

travel

ONTARIO SETS THE STAGE

BY MERLE EXIT

Theatre festivals are popping up all over the globe, two of which are concurring in Ontario, Canada. Niagara-on-the-Lake sports the site of the Shaw Festival and it's only 15 minutes from Niagara Falls. And there's the Stratford Festival, west of Toronto.

The Shaw Festival, running through the end of November, is said to be the only theatre festival in the world that specializes exclusively in plays by Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries along with plays about the period of Shaw's life.

There are three theatres in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Festival Theatre features three productions: Shaw's comedies *You Never Can Tell* and *Major Barbara*, and the landmark Broadway Sondheim musical *Gypsy*.

The Court House Theatre's three productions are R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, a gripping drama about war and the trenches; *The Autumn Garden*, written by Lillian Hellman, and one of her last plays; and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Belle Moral: A Natural History*, a new gothic comedy and Scottish who-

dunit.

The Royal George Theatre, originally built as a vaudeville house, offers Somerset Maugham's *The Constant Wife*; *Happy End*, a Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht musical; William Inge's *Bus Stop*; and *Something On The Side* by Georges Feydeau, a lunchtime one-act sexual comedy that takes place at a Paris restaurant.

So much for the theatre portion of NOTL. The main street has lots of shops, restaurants and art galleries, and the area is dotted with loads of wineries. I didn't spend much time walking about "downtown" except for popping into Poulin Art Gallery on King Street, a venue for the French Canadian artiste.

The adventure portion. I drove to Niagara Falls for Niagara Helicopter Limited. It's a Canadian \$105 ten-minute trip. Not only did I not feel the fear of heights but I sat next to the pilot looking down upon the area via a glass bottom window.

Fear of water. Now that was different. Whirlpool Jet Boat Tours (www.whirlpooljet.com) operates out of NOTL. You're on a jet boat that speeds to 55mph along the lake with about 40 passengers. The boat does a sudden 360 degrees, slows up

to enter the rapids and then accelerates as water gushes into the boat. Not a dry body in the audience. I highly recommend it!

Totally soaked, I met Gary T. Burroughs, the Lord Mayor of NOTL. It turns out that he was the former owner of the Oban Inn where I was staying. The inn, located on Front Street, not only has fabulously decorated rooms, and a pretty good restaurant, but a great view of the lake. It's also in walking distance of the festival!

The Shaw Festival is big but doesn't top the acclaimed Stratford Festival (Stratfordfestival.ca), located 90 minutes west of Toronto. It is North America's largest classical repertory theatre and Shakespeare is only a part of it.

This year most performances are running until the end of October with the exception of *Hello Dolly* with its final show on November 6. Shows range from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, and Hellman's *The Lark* to Tennessee Williams' *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, the Noel Coward comedy *Fallen Angels*, and Sondheim's musical *Into The Woods*. And that's just the two largest venues. You'll find a full

schedule on the website.

What's most interesting about the shows is that you'll find members of one cast on the stage of another show ... but not at the same time. The acting company is an extremely talented repertory group trained to perform several roles.

I stayed at A Hundred Church Street, a gay owned/operated Bed & Breakfast (guess what the address is) whose location allowed the town to be walkable for me. Tim Dwyer and Garry McCubbin are the great hosts and display the rainbow flag. Excellent breakfast, too.

From here you can walk just a few blocks to Avon River. The Shakespearean Gardens are located across from the Court House. Folks who know, frequent the York Street Kitchen (rainbow window sticker) not only for the food, but because of their take-out window: double-fisted sandwiches and benches to view the river. It's one of those good food and inexpensive eateries and even worth dining in for their dinner menu.

What draws people to the river are the Stratford Swans. These vegetarians are just adorable and approachable as well. On the same York Street block Distinctively Tea has the largest assortment of South African Rooibos teas that I've ever come across. The tea comes from a honey bush and is considered to be an anti-toxin. They have a mail-order catalogue.

Another short walk will take you

to Rundles Restaurant at 9 Cobourg Street serving contemporary haute cuisine. They not only offer great food but a cooking school too. My only beef with them is that when I ordered a South African tea, no one, including the owner or chef, knew that it was a naturally decaffeinated Rooibos tea.

There are two excellent chocolate places. Rheo Thompson Candies are located at 55 Albert Street (888-271-6910). The candies are made on the premises. Machines do a lot of the work due to the demand. But the candy's centers are prepared in the "kitchen" as well. They are noted for their Mint Smoothies. Those who are addicted to the mint chocolate Girl Scout cookies will appreciate them. The center is not that goöey white stuff, but a soft chocolate with mint oil.

Derek and Jacqueline Barr opened Chocolate Barr's Candies at 136 Ontario Street. Although both companies use the same bulk chocolate, Barr's hand-makes each piece and has a bittersweet chocolate that they use as well as an excellent white chocolate that's tastier than most.

There are lots of shops (antiques, books, clothing). For the festival, check out The Theatre Store for memorabilia and original costume sketches. Have fun! ▼

Merle Exit is a travel writer based in Woodhaven, New York. More articles on dining and entertainment are on

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