



Shakespearean legacy finds a mover and shaker in Miami

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“When you go to cut a Shakespeare play, it's like cutting the Bible,” said Gail Deschamps, president of the Florida Shakespeare Festival. “Where are you going to cut? What poetry is going to be lost?”

Nevertheless, that's her job. As creator and president of the festival, Deschamps works long hours all year whittling the plays down to contemporary attention spans, directs at least one play per season, writes the grants, goes after most of the funding, oversees the artistic details, lays out the brochures, tends to figures for annual reports and taxes, and plans as far as three years ahead.

“When I come into the office, they nickname me ‘The Tornado,’ because they know I'm coming in with 10,000 things to do,” she said.

The result is the annual two-month Shakespeare Festival at Vizcaya, which opened last night with “As You Like It” on the Casino Mound at Villa Vizcaya.

Apparently, the efforts of Deschamps and her small staff are paying off. Attendance has doubled each year since its inception, from 5,121 in 1983 to 10,500 in 1984 and 24,400 last year.

Furthermore, Deschamps says she has figures that show 32 percent of the audience comes from outside Dade County, with season-ticket holders from Broward and Palm Beach counties and as far away as Melbourne, Ocala and Naples.

“This year we're expecting 40,000,” she predicted. “I think they're finally beginning to realize there's a Shakespeare festival here every year. I'm not going to be satisfied until they're lined up down South Miami Avenue to get in. I think we can build it to where we sell out.”

Deschamps came up with the festival idea during a time of self-searching after the death by cancer of her first husband, a New Orleans promoter. Her interest in theater stems from experience in light opera and summer stock in Vancouver, B.C., where she won her

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Equity card at 15, to professional musical theater and San Diego's Old Globe Theater.

While in Miami Beach with a show at the Theater of the Performing Arts, Deschamps met and married her present husband, and found the area ripe for a Shakespeare company.

In 1979 she formed the South Florida Theater Company, which mainly performed in schools. From that company grew the Vizcaya festival, planned in 1982 and opened in 1983 after intense research of other Shakespeare festivals.

The foremost warning: Don't go too far too fast.

The company concentrated on building an audience by presenting the Bard's comedies and a fourth play by another author. Deschamps listened to criticism that the company's stable of actors was too young and added older character actors this year. Building a varied pool of actors is crucial, since the tragedies demand age and maturity.

"Richard III," the festival's first full-fledged tragedy, is planned next year. Deschamps is negotiating for an actor from the Royal Shakespeare Company to star.

Meanwhile, she continues to alter Shakespeare for 20th-century audiences. "As You Like It" is in splendid 15th-century costumes, with a specially commissioned score; "Comedy of Errors" will be "Marx Brothers *a la crazy*," she says. "Julius Caesar" has been adapted and moved to a 1994 dictatorship in a fictional Central American country. Moliere's "The Doctor in Spite of Himself" will be done with original music and racy lyrics by Fernando Fonseca, who updated "Two Gentlemen of Verona" last year.

None of the shows runs more than two hours and a half.

"We're getting a lot of people coming who've never read a Shakespeare play," Deschamps said. "I don't think the plays are too hard to understand the way we do them.

"The hardest thing in the world to do is to convince the public that they can come to Shakespeare and have a blast. I think the reason is because the scholars have written so much criticism that's been studied in school very dryly, and the general public feels it's like opera. It's out of reach, no way they can possibly enjoy it.

"Shakespeare plays are meant to be done. They're so universal. They touch every emotion you can possibly have, every drive, ambition, greed, hate, love, that are all inside of us."

Further improvements this year include chairs with cushions, lights in the trees, flagstone covering for the Casino mound and a new thrust stage equipped with a hexagonal performing disk.

They have yet to teach the raccoons to tap dance or the

hawks to do loop-the-loops, so the unique outdoor atmosphere remains unaffected.

"When Shakespeare did it, people brought their lunch and their girlfriend, and it was during the day. I wouldn't be surprised if people left and came back. It was such a different type of entertainment. It wasn't enclosing people in a theater and sitting them down and doing the plays.

"There were even times in Shakespeare's day when the audience participated. If someone didn't do good fencing, if anyone wasn't good, I'm sure they got food thrown at them, too.

"Not at Vizcaya. And they do have picnics. American audiences are very polite. I don't think they would throw food. But they would get up and walk out.

"We don't have anybody walk out at Vizcaya," she added with a laugh. "It's a long way to the parking lot."