

All the world's a stage / As summer winds down, here are last chances to catch Shakespeare in the great outdoors

David Templeton, Special to The Chronicle
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Ives Park, Sebastopol, CA "12th Night",
Shakespear. Sebastopol Shakespear Festival.
Viola/ Sara Hernandez Photo/ John O'Hara

It's no secret that at the end of **William Shakespeare's** epic tragedy "Romeo and Juliet," the love-struck teenagers kill themselves. Likewise, no one is surprised when, in the gender-bending "Twelfth Night," Orsino ends up falling for the luscious Viola even though he's spent the previous three acts whining about Olivia and believing that Viola is a boy named Cesario.

It's also no secret -- especially here in the Bay Area -- that watching as youthful actors cross-dress, drink poison and eviscerate themselves with daggers is a whole lot more fun when it takes place outdoors under a clear and darkening sky, while wrapped in a warm blanket and sipping hot chocolate.

Theatergoers can find Shakespeare at Ives Park in Sebastopol, at Dominican **University** in San Rafael and at Stinson Beach.

"Even though everything happens in the wide outdoors, I always find that there is something surprisingly intimate and cozy about outdoor Shakespeare," says **Scott Phillips**. Phillips is the producing artistic director of the 12-year-old Sebastopol Shakespeare Festival, running in Sebastopol's leafy, goose-haunted Ives Park, where shows take place on a permanent stage situated roughly between the picnic tables and the swimming pool.

The annual festival opened in July with a rousing Old World melodrama, continued with a stripped-down, restructured version of the popular "Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" (held over until Saturday) and will finish with "Twelfth Night."

This staging of the popular "Twelfth Night" has been directed by San Francisco actor-director-magician **Ken Sonkin**, whose credits include work with **American Conservatory Theatre**, Berkeley Rep, the Marin Shakespeare Festival, Pennsylvania Centre Stage and the **Denver Center Theatre Company**. As a director, he has won numerous awards and has a knack for breathing fresh, exuberant life into familiar works, such as "West Side Story," "Noises Off" and "The Crucible."

"Being a magician, Ken brings a sense of showmanship and spectacle to everything he directs," says Phillips (who will be playing the Puritanical butler, Malvolio in "Twelfth Night") "and you can see that in the way he's pulled this production together. He's even pulled a prologue out of thin air that helps set up the backstory, and it's just extremely exciting -- really starting the show off with a bang."

Sonkin says his favorite Shakespeare comedy "is a play about madness. It's about the madness of love, the madness of grief, the madness of revenge. It's madness!

"Having been a Shakespeare actor for many years, I've seen so many concept productions of 'Twelfth Night,' but with this production I've avoided the urge to set it in a different time period or do something crazy and weird with the text. I'm approaching it as a storyteller, recognizing that from a storytelling point of view, 'Twelfth Night' is one of the best tales that Shakespeare ever wrote. I just get out of Shakespeare's way, put the best actors I can find in these wonderful roles, work to bring Shakespeare's amazing language to life, and let the story unfold as it was intended."

Sonkin also has elected to have the play performed as a theater-in-the-round experience, even bringing chairs onto the stage so some audience members will get an extra-special close-up view.

"I'm tickled with what we've got here," Sonkin says. "This has turned out to be a wonderful, actor-driven piece, full of great theatrical moments and cool, cleavage-baring costumes, and told in a simple, dramatic, exciting way that I think will play beautifully in a place like Ives Park."

The play's the thing

"Twelfth Night" is presented by the Sonoma County Repertory Theater at Ives Park (Willow Street and Jewell Avenue), Sebastopol. Performances start at 7 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Tickets: \$20; \$15 for students and seniors. The theater area opens at 5:30 p.m. for picnicking. (707) 823-0177 or www.the-rep.com.