

Actress Seana McKenna

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Meets Stratford challenge

By ELIZABETH SPIELBERGS

The Juliet pining for her Romeo at this season's Stratford Festival is Mississauga's Seana McKenna.

With her slender figure and long brown hair, she suits the part admirably.

Seana, who graduated from Port Credit Secondary School in 1975, is beginning her third season at the festival.

As a member of the Shakespeare 3 Company in 1982, Seana appeared as Helena in a *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Last year she appeared on the Festival Stage as one of the witches in *Macbeth*, as Mariane in *Tartuffe* and as Rosalind in some performances of *As You Like It*.

For the present season, Seana was offered the roles of Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* (which opens later this season), and Mariane in *Tartuffe*.

A third role was also mentioned. When the role turned out to be that of Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Seana was surprised but pleased. She says it is a choice role, one which any young actress would covet.

It is also a challenging role, but the favorable reviews she has received for her performance show how well she has met the challenge.

Globe and Mail theatre critic Ray Conlogue said Seana "walked away with the lovely production." He found her Juliet to be "thoughtful and detailed, while still somehow keeping the essential simplicity of a 14-year-old."

The Toronto Star's Gina Mallet was not as complimentary, saying that Seana "seems to be analyzing her feelings even as she is pouring them out." Mallet did add, however, that Seana looked wonderful.

Seana herself does not read the reviews of her performances. Her father read one review of *Romeo and Juliet* to her over the phone, but she feels that an actor who is doing one role for a whole season could be soured at the outset by an unfavorable review.

She also has enough confidence in her own judgment and ability not to need confirmation from critics.

Seana says she didn't decide to become an actress, the profession chose her.

She started acting when she was 7 years old. A neighbor, Elizabeth Walsh, organized the children on her street into an amateur acting group. They performed in school auditoriums, and Seana's first stage appearance was in *Aladdin*.

Theatre was always an extracurricular activity during her school years. She says she

was very lucky to have gone to Port Credit Secondary School when she did.

"Most high schools do plays like *The Music Man*, but we did Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and Edmund Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. All the students went to the school play, so they were introduced to authors they normally wouldn't read."

When the school produced the play *Play* in 1975, the production was entered in the Simpsons Drama Festival, and Seana won an Outstanding Achievement Award for her performance.

Bridgit Harrison, who was Seana's Theatre Arts teacher at Port Credit Secondary, has followed Seana's progress and is proud of her achievements.

"There are many talented people who never get anywhere," Harrison says. "An actor needs so much more than talent. Seana has worked hard and been intelligent in the management of her career."

As to organizing her career, Seana says, "There are choices to be made, and I've tried to make the right ones."

She is adamant that she does not act because she wants to be rich some day. No one ever gets rich in Canadian theatre, she says.

The gypsy lifestyle appeals to her. She likes moving around the country, the excitement of new job offers, and the chance to act in different types of plays.

After a season of Shakespeare, she says, an actor likes to take on less demanding roles.

She has seen older actors suddenly become concerned with security, and she hopes that that will never happen to her, although she knows that there are no guarantees in her profession.

"An actor is only as good as his last show," she says.

She admits that things have gone well for her so far. "I've been lucky in that I've never had to take other jobs to supplement my income. The only time I've never worked is when I've turned down jobs."

Her leading role at Stratford has yet to make any difference to her career. The projects she is considering for the winter are ones which were on the slate already.

Seana thinks of her final year in high school as the most eventful. That was the year she went to the Simpsons Drama Festival, and the year she and a fellow student wrote a play based on *The Tin Soldier*, which they performed to student audiences.

She graduated from Grade 13 with a 92-per cent average, and was chosen valedictorian of her class.

In the same year, she went to the Ontario-Quebec public speaking finals, using "Time" as her topic.

Time is something which Seana considers important. It is a recurring theme in Shakespeare's plays, and Seana sees it as the main enemy in *Romeo and Juliet*.

One of Seana's biggest career choices came after her first year at the University of Toronto, where she was studying English.

She left high school an Ontario Scholar and won the J.W. Billis renewable scholarship for \$1,000 a year, toward the cost of her university education.

After her first year, she was offered an additional \$500 scholarship. She never collected those scholarships, because she was accepted at the National Theatre School in Montreal.

"I liked the academic environment," Seana says, "and I did well there, but I knew that if I didn't get out then, I never would."

After she graduated from the theatre school in 1979, Seana played in theatres across Canada. She has worked at the Manitoba Theatre Centre, the Blyth Summer Festival, and the Centaur Theatre.

She has also toured northern Ontario introducing live theatre to students who have never had a chance to see it.

Student audiences, who come to Stratford from all over Ontario, are important to her.

She enjoys the honesty and spontaneity of their reactions. The future of the theatre in Canada also depends on them, she feels. From today's student audiences will come tomorrow's actors and theatre patrons.

In real life, Seana's Romeo is an artistic director who works on the West Coast, but she thinks of Mississauga as home.

Her parents and her only brother still live here, and she keeps in touch with many of her high school friends.

O.V.L.



Seana McKenna plays Juliet to Colm Feore's Romeo in the Stratford Festival production of *Romeo and Juliet*.