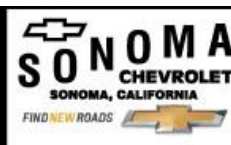




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'Bard' back at Buena Vista

BY EMILY CHARRIER-BOTTS INDEX-TRIBUNE ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

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JEN HOWLETT is Juliet and Aaron Bremner is Romeo in Avalon Players production of "Romeo and Juliet" which opens Thursday at Buena Vista Winery. Robbi Pengelly/Index-Tribune

Buena Vista Winery has proven its commitment to restoring the property and business with tremendous attention to detail, right down to the historically accurate Heritage Garden of huckleberry, miner's lettuce and more. This week, that restoration effort includes a homecoming for the Avalon Players' summer Shakespeare showcase.

"It all started at Buena Vista," recalled Kate Kennedy, who founded the Sonoma-based Shakespeare company 33 years ago. "I just went to the owners and asked, 'Would you like to have a Shakespeare company?' This was before wineries did a lot of big events. To have a nighttime Shakespeare show, with friends and family and wine, was a totally new concept."

It quickly proved a popular concept as well, as people packed in around the historic fountain for an intimate performance under the August stars. Season after season, Kennedy and the cast showcased Shakespeare's best comedies and tragedies. But after 23 years and changes in ownership, the new proprietor didn't want to forgo the potential profit of summer weddings and

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other evening events.

"They wanted to charge us \$8,500 a night to rent the place," Kennedy said. It was an impossible price for a community theater company to pay, and the Avalon Players became homeless. "I couldn't afford it anymore, I was kind of depressed."

After several seasons at Gundlach Bundschu Winery and a brief time with the Sonoma Theatre Alliance, a chance encounter connected Kennedy with Jean-Charles Boisset, who spent millions meticulously restoring Buena Vista Winery since he purchased the property in 2011. A mutual friend arranged a phone call between the two.

"He said, 'Kate, I want you to tell me everything you know about Buena Vista,'" Kennedy said, imitating Boisset's traditional French accent. By the end of the call with Boisset and his team, the Avalon Players were invited to resurrect Shakespeare at California's oldest winery.

"I said, 'You know I don't have \$8,500 a night, right?'" Kennedy asked. "He (Boisset) said, 'Kate, don't be ridiculous.'"

Boisset said it was part of the winery's mission to support the theater company. "We have a deep appreciation for the arts and culture," he said. "Last year, we hosted Muse here at Buena Vista and raised \$100,000 for the Sonoma Community Center, whose purpose is to bring cultural and educational experiences to the Sonoma community."

With its flower-adorned balconies and majestic stone buildings, Kennedy said the winery was an ideal backdrop for Shakespeare's most beloved love story, "Romeo and Juliet." Tables will fan out around the Vortex Fountain, upon which the Montagues will battle the Capulets in intricate swordplay by fight coordinator Lee Ann Hittenberger; while a scrim and detailed lighting by designer Peter Vos will be used for the more intimate bedroom scenes.

"It was a 'natural' fit. Buena Vista's historic stone walls and balcony set the stage for a Shakespearean classic as magnificent as 'Romeo and Juliet' on their own," Boisset said.

Jen Howlett takes the part of Juliet while Aaron Bremner stars as Romeo in this version of the classic tragedy. Opening Thursday, Aug. 8, and continuing Thursday through Sunday until Aug. 25, doors open at 6 for picnicking before the show at 7 p.m. The winery will be selling wines by the bottle and glass before the show, and will also have food available for purchase prior to the performances on Fridays and Saturdays. Kennedy said with only 120 seats, the last two weekends are nearly sold out.

"Move fast if you want tickets," she advised. Tickets are \$25 at buonavistawinery.com.

Both sides of the partnership say they play to continue the relationship for the coming years, meaning more summer Shakespeare for Sonoma theater lovers.

"We feel honored and privileged to work with Kate Kennedy and her cast of talented actors, and it would be splendid to have them back in the future," Boisset said.

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