

Bill Rea ? My annual helping from the Bard

Having been a high school kid many, many years ago, I can still appreciate there are some points of the school year that a lot of kids dread.

I well remember the day in Grade 12 English class when the teacher, almost apologetically, announced we had reached the traditional least favourite time of the year for most students ? We were about to start the annual delve into Shakespeare.

We studied Othello that year, and I would have to do some boning up before I could tell you what it was about. That year was not one the high points of my academic life.

But like most people, I did a bit of growing up, and now I look forward to my annual helping of the Bard.

That came Friday night as my wife and I took in the Humber River Shakespeare company's annual offering. It's Romeo and Juliet this year.

Taking in a helping of Shakespeare every year has become sort of a tradition since before we were married. Indeed, Beth was with me the first time I ever took in a play at Stratford (Richard III in June 1997). I remember the timeline because that was the weekend I popped the question (yes, that question). Since that time, we have taken in a number of offerings from Shakespeare, from making return trips to Stratford to a variety of performances put on by groups in the outdoors (there was one memorable evening when we watched a performance of Richard III with an all-female cast ? They did a good job too).

In my high school days, they still had Grade 13. Yet while I had five years there, there were only four when we had to read anything by the Bard (for reasons I have never understood, we weren't subjected to it in Grade 9). Thus I was obliged to familiarize myself with the likes of Julius Caesar, Richard III (I keep running into that guy a lot), Othello and Hamlet. I rather enjoyed Caesar. Richard was another matter, because my English teacher in Grade 11, a woman who lived and breathed literature, pointed out that Shakespeare did his writing while the Tudors ruled England, and Richard was the guy they knocked off to get the throne. Bill Shakespeare would have known which side of the proverbial bread to butter up. Besides, the man was a playwright, not a historian. Othello came during a rough year, since my teachers spent a couple of months on strike. That's a year I have spent the last 40-something years trying to forget, and I spent most of my Grade 13 year dealing with a lot of coming of age issues.

I sometimes think I'm a lot more typical than I'm given credit for being.

I've been told that Romeo and Juliet is commonly the work that Grade 9 kids are assigned to study (if that's true, then I was an exception). But I have seen several versions of the work, including ones performed in a couple of parks, and Beth and I also took in the 1996 film version. I think it was the first time I ever saw Leonardo DiCaprio in anything (he was Romeo). This was during the time when Beth and I were dating, when she was just my girlfriend (before she became my wife and girlfriend), and going to movies Friday nights was almost a ritual.

It was something of an eye-opening experience for me.

The theatre where we watched the picture, if memory serves, held about 300 people, and the place was packed. If there were 20 people in that theatre older than 30, I would be astonished. The hall was filled with kids, of high school age. And since I do recall we were all dressed in our winter gear, the recollection is clear school was in session, and I was sharing and auditorium with a bunch of kids who had Romeo and Juliet on their assignment sheets.

?Oh God!? I muttered in Beth's ear as the theatre began to fill up with adolescents. ?This joint's going to be a zoo!?

I was very wrong (it happens occasionally). While the movie was playing, the theatre was a cathedral of silence. I believe Beth and I made more noise munching on our popcorn than the rest of the audience combined. For the most part, the kids were completely absorbed in the movie.

I will grant there was a bit of rowdyism toward the end of the movie, but I was impressed with how far we got into it before the kids started acting like kids. I reached what I thought was the obvious conclusion ? namely these kids had Romeo and Juliet on the curriculum, and they had better bone up. When it comes to Shakespeare, actually watching the movie is even better than Coles Notes.

Beth and I took in the performance Friday Aurora. As the local editor, I would have preferred to go to one closer to home, but Mother Nature and production issues got in the way. The show was due to open last Tuesday at Dick's Dam Park in Bolton, but it rained that night (it is a fact that if you arrange outdoor events, you take your chances where the weather is concerned). And last Wednesday was production day for the Citizen. And it was one of those days that I had to fight down the urge to take a sledge hammer to my computer in the office, and then flush the remnants down the nearest toilet. Does that sound to you like a guy who was in an appropriate mood to take in Romeo and Juliet?

But it is still making the rounds, and if you get a chance, the show is highly recommended. It will be performed tonight (Thursday)

at Fairy Lake in Newmarket, but will be back in Caledon tomorrow at Alton Mill Arts Centre, Saturday at Fairy Lake, Sunday at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Monday and Tuesday at Thornlodge Park in Mississauga, next Thursday at Fairy Lake, next Friday and Saturday at Nineteen on the Park in Stouffville, July 27 at Montgomery's Inn in Etobicoke, July 29 and 30 at The Old Mill in Toronto, July 31 at Etienne Brulé Park in Toronto, and Aug. 1, 2 and 3 at Montgomery's Inn.

The performances start at 7 p.m. Admission is on a pay-what-you-can basis, but the suggested donation is \$20. That's what we paid, but don't tell anyone, okay?

