

'Healthy year' for Shakespeare festival

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By RONALD ZAJAC

Staff Writer

PRESCOTT -- The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's "Summer of Love" is turning out to be a midsummer night's dream come true. With only three nights left before the festival's fifth season wraps up (counting tonight's performance of *Romeo and Juliet*), artistic director Ian Farthing said he believes attendance so far is up about 30 per cent over last year. "I was very optimistically hoping for an average of 100 (people a show) and I think we're going to hit that," said Farthing.

The festival has gained visitors from out of town, said Farthing, citing a "significant increase" in spectators from Ottawa and New York State. His comments came as a CTV News crew from Ottawa was at the amphitheatre Wednesday, shooting a feature on the festival to be aired tonight.

The festival this year expanded to a two-play schedule, featuring *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* - its first foray into tragedy. And while the gods befuddled the lovers in *Midsummer* and doomed them in *Romeo*, they have been kind to the actors and their audience. Farthing said rain has forced the company to move only four shows, in whole or in part, from the Kinsmen Amphitheatre to the nearby tent, and unlike last year, none of the shows has so far been cancelled due to lightning. Meanwhile, festival board treasurer Sandra Lawn, citing figures compiled in late July, said the increase in attendance may be closer to 40 per cent. While the season's financial picture won't be known until the festival's year end October 31, Lawn expects it will at least break even. "It looks like a healthy year," said Lawn. Both Lawn and Farthing agree the successful crossing of the five-year mark gives the Shakespeare Festival a certain permanence. "People are talking all the time to me about: 'Well, next year, we can do this,'" said Lawn. "It's a really, really nice feeling."

As for what next year holds in store, Farthing said Wednesday it is too early to comment on plans for 2008. He promised an announcement soon about next year's schedule, and said the non-profit group hopes it can continue staging two-show seasons. "We fully intend to carry on with that tradition. "The company also hopes to extend next year's season by a week, from four weeks to five, said Farthing. The closely knit ensemble is not a "star vehicle" for any of its members, said Farthing, who has roles in both plays. But that hasn't stopped some eager female fans from setting up a fan site on the website Facebook for Perry Mucci, who plays Romeo, said Farthing. The season concludes with performances of *Midsummer* tomorrow at 7 p.m., *Romeo* at 2 p.m. Saturday and *Midsummer* at 7 p.m. Saturday.