

# Cultural Daily

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## Stratford Festival Delivers a Memorable Shrew & Stoops

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015

The theatre experience changes when you visit a town where the stage is the main industry. There is a sense of community and celebration absent when patronizing most commercial productions. Instead of consuming a mass Broadway product you're sharing the artisanal offering of passionate local practitioners. (Even Off-Broadway companies' seasons tend to be seen as containing potential transfers to bigger runs or possible prize winners as opposed to pure dramatic expressions.) In the Canadian province of Ontario, several hours' drive from Manhattan, two well-established annual theater festivals—the Stratford in the town of the same name and the Shaw at gorgeous Niagara-on-the-Lake, offer the opportunity for playgoers to indulge in nonstop theater for its own sake with two and sometimes three performances a day. On a recent visit, I crammed in eleven shows in five days, my Stratford impressions are below and I'll take up the Shaw shows in the next column.

My theater marathon began at the impressive Festival Theater (my favorite venue of the seven attended) with a matinee letdown in the form of a rather sleepy staging by John Caird of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*. This merry comedy of four academic male courtiers unsuccessfully resisting the romantic advances of the French princess and her three ladies-in-waiting falls victim to the trap of over familiarity. The capable cast led by handsome Mark Shara's Berowne and attractive Sarah Afful's Rosaline relies on flowery and forced line readings rather than establishing connections with each other. There is no chemistry between any of the four supposedly loving pairs and so their witty declarations of amour fall flat. The supporting comic turns are equally stale with Juan Chioran's pompous Don Armado and Josue Laboucane's buffoonish Costard striking poses instead of believably pursuing the dairymaid Jaquenetta (Jennifer Mogbock in one of the few sincere performances, probably because she has little to say.)



Seana McKenna, Mike Nadajewski, and Wayne Best in *The Physicists* at the Stratford Festival.

Credit: David Hou

Matters improved that evening at *The Physicists*, Friedrich Durrenmatt's black comedy in a new Canadian translation by Birgit Schreyer Duarte. Written at the height of the Cold War in 1961, this dark play imagines a nuclear nightmare set off by three allegedly insane scientists in a Swiss asylum. When nurses begin turning up dead, the authorities intervene and a complex plot combining elements of Agatha Christie, John Le Carre, and Jonathan Swift is unraveled. The play premiered on Broadway in 1964 starring Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. It's hard to imagine such a cynical satire on today's comfy Main Stem.

Miles Potter's sharp direction strikes just the right balance between outrageousness and verisimilitude. The world the characters inhabit is crazy and the actors proceed logically within its terms, no matter how nuts their actions may seem. As the trio of afflicted physicists, Gearing Wyn Davies, Graham Abbey, and Mike Nadajewski are dazzling as they switch from goofily eccentric to coolly rational and back again and Seana McKenna is riotously versatile as their Strangelove-like psychiatrist, transforming from flustered administrator to power-mad dictator without missing a beat.

The following day provided examples of smashing productions of oft-seen favorites, staged with imagination and flair. Martha Henry's *She Stoops to Conquer* makes clever use of Douglas Paraschuk's revolving set and doesn't attempt to "conceptualize" Oliver Goldsmith's 1773 farce of mistaken identity in a rambling country house. Henry delivers the antics in a straightforward, fun manner. Unlike the disconnected lovers in *LLL*, Maev Beaty's Kate Hardcastle and Brad Hodder's Charles Marlowe shoot sparks towards each other and their blazing dynamic is apparent despite the obstacles Goldsmith places in their way. Joseph Ziegler and Lucy Peacock make merry as the confused heads of the household and Karack Osborn is a jolly Tony Lumpkin, the chief prankster.



Deborah Hay and Ben Carlson in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Credit: David Hou

Next was *The Taming of the Shrew*. Modern productions of this Shakespearean warhorse can cross themselves by trying too hard to repudiate its period sexism. Chris Abraham wisely tones down any apologies for the behavior of the chauvinistic Petruchio and emphasizes the unlikely love match between him and the headstrong Kate and the wild comic elements surrounding it. He begins by restoring the oft-cut prologue wherein the drunken Christopher Sly is duped into thinking he's a great lord and *Shrew* is an entertainment for his pleasure. Here Sly is a disruptive arts blogger refusing to turn off his cell phone, played with proper petulance by Ben Carlson who later turns up as Petruchio. This allows some tasty insider jokes about both the Stratford and Shaw festivals and sets the right ungirdled atmosphere. Carlson as Petruchio and Deborah Hay as Kate are perfectly-matched combatants, athletically tossing each other around during their jousts, and spectacularly romantic when their boxing gloves come off. The supporting clowns are among the best I've ever seen in these roles. Tom Rooney and Gordon S. Miller as the servants Tranio and Biondello nearly steal the show with the on-target tomfoolery. This *Shrew* provided a glorious and joyous ending to my two-day visit. (The Shaw Festival will be covered in my next review.)

*Love's Labour's Lost*: Aug. 14—Oct. 9. Festival Theatre, 55 Queen St., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: three hours including one intermission.

*The Physicists*: May 27—Sept. 20. Tom Patterson Theatre, 111 Lakeside Dr., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including one intermission.

*She Stoops to Conquer*: June 4—Oct. 10. Avon Theatre, 99 Downie St. Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including one intermission.

*The Taming of the Shrew*: June 8—Oct. 10. Festival Theatre, 55 Queen St., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: three hours including one intermission.

All productions: repertory schedule; \$195—\$25 (Canadian); (800) 567-1600 or [www.stratfordfestival.ca](http://www.stratfordfestival.ca).

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This review has previously appeared on [ArtsinNY.com](#).

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