

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

2014-15 SEASON

PLAYGUIDE

JANUARY 8 – FEBRUARY 1, 2015

THE BEST BROTHERS

by Dan MacIvor

MEET THE BESTS

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PUPPY LOVE IN LOWELL

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Everything you wanted to know about grief but were afraid to ask

Charles Towers, Artistic Director



Elizabeth Kegley, Executive Director

JANUARY 8 - FEBRUARY 1, 2015

THE BEST BROTHERS

by Daniel MacIvor

Featuring

MICHAEL CANAVAN

BILL KUX

Scenic Designer

BILL CLARKE

Costume Designer

ARTHUR OLIVER

Lighting Designer

DAN KOTLOWITZ

Sound Designer

DAVID REMEDIOS

Stage Manager

CASEY LEIGH HAGWOOD

Assistant Stage Manager

PETER CREWE

Directed by

CHARLES TOWERS

The Best Brothers is staged by arrangement with Pam Winter, Gary Goddard Agency, www.garygoddardagency.com.

*The Best Brothers Premiered at The Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Stratford, Ontario July 12, 2012
Des McNuff, Artistic Director | Antoni Cimolino, General Director*

Courier

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A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Hello and welcome to the second half of MRT's 2014-15 Season.

We start with *The Best Brothers*, Daniel MacIvor's very human comedy about sibling rivalry and a mother's love. To leave it there would make the play sound rather run-of-the-mill and MacIvor's play is anything but. It is shot through with inventiveness and eccentricity, but all within the bounds of recognizable human behavior. To say any more would be to spoil the fun.

There is a quote often attributed to George Bernard Shaw which says "England and America are two countries separated by the same language." I often feel the same could be said about the United States and Canada. MacIvor is very well-known both as a playwright and an actor in Canada, yet (I'm slightly embarrassed to admit) this is my first encounter with him and his work. There is much that goes on theatrically north of the border about which we know so little. I'm indebted to my Canadian friends and colleagues Seana McKenna and Miles Potter (the actor and director of *Shakespeare's Will* which we produced here at MRT two years ago) for bringing this play to my attention. It had its premiere at the Stratford Festival, where both Seana and Miles are leading artists, and subsequently played at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in the fall of 2013. As it turns out, MRT is only the second theatre in the U.S. to produce *The Best Brothers* but I'm sure there will be many more.

The play is set in Toronto but except for a couple of local references it could take place in any number of American cities. I felt no need to "Americanize" it in any way, so in Toronto it remains.

Enjoy,

Charles Towers

THE CAST OF THE BEST BROTHERS



MICHAEL CANAVAN (*Hamilton Best*) **MRT:** Michael is delighted to be returning to MRT after playing James Tyrone Jr. in *Moon for the Misbegotten* and directing *Three Songs*. **OFF-BROADWAY/NEW YORK:** *Bug*, Barrow St. Theatre; *Bang Bang Blues*, Joseph Papp Public Theatre; *As You Like It*, Riverside Shakespeare Co. **CHICAGO:** *Hamlet*, *The Lion in Winter*, *The Father*, Writer's Theatre; *Mizlansky/Zilinsky*, Steppenwolf Theatre Company; *The Dying Gaul*, Apple Tree Theatre.

REGIONAL: *Reckless*, *Driving Around the House*, *Jitters*, *Haut Gout*, *Prelude to a Kiss*, *Cold Sweat*, *Ghost in the Machine*, *Oleanna*, South Coast Rep; *De Donde?*, New Mexico Rep; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Twelfth Night*, Pittsburgh Public Theatre. **INTERNATIONAL:** *Three Sisters*, (Teatro Popular de Bogota, Colombia, S.A.); **FILM:** *Flags of Our Fathers*, *The Island*, *Hidalgo*, *Murder By Numbers*, *Striking Distance*, *Ratboy*, and others. **TELEVISION:** Dozens of guest star appearances including most recently; *Grey's Anatomy*, *Mad Men*, *Bones*, *Criminal Minds*, *CSI Miami*, and *Entourage*. **EDUCATION:** Michael considers himself lucky to have studied with two of the greats, Wynn Handman and Bobby Lewis. **OTHER:** Michael narrated *The Bible* for Warner New Media and voiced the *Marquis de Sade* for the History Channel. In May, he will appear in *The Little Foxes* with his wife Shannon Cochran at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago.



