



## Mr. Shakespeare visits LCF

### It's no dream when a whimsical take on the bard delights Descanso Gardens audiences.

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Dozens of people enjoy an evening of interactive theater performance and family fun during the Elizabethan Festival, performed by Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum at Descanso Gardens in La Canada, Calif., on Tuesday, August 2, 2011. (Photo by Libby Cline)

Under a canopy of oaks and a darkening summer sky, Descanso Gardens on Tuesday night concluded its Summer Family Series with an Elizabethan festival brought to life by the Theatricum Botanicum for a crowd of nearly 200 people.

At 5:30 p.m. sharp, troubadours in full period dress sang their way from the garden gates to an intimate amphitheater under the oaks where Queen Elizabeth and Mr. Shakespeare welcomed the audience, all of whom shouted "huzzah," officially commencing

the festivities. As more families continued to spread picnic blankets on the surrounding lawns, children near the stage were pulled up to participate in scenes from "The Merry Wives of Windsor," "Richard III," "The Tempest" and Moliere's "Tartuffe."

Cameron Squire, production manager for Theatricum Botanicum, said the varied ages of the audience requires finding a balance of offerings to interest everyone.

"It's significant to us, so we often think about how to make it significant for them," Squire said.

"I really enjoy Shakespeare and ... my son's a little young, but he enjoyed it when we came to the first "Merry Wives" performance two weeks ago, and he was really pretty engaged by the interactive nature of the show," said Allyson Rawlings, who was accompanied by her 4-year-old son, Waylon. "It's such a beautiful venue. It's too bad more people don't know about it."

In 2010, under the direction Lisa Kurstin, the venue's head of public programs, Descanso Gardens extended its summer hours to evenings during the middle of the week to increase visitation and tested the jazz and family series. Enthused that the programs were so well received, Margaret Leong Checca, a trustee at the gardens, decided to make a donation to help expand the program, Kurstin said.

Last summer, Theatricum performed one showing of the bard's classic, "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The unprecedented attendance levels and positive feedback from members prompted Kurstin to work with Ellen Geer, producing artistic director of Theatricum Botanicum and daughter of founder and actor Will Geer, in tailoring something special for the 2011 series.

"They're such a quality company and there's nothing like this around here," said Kurstin. "Their theater site in Topanga is so far away, so I was thinking of using the Gardens as their easterly site."

Theatricum Botanicum grew out of a dirt-staged theater Will Geer — Grandpa on TV's "The Walton's" — opened for blacklisted actors and folk singers on his property in Topanga Canyon in the early 1950s. The theater has evolved into two outdoor amphitheaters with a host of youth and adult programs, evening performances for the public, and a traveling troupe that brings the theater arts of the Elizabethan world to schools.

At the conclusion of their scene from Tartuffe, Queen Elizabeth and Mr. Shakespeare led the players to the open lawn and invited the audience up to learn traditional Elizabethan dance. After the final kiss of the finger, then a bow from the gentlemen and a curtsy from the ladies, Queen Elizabeth announced that the hour had come. She bid farewell with Puck's admonishment to the audience, which he delivers at the conclusion of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" to remember that it all may have been a dream.