



All the world's a stage when the World Shakespeare Festival comes to London this summer, with theatrical performances from dozens of international companies happening across the capital.

BY JO CAIRD



Visit London at any time of year and you're likely to find a major production by William Shakespeare on one of the city's stages. This summer, visitors to the capital will have even more options than usual, as dozens of theatre companies from the UK and around the world come together for the **World Shakespeare Festival** (to Sep), forming part of the Cultural Olympiad.

Even though Shakespeare lived 400 years ago and never set foot in the exotic locations where many of his plays were set (think Italy, Cyprus and Ancient Egypt), his work feels as relevant and vital today as it has always done, both at home and abroad. Given the enormous influence his plays, sonnets and narrative poems have had on British cultural heritage over the decades, it's no surprise that the playwright is still required reading for children learning English literature here in the UK. And, we should also take great pride that Shakespeare is studied by 50 per cent of the world's schoolchildren – that's 64 million every year. From Austria to Zaire, Shakespeare is alive and well in the mouths and minds of young people.

But his legacy isn't just limited to schools. One of the most translated writers ever to have lived, his work is performed in theatres around the globe. The World Shakespeare Festival, which opened on 23 April – Shakespeare's 448th birthday, also the anniversary of his death and, coincidentally, St. George's Day – continues for a mammoth six months, further proof (as if we need it?) of his continuing relevance. His plays speak to different cultures and situations at different times, bringing universal themes that concern us in our contemporary lives. There's proof enough to see how his plays have been adapted – for example *Romeo And Juliet's* storyline was brought to the present day for the movie *West Side Story*, while *The Taming Of The Shrew* is seen in a different light in the film *Kiss Me Kate*.

You can catch the end of the **Globe To Globe** season (to 9 Jun), which has been one of the most ambitious and unusual elements of the festival. Performed at the wonderful **Shakespeare's Globe** (left; p. 50), a recreation of an Elizabethan theatre, the season presents all 37 of the Bard's plays in a different foreign language. With each of the international companies performing in their own tongue, including from Iran, Ghana, Russia and Turkey, it's a genuine



A Midsummer Night's Dream at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre

snapshot of theatre from around the world, demonstrating how people have taken Shakespeare into their hearts.

Elsewhere in London, there's plenty more of the Bard's works to choose from, in all shapes and styles, and appealing to different audiences. Little kids and their families have a treat in store with *In A Pickle* at **Stratford Circus** theatre (Theatre Sq, E15. T: 020-8279 1001. www.stratford-circus.com). This adaptation of *A Winter's Tale* is a co-production between the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and respected children's theatre company Oily Cart, featuring an interactive journey for audience members with live music (19-23 Jun).

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Music is definitely the food of love at the **Royal Opera House**, as Verdi's *Otello* (p. 78), produced by the RSC, takes centre stage.

Shakespeare's tragedy is transformed into this much-loved masterpiece, written in 1887, bringing the passionate storyline to life, of the jealous Othello and his beautiful wife Desdemona, with a sweeping score.

Meanwhile, in the depths of the funky **Roundhouse** (p. 76), a venue renowned for its off-beat performances, Brazilian director Renato Rocha stages the atmospheric Shakespeare-inspired production *The Dark Side Of Love* (26 Jun-

8 Jul) exploring the painful and tragic aspects of love that are experienced so often by his characters. Upstairs, the RSC presents *The Shipwreck Trilogy*, a trio of plays exploring themes of migration, exile and discovery (1-5 Jul). *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy Of Errors* share one company of actors, with each performer playing multiple roles.

Adventurous theatregoers will enjoy off-beat, contemporary takes on works such as *Macbeth: Leila And Ben — A Bloody History* at **Riverside Studios** (Crisp Rd, W6. T: 020-8237 1111. www.riversidestudios.co.uk). This Tunisian production (performed in Arabic with English subtitles) reimagines the troubled pair at the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy as Zine Ben Ali, former president of Tunisia, and his wife Leïla.

Further highlights include legendary Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa's production of the rarely performed romantic tragedy *Cymbeline* at the **Barbican** (1-2 Jun, p. 76), Simon Russell Beale as *Timon Of Athens* at the **National Theatre** (from 10 Jul) and the Iraqi Theatre Company's *Romeo And Juliet In Baghdad* playing at **Riverside Studios** (28-30 Jun). Set in contemporary Iraq and performed in Arabic with English subtitles, the world's most famous love story is told using Arabic folklore, music and ritual.

You don't have to be a Shakespeare devotee to be completely charmed by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and there's hardly a more appropriate setting than the **Open Air Theatre** in Regent's Park (from 2 Jun; p. 78). It's as if the fairytale venue was simply made for this, one of the Bard's most magical plays. No surprise that it's been performed here in 50 different productions, ever since the first one in 1933, which was the theatre's first full season.

Even if you haven't read a sonnet since schooldays, make the most of the Bard's brilliance in London this summer. www.worldshakespearefestival.org.uk



Sebastian Hagen in *Twelfth Night*



left: *Otello* at Royal Opera House; above: *The Comedy Of Errors* at the Roundhouse