BILL KUX (*Kyle Best*) **MRT:** Debut. **BROADWAY:** Gore Vidal's *The Best Man*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Ain't Broadway Grand*. **NATIONAL TOUR:** *Death of a Salesman* (Hal Holbrook). **OFF BROADWAY:** *Endpapers*, *Summer of '42*, *Loose Ends*, *Absent Friends*. **REGIONAL:** *Ether Dome*, Huntington; *Noises Off*, *Summer and Smoke*, *Christmas Carol*, Hartford Stage; *Pyschic Lives of Savages*, Yale Rep; *Our Town*, Dallas Theatre Center; *Dimly Perceived Threats to the System*, Arena Stage; *Travels With My Aunt*, Seattle Rep; *The Film Society*, Baltimore Center Stage; *Art*, Cincinnati Playhouse; *Love, Valor, Compassion*, Philadelphia Theater Company; *The Dresser*, *Sherlock Holmes*, Monomoy. **FILM:** *Die Hard With a Vengeance*. **TELEVISION:** *Gossip Girl*, *MASH*, *Law & Order*. **EDUCATION:** Yale School of Drama.

"HAPPY TAILS" FROM THE HOME FRONT

In *The Best Brothers*, we learn about Bunny's personal transformation through the love of her dog Enzo. Pets, both real and fictional, have a remarkable power to bring health and happiness to their humans. The following article was written by **Julia Gavin**, a volunteer at the Lowell Humane Society.

"IF YOU PICK UP A STARVING DOG AND MAKE HIM PROSPEROUS, HE WILL NOT BITE YOU. THIS IS THE PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DOG AND A MAN."

- Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Since 1873, the **Lowell Humane Society** has worked to protect many of the city's most defenseless residents.

Originally established to fight both animal and child abuse, the society handled complaints and prosecutions concerning both groups until 1929. When the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children began handling local child abuse cases, the Humane Society shifted its focus to animal issues and opened its first shelter at the Hamilton Mills on Jackson Street. At its current home on Pawtucket Street since 1939, the shelter has expanded its adoption and humane education programs and become the strong community partner it is today.

In 2013 alone, the society's dedicated staff and volunteers facilitated 1,021 adoptions, returned 99 lost pets to their owners, and helped an additional 137 animals find forever homes through partner organizations. The Society offers counseling to match the right pets with the right people, helping to ensure a happy ending for the animal and the family alike.

The society also works to help pet owners in need through education and resource sharing. Their pet food pantry assisted more than 113 families in 2014, preventing the surrender of 175 cats and 108 dogs. Spay/neuter efforts and partnerships with other local organizations and foundations help ease the financial burden for Lowell residents. One effect of such low-cost surgery options is that the shelter's kitten intake is down 48% since 2008. This drastic and necessary change has opened up adoption possibilities for more adult cats, who are often overlooked when kittens are in abundance.

The society depends on community support, donations, and adoption fees to cover costs—and the community enjoys the benefits. By helping thousands of people become and remain happy pet owners each year, the Society contributes to the health and happiness of Greater Lowell's animals and humans alike. Numerous studies have found that pet owners have healthier blood pressure, lower rates of illness, and faster rates of recovery.

The inestimable value of an animal's love can be seen in just a few of the many **"Happy Tails"** from the Lowell Humane Society's families:



think that this adorable puppy could have been lost in such an awful way."

Molly brings love and laughter to the family every day. "She shows us her love with kisses, greeting us when we get home and is always ready to play. Molly takes care of our little ones and is definitely the 2 year old's favorite family member," says Danielle. "We couldn't be happier to have Molly in our family and will always be grateful to the Lowell Humane Society for rescuing her."

