

## *Stratford Shakespeare Festival Behind the Scenes.*

Version 1.0. *Apple iTunes Store*. 7 December 2012. \$4.99.

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Now in its sixty-first season, the Stratford Festival (formerly the Stratford Shakespeare Festival) continues to innovate in its marketing of itself as a premiere destination Shakespeare site. After a series of initiatives for social media, including YouTube (2007), Facebook (2008), Twitter (2009), and Pinterest (2012), in late 2012 the Festival released an app for the iPad and Blackberry Playbook to engage users with the Festival's performances using the multimedia functionality of a tablet computer. The description from the iTunes App Store promises:

The Stratford Festival at your fingertips! Become a theatre insider with the *Stratford Festival Behind the Scenes* app. Explore the process of building a season at the Festival, from choosing the playbill to set construction to performance. Filled with interviews, observations, and breathtaking photography, this app will lead readers on a fascinating journey into corners of the Festival seldom seen by members of the public. ("New app" 2012)

The second sentence provides the key to the Festival's conception of its users — theater insiders. Rather than new patrons, these people are regular visitors to the Stratford Festival and are seen as desiring knowledge of "insider" information and access to "seldom seen" aspects of the Festival. Simply attending plays is no longer enough; the audience is now able to observe the entire "process of building a season." Newcomers are not excluded, but the apparent lack of basic information about the Festival might leave unfamiliar audiences confused. The use of present tense in the second and third sentences suggests that the viewer will see the development of the current season, but the list of details implies that this is not the case:

- 360-degree views of treasures from the Festival Archives;
- Interactive set models from productions at our two largest venues;
- Exclusive images and slideshows from rehearsals and backstage;
- Exclusive interviews with Antoni Cimolino, Des McAnuff, and Lloyd Robertson, as well as many more members of the cast and crew;
- Photos, stories, sketches, animations, and insights into the world of theater;

- Full text version of our 60th season book to complement the digital content.

The visual nature of the app is foregrounded in the first three items, as is the interactive potential of the iPad. The last three items seem less interactive and more passive. Omitted is any mention of the plays or of Shakespeare. The app offers insight into the mechanics of the Festival rather than its products.

The press release for the app amplifies the content's exclusivity; it "reveals the secrets of theatrical production, demonstrating the artistry that takes place behind the scenes is every bit as magical as the performance itself" ("New app" 2012). Not only do backstage views provide rarely seen images, but they also reveal secrets and expose viewers to magic. The appeal goes well beyond theatrical audiences to address Festival aficionados who are not satisfied with the conventional audience experience. They already know the performers and the plays; now they want to know what is behind the curtain of theatrical performance.

The press release goes on to describe how the app allows the Festival to "connect to younger audiences" and inspire "follow-up projects, including study guides for students and teachers." These audiences are school-age children and teens who need to be educated to enjoy theater or will most likely only attend theater as part of a school group. They are also those who might rather watch a video on a screen rather than see a live play. *Stratford Shakespeare Festival Behind the Scenes* is more than a marketing tool or a souvenir. It constructs its audience as consumers of an innovative, hybrid, multimedia form of Shakespeare in which the wonder at learning how the plays are produced, rather than the plays themselves, is the actual product.

The app begins with a black screen, then a stage manager's voiceover: "lights twenty-one, go, sound and opening doors, go." In the background is the sound of an orchestra tuning. A vertical slash of light splits the screen; two men in eighteenth-century livery appear on each side of the light holding handles to doors that will open onto the Festival stage.<sup>1</sup> On the voice's cue, they pull the doors open. Rising dramatic music begins, then a pan-and-zoom montage of backstage images of makeup, costume, scenery, and prop shops passes by, moving away from the viewer; finally, the navigation screen appears.

With this opening, users have the sensation of being thrust into the behind-the-scenes world of the Festival. They have been given a preview of much of what the app will offer — dramatic and detailed sights and sounds that audiences never see. The two doormen create a slightly misleading sense that users will be walking on stage and will become participants in the process. Instead, they will be the audience for a different type of production.

Tapping on each of the chapter headings begins a PowerPoint-style pan-and-zoom montage similar to the opening, with images moving onscreen from all directions and dramatic music playing in the background. Once this has concluded, the user is prompted to swipe from right to left to move through the chapter. In the upper left of the screen is a smaller prompt: "To return to the main menu, pull out the tab in the top left and touch the Stratford logo. To read the full text, turn your tablet 90 degrees." Turning the iPad 90 degrees to the portrait orientation presents the user with an eBook version of *Stratford Behind the Scenes* by Don Gillmor, a coffee table book published in 2012 to celebrate the Festival's sixtieth anniversary.

The user swipes through each chapter very much like a book. The chapters range from six to twenty-two screens in length, each page having one or two images and a sentence or two of text. Some of the images are marked with an "X" in the corner, which, if touched, expands the photograph to fill the entire screen. Most chapters have brief embedded video clips of actors, directors, stage managers, and others typically explaining or narrating some aspect of production. The clips that illuminate procedures are some of the most effective, in part because they also provide images of what is being described. Stage manager Cynthia Toushan, for example, gives a tour of her booth in the Festival Theatre, pointing out her controls and quickly running through her process of preparation before a performance.

