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Bard takes over Bixby Park in Long Beach Shakespeare Festival

Festival returns Sunday at 2 p.m. with show at 5:30.

By Kristopher Hanson, Staff writer
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Hanna Longdo portrays Elizabeth 1 of England for the audience just prior to Saturday's performance. (Mark Savage /Press-Telegram)

LONG BEACH — If "all the world's a stage," then Bixby Park was front and center Saturday during the opening performance of the annual Long Beach Shakespeare Festival.

Dozens of actors, musicians and production staff from in and around Long Beach performed Shakespeare's classic comedy of errors, "The Merry Wives of Windsor," considered one of the playwright's most accessible to modern audiences.



Jaquelyn Johnson and Carl Wawrina of The Long Beach Shakespeare Company during the performance of "The Merry Wives of Windsor" at the 13th annual Long Beach Shakespeare Festival on Saturday at Bixby Park in Long Beach. (Mark Savage /Press-Telegram)

Written for England's Queen Elizabeth in the late 1590s, the tale follows the fumbling attempts of Shakespeare's famous character "Fat Knight Falstaff" to seduce two married women, take their money and the ladies' own successful revenge plots.

Saturday's show was a tribute to the late local arts patron Mark Bixby, a longtime financial supporter of the Long Beach Shakespeare Company, who died in a shocking plane crash March 16 at Long Beach Airport.

"The play is such a fun romp, and I strongly believe anyone who wants to come watch the remaining shows will get a kick out of the whole atmosphere we've set up here at the park," said Brandon Cutts, an actor and the show's director. "We'll have games, live Renaissance-era music from a group of local musicians, vendors, puppet shows, costumes and swashbucklers. We've tried as much as possible to re-create the atmosphere of when the play was first produced."

The Shakespeare company, based full-time in the 4300 block of Atlantic Avenue in Bixby Knolls, spent dozens of hours building sets, rehearsing and obtaining funding

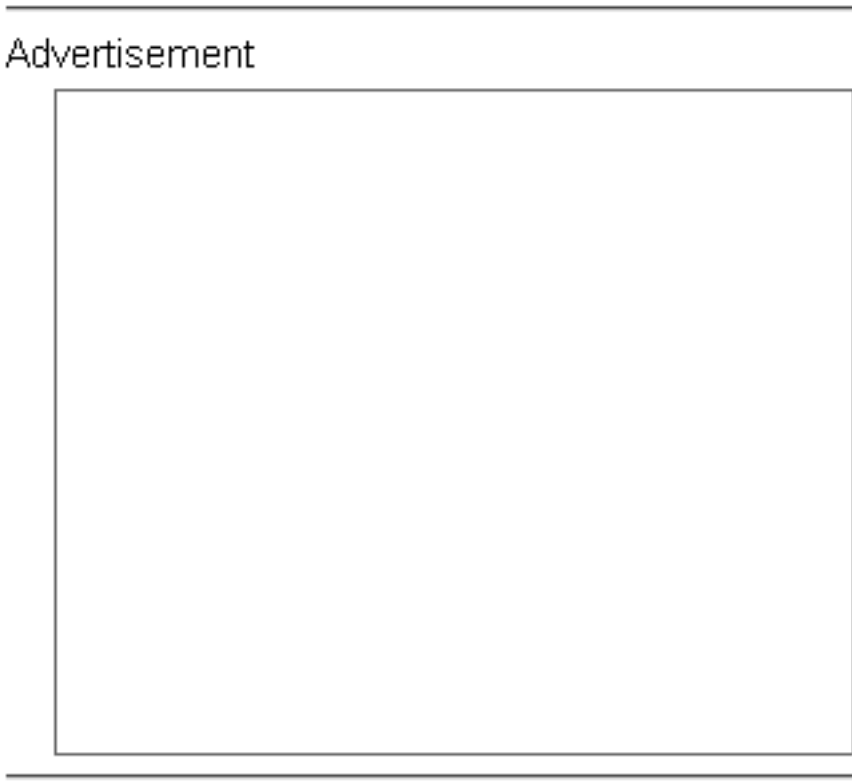
to keep the performances free and open to the public.

It's the 13th consecutive year the company has produced free summer shows and concerts, though only the second at Bixby Park's concert shell.

The show plays again Sunday, July 16, 17, 23, 24, 30 and 31st. Festivities begin each day at 2 p.m., with the main performance at 5:30 p.m.

Z Pizza in Bixby Knolls and Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe have also provided funding, along with the Bixby family, longtime supporters of the city

for whom the park was named.



Claudia Schou, the festival's producer, said the show's 20 actors and more than 20 behind-the-scenes stage, lighting, prop and technical coordinators have created what they feel may be the company's best summer festival yet.

"Everyone's poured their all into it, and the venue this year is excellent," Schou said. "I think everyone, whether you're a big Shakespeare fan or not, will find something fun and entertaining this year."

Among the dozens in attendance were Carlos Velasco and wife Paulita, who got a kick out of the 17th-century atmosphere permeating the park.

"Usually when I hear Shakespeare in that Olde English (verbiage), it can get kinda confusing, but this seems different...more modern," Carlos said. "We just came out to the park for a picnic not knowing about all this, but it was a pleasant surprise."

It wasn't possible to tell how many in attendance Saturday were simply at the park on Ocean Boulevard at Cherry Avenue to enjoy a warm summer day, or if they were there specifically for the festival and play.

But as showtime neared, dozens had pulled up lawn chairs, blankets or simply found a comfortable spot in the shade around the band shell to watch the merrymaking.

"We hope word spreads and we can draw as many people out here as possible (through month's end), though we wish Mark (Bixby) could be here with us," Cutts said. "There were a couple times he saved us financially. We hope to make him proud."

To learn more, visit www.lbshakespeare.org or call (562) 997-1494.

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