

St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival welcomes new chair, celebrates former chair's successes

By LYNNE CHAGNON

After five years as chairman of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Theatrical Company board, Prescott businessman Ken Durand stepped down at the organization's annual general meeting Jan. 29.

Durand, who served as a founding director his first year on the board, looked back on some of the accomplishments of the board over the past five years.

"First and maybe most important were the memories and laughter we have been able to bring to the people of Eastern Ontario," he said, mentioning each of the six plays that have been staged on the Prescott amphitheatre during that time, including *Romeo and Juliet*, one of two plays performed last summer.

"Who can forget *Juliet* standing on that balcony overlooking the St. Lawrence River," he said. "That was one of my proudest moments."

Durand also noted the economic benefit and growth the annual festival has brought to the area with its audience tripling since its inception.

"Our audience grew from 1,100 in year one to 3,400 in year five," he said, noting 64 per cent of last summer's audience came from outside the Prescott area.

"The festival has had tangible results of helping local businesses because of the visitors to our community who came to see our plays."

The outgoing chair said the sense of ownership the community has developed for the festival is also an

accomplishment the board should be proud of.

"I am amazed and gratified by the number of volunteers and financial contributors that our festival has attracted over the years," he said. "Truly we can say that the community has embraced the festival and treated it as its own." He gave kudos to the myriad of volunteers who have worked hard in many areas from sewing costumes and working on sets to marketing.

"Clearly, we are all invested in Shakespeare."

Durand also made note of the festival's youth program that gives local young people the opportunity to learn acting skills they might otherwise not have had access to.

"I'm sure it will help them in their careers as they go forward," he said. He also applauded the festival's school program that's goal was to promote to students the benefits of seeing Shakespeare performed live.

Durand said the high quality of the productions performed on the Prescott stage has given everyone a reason to be proud of their community.

"Past performances were as good as anything I have seen outside our community and better than most," he said. "Prescott can surely be proud of the quality of our productions and the quality of all of the people who have supported the festival over the past five years."

Durand ended on a personal note, becoming quite emotional as he thanked his wife, Barb for her support and her interest in the



EMC photo by LYNNE CHAGNON
Outgoing chair of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Theatrical Company Ken Durand received a plaque of appreciation and a handshake from incoming chair Sandra Lawn at the company's annual general meeting Jan. 29. The rest of the new board is comprised of Joanne Beckstead, Barry Laushway, Kate MacDonald, Judy Martin, Patty Dimopoulos, Tom VanDusen and Peter Martin.

festival as he served as chair.

"Of course I am sad to leave," he said. "It has been a privilege and an honour for me to have acted as the chair of the festival for the past five years and to have been a participant in watching it grow."

He thanked the board of directors for their dedication without which he didn't feel the success of the festival would have been possible.

"Together we have traveled a long and what seemed to be in the beginning an uncertain road, but it has proved to be a very rewarding one. We have been able to bring excellent professional classical theatre to many people here in Eastern Ontario who otherwise would not have had the chance to experience Shakespeare at its finest."

He noted that while the road ahead may have many obstacles, he was confident they could be overcome to make the festival an even greater success in the years ahead.

"Although I am stepping down as chair, I will always be a supporter of the

Shakespeare festival," he concluded handing a \$10 bill to general manager Jessie Ritchie to cover 2008 memberships for himself and Barb.

In an interview with *The EMC*, Durand reiterated stepping down as chair was a sad occasion but that "it was a wonderful experience working with the board and the volunteers and watching the festival grow has been very gratifying to see." He plans to continue to work for the success of the festival as a volunteer.

Other agenda items that night were reports from the auditor, the artistic director and from general manager Jessie Ritchie who noted the audience for last year's performances increased by 30 per cent, due mostly to the fact the festival expanded to two plays.

"Thank you especially to Ian Farthing, our artistic director and our progressive board of directors having the faith to take on this expansion," she said. "Congratulations to absolutely everyone for making this year such an unmitigated success!"

Ritchie credited the

many volunteers involved with the festival for enabling it to develop so successfully over the years.

"In 2007 there were 186 volunteers who contributed 6,592 volunteer hours," she noted. "At a conservative rate of \$15 per hour, these hours translate to \$98,800 in value. In addition, volunteers and members of the community contributed \$35,823 through informal means such as food, gas and equipment use."

Ritchie also credited partnerships within the local community and beyond with being an integral part of the festival's success.

She said the company will be looking for more innovative ways to publicize the festival and to raise money over the next year including the introduction of the 2008 Lottery Calendar and the return of the annual Valentine's fundraiser set for Feb. 16.

"Every year we make extraordinary efforts to promote the festival in every way we can," she said. "2007 was no exception." Some of the highlights included promoting the festival at the Senior Winter Games in Gananoque, the Outdoor Show in Montreal and taking part in the Mayor's

Walk in Brockville and the Ontario Tourism Summit in Ottawa.

After taking care of some board business, nominating committee member Patty Dimopoulos

announced the new members of the 2008 board of directors. They are Joanne Beckstead, Barry Laushway, Kate MacDonald, Sandra Lawn, Judy Martin, Dimopoulos, Peter Martin and Tom VanDusen.

The directors in attendance left the room for a few minutes to determine who the officers will be for the year ahead. They are Sandra Lawn, chair; Patty Dimopoulos, vice chair; Peter Martin, recording secretary; and Judy Martin, treasurer.

Lawn served on the company's board of directors for four years before accepting the chair's seat.

She said she accepted the position and the challenge ahead with confidence "because I know the board of directors are absolutely amazing and that the upcoming 2008 season is going to be unbelievable."

Lawn said she knows she has big shoes to fill following Durand's tenure but that she is confident she can call on him for help if she needs it.

"Remember, I don't have a cell phone," he told her.

"Well, I know where you work and I know where you live," she laughed.

After the meeting was adjourned, Lawn said the year ahead looks really good for the festival.

"We've got great experience in our board members including the two new ones," she noted. "Tom has experience with the Upper Canada Playhouse and Joanne Beckstead is already worth her weight in gold."

"I'm looking forward to a great year ahead."

For more information on the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival, go to www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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