Several chapters have a "snapshot" feature, a group of photos that the user can swipe through manually while remaining on the same page. Three automated time-lapse sequences allow the viewer to watch an actor apply his makeup, the stage crew switch the Festival stage from one production to another, or actors rehearse an elaborate fight scene. The "Setting the Scene" chapter has two animated "fly through" renderings of the stages for *Henry V* (2012) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (2012), both created by the stage designers as part of the process of building the sets.

The 360-degree photograph feature is used most extensively in the chapters on props and costumes. Users may rotate (on the vertical axis only) materials from current shows and archives. Included are images of an epergne from *Henry V* (2001), the crown from *King Lear* (2007), and the gold casket from *The Merchant of Venice* (1989). The costume chapter provided the oldest object in the app, a mask from *Oedipus Rex* (1954/55), as well as one of the most colorful, a wolf mask from *Into the Woods* (2005). The images below show the masks in rotation. The images also may be enlarged with a finger spread. Some sharpness is lost, but the image can still be rotated.

The chapter on costumes also contains a unique example of linked audio and visual materials. Rather than a filmed interview, seven audio clips of costume designer Carolyn M. Smith describing her ideas are linked to color images of seven of her idiosyncratic sketches.

The app may also be browsed in outline form. Beginning at the Table of Contents screen, if one touches the chapter titles, one can swipe through a précis of three or four images from the chapter. The app also allows users to jump forward and backward, using a slider at the bottom of the screen that appears when one of the four edges is touched. This action also brings up a link to the home (table of contents) screen, a back arrow that returns the screen to the previously viewed page, and a pop-up version of the table of contents. Touching the border also reveals a star in the upper right that allows users to mark favorites. Next to the star is a set of four vertical bars that, when touched, provides another browse feature. This shrinks the image stream so that the current image and the previous and subsequent images are visible. The user can swipe quickly through the chapters to find a particular page or image.

The app is visually impressive, giving the user access to a rich variety of images, animations, and video and audio recordings. Navigation is initially tricky, but the book-like organization quickly becomes apparent. While this linear structure is a rewarding way to experience the app, the various navigation tools also encourage browsing and discovering. It is equally enjoyable to jump from section to section as it is to move through the app from beginning to end. The mixture of different types of media keeps the user's attention. The sections on wardrobe and set design are the longest, with the largest number of images and the greatest variety of media. The sections on stage management, acting, and directing are the shortest and rely more on still photos and talking head type interviews.

The content of the app does exactly what the promotional materials suggest: provides users with a behind-the-scenes view of what has happened (and by implication, what will continue to happen) at the Festival. The experience is repeatedly characterized in terms of wonder and its resolution, with words such as "amazing," "explore," "explain," "experiment," and "unlock." The photos and video clips reinforce this feeling of awe. Andrew Mestern, Technical Director of Scenic Construction, describes the trial and error process of building a set feature so that it will support the actors safely, look convincing to the audience, and be simple enough to disassemble every day. Head of Wigs and Makeup Gerry Altenburg explains that wigs are made with real human hair and that European hair is easier to work with than American hair. The app provides numerous images of the creation of both the prop and the wigs to exemplify the wonder of the transformation of materials from ordinary objects to items of dramatic value.

The choice of objects and scenes increases the sense of wonder. The archives have been thoroughly excavated. The props and costumes, such as the wolf's head, are among the most elaborate and curious in the collection. The processes, too, are never ordinary but always involve unusual and painstaking labor. Throughout these moments of revelation, the app is scrupulous to

identify nearly every person and his or her title.<sup>2</sup> Rather than potentially diminishing the wondrous effects, this practice makes them all the more impressive because the user sees and hears ordinary people hard at work making theatrical magic. The instances of problem solving, or in the case of the actors and stage crew, tales of disasters narrowly averted, activate a "show must go on" ethos that excites audiences and performers alike. As Toushan says, "audiences love when things go wrong because that puts them on the inside track." And the app not only records accounts of these events, but also identifies the numerous Ruby Keelers who have stepped in to save the day over the years. They are, however, theater workers. The problems they relate are always solved because the show always goes on. The day-to-day tasks, such as sorting human hair, are simply part of a profession that few people know much about.

The extensive multimedia content of the app is well-organized and easily accessible. It provides a rewarding experience to Festival regulars who wish to recall past productions and learn more about the process of mounting a play. For newcomers, the app will likely be less appealing. There is much to learn, but without first-hand knowledge of the Festival, the content will lack important context. For younger audiences, the app will be impressive, but lack the interactivity that accompanies most apps. The navigation options may appear novel to older generations, but the younger audience that the Festival wants to develop will have greater expectations for participation in the app.

### Notes

1. The voice belongs to stage manager Ann Stuart, and the two doormen are Jaz Sealey and Victor Dolhai from 2012's production of *The Misanthrope*. The app is very careful to identify everyone who appears.
2. This may well have as much to do with contracts and union rules — topics that are never introduced as part of the behind the scenes glimpse at the Festival — as anything else.

### References

"New app presents rare insider's view of the Festival." 2012. Media Release 46/12. Stratford Shakespeare Festival. 6 December.