



The cast of *Alice in Wonderland* at the Shaw Festival.
Photo by David Cooper, courtesy of Shaw Festival

Sipping a chocolate martini
on Savour Stratford Chocolate Trail.

Stratford's York Street shopping district.

Take a seat at the theatre

Pick a play (there are 23) and enjoy everything these festival towns have to offer

By Anne Bokma

Trying to decide whether to head to the Stratford Festival or the Shaw Festival this season? If that is indeed the question, the answer is easy: get to both.

North America's two largest repertory theatre companies are situated a mere two hours apart and both present world class drama, are set in picturesque towns and offer getaways both edifying and enjoyable. And with performances stretching to almost the end of October, there's plenty of time

to pay homage to both Shaw, the Irish playwright whose views in some of his 60 plays are still considered controversial today, and The Bard, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language with 37 plays and 154 sonnets. (But, hey, who's counting?)

The play's the thing: Showcasing 23 shows between them, both festivals aim to please a broad range of theatrical tastes, from Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *As You Like It*) to Shaw (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*), classic drama (*All My Sons*, *Our Town*), lighter fare

(*Shakespeare in Love*, *Engaged*), musicals (*A Chorus Line*, *Sweeney Todd the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*) and family amusements (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Alice in Wonderland*).

Food for thought: It was Shaw who wrote, "There is no sincerer love than the love of food" and Niagara-on-the-Lake has no shortage of restaurants that take that dictum very seriously — among them *Escabèche* at the Prince of Wales (its cherry amaretto crème brûlée dessert leaves you with a longing for more) and *The Can-*



Luke Humphrey as Will Shakespeare and Shannon Taylor as Viola de Lesseps in *Love on stage* this season at Stratford. Photo by David Hou, courtesy of Stratford Festival

tery at the Pillar and Post (where the prime rib is the Sunday night fave). Stratford has been experiencing a major restaurant revival over the past couple of years with new openings, owners and chefs. The stunning Revival House (formerly The Church Restaurant) features a menu worthy of holy praise with its local and seasonal Perth County ingredients (the charcuterie is a visual and sensual delight).

Take a tour — by foot or bike: Sample delectable treats in restaurants and shops with the Savour Stratford self-guided culinary walking tours (six stops for \$25). In addition to a Chocolate Trail, there's a Pubs, Pilsners and Spirits Trail, a Pumpkin Trail in the fall and the popular Bacon & Ale Trail, inspired perhaps by the line from "Henry VI" would give all my fame for a pot of ale." A three-hour guided Flavours

of Stratford walking tour includes stops at such unique spots as Distinctly Tea Stratford (which sells 350 quality loose teas from around the world) and Rheo Thompson Candies (where you can sample their world famous signature product, the mint smoothie).

In Niagara-on-the-Lake, Grape Escape Wine Tours offers morning, afternoon and daylong eight to 25 km bike rides on a paved path alongside the scenic Niagara Parkway. We sampled delicate rosés, refreshing chardonnays, boisterous reds and ice wines sweet as candy at Inniskillen, Riverview Cellars and Reif Estate, just three of 30 wineries in the area.

Take in the shops/check out the spas. After all that intellectual stimulation at the theatre, your body might be craving some below-the-brain invigoration as well. Get on the move with a long stroll around these towns to check out the pretty gardens of local historic homes and the dozens of unique independently owned fashion boutiques, tea shops, gift stores, ice

cream parlours and gourmet specialty food emporiums. For a more vigorous pace, head down to the paths along the Avon River (occupied by elegant swans) in Stratford and the Niagara River (occupied by regal boats) in Niagara-on-the-Lake. If your body is craving a more relaxing workout, both places have plenty of spas that are happy to oblige (although Niagara-on-the-Lake, with its variety of luxury hotels offering spa services, wins out here.) The 115-minute Perfect Circle head-to-toe massage and mini facial at the White Oaks Inn & Resort is particularly blissful. It includes a dreamy scalp massage we're convinced will boost your brain — and thus ultimately enhance your enjoyment of Uncle Vanya and Macbeth.

Shaw or Stratford? Neither will disappoint. The important thing is that you go. And when you do, consider carefully Shakespeare's words from Romeo and Juliet: "Go wisely and slowly. Those who rush, stumble and fall."

No sense breaking a leg.

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