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11-26-2008

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### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Haenicke, Diether, "Theater productions at Stratford, Ontario, are large and superb" (2008). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 47.

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## Theater productions at Stratford, Ontario, are large and superb

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*November 26, 2008*

Some 15 years ago, my wife and I visited Stratford, Ontario, and the annual Shakespeare Festival. It was a late discovery. The festival, by that time, was already well established.

It had begun in 1953, when Alec Guinness, as Richard III, stepped on the provisional first stage reciting the famous lines, "This is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this sun of York." The tent in which the famous actor performed has since been replaced by a magnificent Festival Theatre to which three other, more intimate venues, were later added.

Today, the festival has grown into one of the most significant art events in North America, featuring 750 performances during a 30-week season with more than 600,000 visitors each year. Some of the world's best known stage actors have appeared here, among them Brian Bedford, Hume Cronyn, Julie Harris, William Hutt, James Mason, Christopher Plummer, Jason Robards, Maggie Smith, Jessica Tandy and Peter Ustinov.

This year we went during the last days of the season, which closed on Nov. 9. We had been to Stratford once before for the late season, which is quite different from the summer, when the festival is at its height. By November, the long lines of tour buses have disappeared and one can drive up to the Festival House and park just a few steps away from the entrance. The performances are still well-attended, but fewer people in the audience are from the U.S., and one sees more high school students.

Stratford on Avon, as the town is actually called, was named after the birthplace of William Shakespeare and was a furniture-producing town before it remembered its iconic name and reinvented itself as a center for the arts. It is today a quaint little town with about 30,000 year-round inhabitants and has chosen the swan as the symbol of the

city. Each spring, 24 white and two black swans are released into the Avon, where they swim majestically past the thousands of tourists who promenade along the river.

Like many small, rural towns in Canada, Stratford reminds one of the U.S. of 40 years ago. Small, modest-looking homes line the residential streets. Family-run shops still abound, and although one finds a chain supermarket in the center of town, it hardly meets the glitzy standards of its American equivalents. Cozy pubs and a few old-fashioned hotels downtown still serve their purpose as they did half a century ago.

Except for a fairly modern but completely nondescript big hotel at the outskirts of town, visitors stay in the dozens of bed and breakfasts where one sleeps in comfortable, smallish guestrooms, many of which still glow with the charm of the Victorian era. Many tourists stay year after year in the same cozy little hostleries and bond over time with their congenial Canadian hosts.

Also, in other aspects time has stood still in rural Canada. When high school students come to festival performances, they are giggly and self-involved just like any similar age group elsewhere. But they dress differently. The boys wear real pants and dress shirts -- no blue jeans and T-shirts -- and the girls do their hair and appear in dresses and nice shoes. Their dress code is definitely a tad more formal than that of their American counterparts, and I haven't seen one Canadian teenager yet who starts text messaging the moment she takes her seat in the theater.

The performances are, by and large, superb. We saw a satisfactory "Romeo and Juliet," an absolutely glorious "Caesar and Cleopatra," by George Bernard Shaw and, wonders never cease, a play by the German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, titled "Emilia Galotti," written in 1772. It was a revolutionarily staged production by a leading Berlin theater and performed entirely in German. The play is a classic of German literature. I had read and seen it several times before, but hardly recognized it in this extremely modern production. The Avon Theatre was packed and the final curtain applause thunderous.

Western Michigan University professor Gus Gianakaris, in cooperation with Carolyn Mack Tours, leads an expertly guided Stratford tour each summer. If you haven't been to the festival, do yourself a favor and sign on for next year.

*This column was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette [mlive.com/kalamazoo](http://mlive.com/kalamazoo)*