serves French-influenced dishes that celebrate local flavours, such as Yukon Gold frites and "twenty-four-hour pork belly with one-hour egg and one-minute onions," a complex riff on different contrasts, textures and tastes. In the Belfry, the restaurant's more intimate dining room up top, it isn't unexpected to encounter luminaries such as Christopher Plummer, Richard Monette, Peter Mansbridge and Cynthia Dale.

Rundles Restaurant (9 Cobourg St., 519-271-6442, <http://www.rundlesrestaurant.com>) serves French haute cuisine with a modern interpretation, and aims to give diners an exceptional meal while still getting them away in time for an 8 o'clock theatre performance.

The Old Prune (151 Albert St., 519-271-5052, <http://www.oldprune.on.ca>) features inventive pairings from chef Bryan Steele, such as steamed Scottish cod with chorizo, clams, garlic and parsley.

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But there are small gems as well, like **Bijou Restaurant** (105 Erie St., 519-273-5000, <http://www.bijourestaurant.com>) for great duck confit, **Boomers Gourmet Fries** (26 Erie St., 519-275-3129) for the best poutine you've ever had, and the **York Street Kitchen** (41 York St., 519-273-6768, <http://www.yorkstreetkitchen.com>), which is famous for its inventive and gigantic sandwiches.

Tea sommelier Karen Harwick at the **Tea Leaves Bar** (433 Erie St., 519-273-1201, <http://www.stratfordtealeaves.com>) will introduce you to the exotic charms of golden Pu-erh tea leaves.

And many of the local restaurants feature the great artisanal sheep cheeses being made by Ruth Klahsen at **Monforte Dairy** (519-595-7921, <http://www.monfortedairy.com>) in nearby Millbank.

On Saturday mornings, there is a true farmers' market, where the people who grow the food are the

For a picnic by the river, stop by **Pass Da Pasta** (127 Albert St., 519-272-1956) for fresh homemade pasta, fresh soups, panini, cheeses and olives.

GARDENS

There are gardens. **The Shakespeare Garden** (located at the Huron Street Bridge) originally designed by acclaimed Canadian landscape architect H.B. Dunnington Grubb, blossoms with plants mentioned in Shakespeare's plays, and the banks of the Avon are lined with green lawns and well tended flower beds.

Queens Park (55 Queen St., 519 271-5140) is just west of the Festival Theatre and includes Meadow Rue Corner, with its indigenous plants and Birnham Wood Arboretum.

SHOPPING

Shopping opportunities in Stratford are eclectic but fun. **The Quilt Gallery** (55 Downie St., 519-272-8194, <http://www.thequilt.com>) has hundreds of beautiful quilts, many by well-known artists such as B.J. Reid, Janet Rhind and Jane Vickery, whose quilt called *Extreme Squeeze* showed up on *Will & Grace*. Some quilts are serious works of art, others whimsical, but most of them are donated and the profits go to breast cancer support services.

Watson's Chelsea Bazaar (84 Ontario St., 519-273-1790) has china, glass, knickknacks and bargain finds, as well as a couple of resident cats, while **MacLeod's Scottish Shop** (80 Ontario St., 519-273-5850), **Kitchen Connoisseur** (75 Ontario St., 519-271-3311), **Fanfare Books** (92 Ontario Street, 519-273-1010) and **Chumley & Pepys Fine Used Books** (48 Albert St., 519-271-3243) remind us of the pleasures of shopping before the mall arrived.

And for the ham in all of us, there is the **Costume Warehouse** (35 Douro St., <http://www.stratfordfestival.ca>). Here, stored away in corners and on shelves are the props, fake food, wigs, hats and costumes that create the magic of the Stratford Theatre. I tried on a dress that was the costume for Queen Isabel in *Henry V*, a fabulous gown that wouldn't be out of place at a modern-day

ball, and felt quite regal. There are regular guided tours of the warehouse, which is the third largest of its type in the world.

ACCOMMODATION

For a B&B with a difference, try the **At Eleven** (11 Elizabeth St., 519-271-3375, <http://www.ateleven.ca>), an elegant and contemporary space, more like a small inn, with art on the walls and excellent breakfast. **Plums** (519-271-5052, <http://www.oldprune.on.ca>) is a small Ontario cottage located, appropriately, next to the Old Prune. There are two suites available. Breakfast in your room or at the Old Prune is included.

For Italian marble baths, Frette robes and Bulgari toiletries, try the **XIS** (6 Wellington St., 519-273-9248, <http://www.xis-stratford.com>). Located right across from City Hall, this small hotel has only six rooms, but they each have a flat-screen TV, contemporary design and high-speed Internet.

While the theatre will always loom large in Stratford, there are many delights to be savoured in this historic Southern Ontario town, before and after the lights go down.

Methinks Will would have delighted in all of them.

Pack your bags

Summer Music Festival

The festival runs from July 23 to Aug. 19 in a variety of venues in downtown Stratford. Admission to all outdoor events and some indoor events is free or by a donation of one's choice. Tickets for other concerts are \$27 to \$54 and can be purchased through the Stratford Festival box office. 519-273-1600 or 1-800-567-1600.

More information

For general information about Stratford and the Festival Theatre, visit: <http://www.welcometostratford.com>, <http://www.stratfordfestival.ca> and <http://www.sensuousstratford.com>.