

"There is something in this more than natural"

## Stratford (Ont.) Hails Will Shakespeare

By Kristy Borth

**I**N NINE weeks during the summer of 1954 the little town of Stratford-on-Avon, Ontario, (population 19,000) was host to more than 125,000 visitors. They came from all parts of Canada, the United States and from Europe. Six nights a week they packed themselves, almost 2,000 at a time, into an amphitheatre under a gaily pennoned tent to watch a troupe of

actors perform Shakespearean plays in this, the town's second Shakespearean Festival. In 1955, though records are incomplete at the time of writing, the throngs have been even more remarkable.

"What's in a name?" Stratford got its name accidentally in 1831, when William Sergeant was offered a piece of land free if he would build an inn beside a new road through

the Canadian wilderness. Sergeant agreed, and built his inn at a spot where the road crossed the Little Thames River. For a tavern sign, he hung up a picture of Will Shakespeare; in time the name attached itself to the inn, the hamlet at the bridge became Stratford, and the river was called Avon.

Eventually, the railway came, and with it a collection of small industries that clustered near the stream and made the banks of the Avon an eyesore. Then, in 1904, the people of Stratford organized a Parks Board to clean up the riverfront. Over the years it acquired land, planted trees and shrubs, and dredged the river to form lovely Lake Victoria in the heart of the town. Today there are 1,300 acres of parks from one end of the town to the other, their centre of interest a formal English garden tucked beside the arched stone bridge at the original crossing — Stratford's Shakespeare Gardens.

But, for all its parks, Stratford was to its neighbours "just a railway workshop town," and the townspeople had their lovely Avon pretty much to themselves—until Tom Patterson came along. The Shakespearean Festival is the fulfilment of a boy's dream.

Twenty years ago, when he was 15, Tom Patterson had never seen a serious stage production. But he had lived all his life in this place where streets, districts and schools bear Shakespearean names. One

night when the Canadian National Railway band was playing in a Stratford park, Tom sprawled on the turf with the music floating between him and the stars. He began to visualize "a Shakespearean theatre here, just like the one in Stratford in the Old Country." The idea excited him. It never left him.

After six years as a soldier in the Second World War, Tom went to work for a magazine in Toronto. He kept his dream to himself until one day in 1951, when he ran into the mayor of Stratford, David Simpson. He told the mayor of his idea. Simpson was enthusiastic, and Tom went to Stratford to talk further to anyone who would listen. Finally, the Stratford Chamber of Commerce formed a committee to "study possibilities." Then someone suggested that Tyrone Guthrie, former director of the Old Vic Theatre in London, might be interested. Tom phoned him across the ocean and said he thought he could dig up 500 dollars if Guthrie would come over and advise the committee.

When Patterson met Guthrie at the Toronto airport in July, 1952, the towering Scots-Irishman demanded, "Now, what's all this about?" Tom started to reply by confessing that he knew nothing about theatre. "If the rest of the committee is as honest, we'll get along all right," said Guthrie.

The director expected that the Stratford committee would consist "mainly of artistic and excitable



A scene from "King Richard III"

Condensed from *The Montrealer*

elderly ladies of both sexes, with a sprinkling of businessmen to restrain the others from spending money." Instead, he was surprised at the youth of the group, and that men outnumbered women five to one.

After two weeks' investigation, Guthrie gave the group his professional advice: Canada had enough good talent for all supporting rôles for such a project, but get stars—"the very best"—for the leads. Only two plays a season at first. Lavish costumes, but simple lighting and settings. An apron stage, to return to the intimacy that existed between cast and audience in Shakespeare's time. No permanent building until there was an audience big enough to warrant it. Meanwhile, a tent would give shelter, wouldn't it?

Then, after presenting his bill for two weeks' expenses — \$7.50 — Guthrie flew back to Britain to direct at the Edinburgh Festival.

The following month Tom Patterson came to England to scout for talent. He sought out Alec Guinness and invited him to lunch. "Can we talk money?" Tom asked early. But by the time lunch was finished Guinness was so enthusiastic that he was saying, "Look, Tom, I'll be satisfied with the minimum."

Besides Guinness, who turned down a fat film offer to accept this job, Tom lined up Guthrie as producer, and the talented stage and set designer, Tanya Moiseiwitsch.

By December, Guthrie and Guinness had decided on the plays: *King*

*Richard III* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Guthrie went to Canada and, in five days, interviewed 317 candidates for supporting rôles. The Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada Foundation had been set up with Doctor Harrison Showalter as chairman and Tom as Director of Planning; now they set out to raise 150,000 dollars in donations.

Tanya Moiseiwitsch's design for the theatre was unique and daring. It called for a concrete amphitheatre resembling a deep-dish pie with all but one slice removed. The remaining slice, projecting into the centre of the amphitheatre would be the stage, built on several levels. Seats would be tiered up on three sides round it, with no spectators more than 55 feet from the stage. The entire amphitheatre was to be covered with canvas suspended by cables from external masts.

A Toronto firm of architects went to work on the plans, a Chicago firm agreed to make the tent, and in April, 1953, a young local contractor, Oliver Joseph Gaffney, began excavating. "Now," says Guthrie, "the Jeremiahs, the Headshakers, the Finger-Waggers began to have a good time." Public confidence in the project weakened. Collections slowed. Collections stopped.

The crisis came on May 8, while contracts were being signed. The Foundation was committed to pay 66,400 dollars, but had collected only 48,250 dollars. And by the end of the week the Foundation would

have to pay 15,000 dollars for the tent. The fulcrum on which all now turned was the faith of one man, Gaffney, the contractor.

Calmly, Gaffney announced that he would keep his construction crews and machinery at work whether he was paid or not. His declaration turned the tide.

The following week two anonymous donations were received, one for 10,000 dollars, the other for 25,000 dollars. Soon the collections from subscribers reached 157,000 dollars. Ticket sales began to boom, and an extra week had to be added to the schedule to take care of the 62,000 requests. Now Tom Patterson's "impractical idea" had become "our festival."

And then, on July 13, 1953, came opening night. At dusk a two-ton bell rang out, calling for silence in the town. A fanfare of trumpets summoned the gathered notables—and critics—through the turnstiles. The lights dimmed. Then, in the silent blackness, a pencil of light stabbed out and caught the crook-backed, malevolent figure of Richard as he launched the evening with:

"Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer..."

Later that night, when the spell was broken, the enthusiasm of the audience gave hope to all who had believed in the venture. The next night's performance of *All's Well That Ends Well* was even more warmly received. Before the season

ended, the favourable reviews and the mounting demands for tickets convinced even the sceptics: the Festival was in Stratford to stay.

That winter the whole town became part of the team. Women stopped playing bridge to organize themselves into Shakespeare study classes. The town's bookseller happily discovered that the Bard was a best-seller. Foundation headquarters had to be enlarged because of the flood of out-of-town requests for tickets for the 1954 season.

That year they staged *Measure for Measure* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, and also Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. James Mason was brought from Hollywood as star. When the season ended, the profits not only wiped out the first year's losses but left a balance of 32,000 dollars. This year, in addition to *Oedipus Rex* again, and *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, there was a month of musical concerts.

The tent will last two more years at least, but the townspeople talk now of a permanent theatre. They know that something unusual has happened here on the banks of the Avon. A stirring of the spirit lights their eyes when they tell you how Stratford—a railway workshop town that got its proud name by accident—has earned the right to call itself the Classic City.

What's in a name?

"There is something in this more than natural, if philosophy could find it out."