

## Yes, you can take your kids to the Shaw Festival

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It had been almost 10 years since we last brought our daughters to Niagara-on-the-Lake. They were five and eight then and we spent the morning watching them splash in the wading pool in the beautifully landscaped Simcoe Park in the centre of town before taking them on a bike ride along the Niagara Parkway, stopping at a roadside market for local peaches to add to the picnic lunch we had packed. We left at dusk, making the mandatory stop for ice cream on the way home.

Seeing a play at the Shaw Festival was out of the question; no way they'd sit through some lofty Shavian production debating the finer points of socialism, regardless of how witty it might be. There was nothing on the playbill that remotely appealed to kids.

A decade later, things have changed. Not only can our kids sit through and appreciate a full scale theatre production, there are actually a number of family-friendly productions on the 11-show playbill this season, all of which run to the end of October. They include the magically rambunctious and sweetly sentimental *Peter and the Star Catcher*, a pun-filled prequel to *Peter Pan* complete with Miley Cyrus references; the high-stepping song-and-dance visual feast of *Sweet Charity*; and even a Shaw show, *Pygmalion*, with a modern-day setting in which technology-obsessed professor of phonetics Henry Higgins totes an iPad instead of a notebook.

And the good news is the Shaw Festival has announced it will continue what one hopes will become an annual tradition of having at least one big show for families when it stages the much-anticipated world premiere of *Alice in Wonderland* in 2016, a production it promises will use "a dazzling combination of contemporary technology and old-fashioned magic."

*Peter and the Star Catcher*, which won five Tony Awards when it opened on Broadway in 2012, recounts the adventures of an orphan soon to be called Peter Pan, and Molly, a girl charged to protect a parcel of stardust from falling into the wrong hands. Recommended for kids eight and older, it's the Shaw's biggest all-ages hit this season. What kid wouldn't love the line "I hate grownups!" repeated more than once during the show?

We felt a little self conscious when we discovered that director Jackie Maxwell, also the artistic director of Shaw, was sitting directly in the seat behind us, but soon we were hooting heartily and applauding loudly, hoping she could sense our appreciation for the wonderful production she's created.

I managed to nab Maxwell for a moment in the lobby after the show where she said the reception for *Peter* "has been fantastic and heartening," and she expects the same for next year's *Alice*. "It's going to be beautiful," she promises.

The next day, waiting for the curtain to rise during a midweek matinee of *Sweet Charity*, recommended for kids 13 and older, I winced when my 15-year-old daughter surveyed the room and announced (a little too loudly): "I've never seen so many old people in one room in all my life!" After the performance we decided more sweetness was in order so we headed next door to Zees Grill for delicious desserts, practically skipping along the street while humming along to the show's signature hits, *If My Friends Could See Me Now* and *Hey, Big Spender*. This time my daughter exclaimed: "And I thought it would be boring!," which one hopes bodes well for an upswing in a younger demographic at Shaw.

(A side note: We also made a point of skipping to the loo at Zees located in the Shaw Club Hotel & Spa, where the very fancy ladies room has been named the best bathroom in the country by Cintas Canada.)



*Peter and the Star Catcher is an entertaining romp for kids at the Shaw Festival and its biggest all-ages hit of the season.*



*Queen Street is a shoppers' paradise of unique specialty stores and a good place to find an ice cream cone.*



*A vegetable stand along the Niagara Parkway is a welcome stop on a family bike ride.*

After all that time indoors, we were ready for an outdoor adventure. We stayed the night at the elegant Queen's Landing (where our kids enjoyed a dip in the warm salt water pool) on the edge of the Niagara Parkway bike path and in the morning Zoom Leisure delivered bikes and helmets directly to the hotel so we could easily set off for a late morning ride (the company also rents child seats, trailers and trail-a-bikes). As we passed historic Fort George, a Parks Canada national historic site where kids can experience life (including musket demonstrations) in a military post that played a pivotal role during the War of 1812, we heard the cry of a bugle and we saw the Upper Canada flag raised high into the sky. We glided along the paved, mostly flat path, which overlooks the Niagara River on one side and stately mansions, estate wineries, and fresh fruit stalls on the other — all the very definition of "picture-book."

To fortify ourselves along our journey, we stopped at the McFarland House, an atrium style tea room situated right on the Parkway that was once used as a hospital and officers' headquarters during the war of 1812. Three-tiered platters of fruit, cheese and finger sandwiches, along with the requisite scones and clotted cream served with a pot of lavender Earl Grey tea, were served to us by attentive wait staff dressed in period costume.

You can't leave Niagara-on-the-Lake without doing a bit of shopping along the pedestrian-crammed Queen Street. Among the dozens of high end specialty shops, galleries and antique stores, there's plenty of retail fare to appeal to kids, including Just Christmas, Canada's oldest year-round Christmas store with thousands of whimsical decorations, Silver Screen, featuring memorabilia from popular movies and music, and, especially, sweet shops such as Maple Leaf Fudge, the Olde Tyme Candy Shop and Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory.

Our day ended at the Oban Inn restaurant where a room with a black and red tartan carpet, oversized chandelier and rows of black and white head shots of Shaw Festival actors from past decades created a cozy setting. George Bernard Shaw himself looked down at us from a giant oil portrait on the wall. We toasted his image with a promise that we'd be back.

As we headed home, we made the mandatory final stop for ice cream. The kids may be older now, but it's nice to know some things never change.

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