

## Much Ado About Shakespeare

Twenty-eight years ago Tom Patterson, a journalist, seized on what seem two irrelevancies. His hometown had the same name as Shakespeare's and it also had a large riverside park. These seemed sufficient reasons for the town to underwrite a summer of Shakespeare in the open air.

The original plan was quaint.

"We had some rather absurd ideas," a member of the first committee recalls. "We were going to have girls dressed up in Elizabethan costumes and Beefeaters standing at the doors and all sorts of Ye Olde Englishy touches."

Stratford's Junior Chamber of Commerce gave Patterson \$50 for expenses and he went to New York in search of Laurence Olivier. Name actors, he found, preferred to work with name directors and producers. Dora Mavor Moore, the founder of Toronto's New Play Society, suggested that Tom ask Tyrone Guthrie of London for advice. Guthrie, whose *Midsummer Night's Dream* had just flopped, agreed to visit Canada.

"I was free," he said later, "and I'd go anywhere if expenses were paid, particularly if it was far away."

He came first as an advisor and then returned as artistic director with a model for a radical stage designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. He rejected the Elizabethan maids, doormen and open air performances (his Old Vic presentation of *Hamlet* had been rained out in Denmark) and commissioned the largest theatrical tent ever manufactured in North America—four poles weighing a ton-and-a-half each, ten miles of guide rope, and acres of blue canvas. He secured the services of two notable actors, Sir Alec Guinness and Irene Worth, and recruited a solid Canadian company to back them up.

The first play, *Richard III*, opened on June 12, 1953. It has since been customary to refer to that opening as the most exciting night in the history of Canadian theatre. Guinness came on stage, slyly, almost shyly, and spoke in a confiding voice:

"Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer/By this sun of York."

The prophecy would prove more accurate for the Festival than for the King. In the words of one critic, the audience "reeled into the night air, filled with exhilaration, relief and satisfaction."

Guthrie put the second play, *All's Well That Ends Well*, in a fanciful modern time and it was, if anything, an even greater triumph. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* and hundreds of other critics from Canada and the United States came to praise.

It was a dazzling beginning. The next twenty-eight years would often be glorious and spectacular, sometimes daring, and now and then tumultuous. The gentle folk of Stratford who had missed out at the beginning would come to envy those who had hurled themselves into the breach in the glorious summer of 1953.



The Stratford Festival opened in 1953 with Sir Alec Guinness as Richard III.

## The Theatre

Tyrone Guthrie had noted early on the Festival tent's drawbacks as well as its practicality.

"On hot nights the audience and actors are fried in their own fat. On cold nights the play is given to a castanet obbligato of chattering teeth. In high wind the gallant Tabernacle rocks like a windjammer at sea. Rain drumming on the canvas roof makes a most glorious and Wagnerian effect but it completely obliterates the puny competition offered by the actors. A more solid structure is clearly indicated."

The giant canvas was folded at the end of the season in 1956, and the following winter 150 construction workers built the permanent tent-like brick building designed by Robert Fairfield. In January the late Right Honourable Vincent Mas-