Photo: Molly poses for a picture with Santa. Photo by Danielle DeMoss.



she was supposed to wait for Scruffy.

"I honestly think Scruffy was meant to come into my life, and he has changed me and everyone who is in his life," says Sarah. Scruffy has moved across the country and back, helping his humans through many life changes. He's picked up some gray hairs along the way, but he still loves long walks and swimming for hours.

Photo: Scruffy soaking up some sun at the beach. Photo by Sarah Brown-Walsh.



MOLLY (a different one!) has brought lots of love to the Hetherman family, who gave the bulldog a second chance when her previous owners surrendered her in 2013. She loves playing soccer and helping her family get active, though her enthusiasm has led her to pop four soccer balls.

"Molly is such a good dog. She's become a huge part of our family," says her new mom, Kim. "She loves to go for rides in the truck and has become my copilot."

Photo: Molly the bulldog settles in for a nap. Photo by Kim Hetherman.

THE ITALIAN GREYHOUND

Enzo, Bunny Hamilton's dog in *The Best Brothers*, is an Italian Greyhound (IG). This small dog breed has been around for a long time, but today they are known as sweet and graceful companion dogs.



Their short coat makes them rather sensitive to the cold.

While selective breeding has left the Italian Greyhound small (with an average height of 13-15 inches), it is a true greyhound, just like its larger compatriots.

13-15"

They are quick learners and good problem solvers, but they are notoriously difficult to house-train.

Italian Greyhounds are especially prone to dental problems.

Italian Greyhounds have long been a favorite dog among European royalty. IG owners have included Catherine the Great of Russia, Anne of Denmark, and Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of England.



Italian Greyhounds tend to develop close bonds with their owners.

Although they are today called "Italian", they are actually an ancient dog breed, appearing in Mediterranean art dating back 2,000 years. Similar dogs appear in Egyptian art dating back almost 6,000 years.



They are both fast runners and high jumpers. In fact, most seem to believe that they can fly; they are known for leaping from high ledges without inhibition.

Their skinny legs are fragile, especially during their puppy years, and often break easily.

Sources:
American Kennel Club: akc.org
Dogbreedinfo.com
ItalianGreyhound.org
AnimalPlanet.com/breed-selector

Photos:
"Zoom" by Eric Miraglia.
"Catherine the Great"
painting by Vladimir Borovikovskiy.
"Dog in Fleece" by Eric Miraglia
"Jumping Dog" by Andrew Hutchinson



Bill Kux (Kyle) and Michael Canavan (Hamilton). Photo by Meghan Moore.

MEET THE BESTS: A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL CANAVAN & BILL KUX

Michael Canavan and **Bill Kux** portray Hamilton and Kyle Best respectively in MRT's production of *The Best Brothers*.

They generously agreed to take time amidst their busy rehearsal schedule to chat about dogs, Canadians, and how to look more handsome.

What do you think audiences will find exciting about *The Best Brothers*?

MICHAEL CANAVAN (MC): Well you know, when you're in a comedy, it's never a good idea to tell people how funny it's gonna be.

BILL KUX (BK): It's gonna be funny! What are you talking about?? It's gonna be funny!

MC: See, Bill almost always agrees with me on these issues.

What's it like for you guys doing a two-person show? Is it very different from doing a play with four, five, six characters?

BK: Doing a two-hander means you have almost every other line. So you can't like file your nails, or take a smoke, or read the paper. It's like "Oh my! It's my line!"

MC: Yeah.

BK: [It's not] "Oh, the other scene is going on," and you sit back, and you look at the NY Times...

MC: Do a crossword puzzle...

BK: Call your agent, "What am I doing here?!"

MC: Only doing a one-man show is harder. And it's kind of a toss up, because you never know what you're gonna get, when you have a scene partner.

BK: [When we started rehearsals,] I thought "Oh my god, that's *him?* I get *him?*" And then I thought "Oh well, you know, I think I could grow to get used to him..."

The other thing about doing a two-hander is, besides having the responsibility, that it's like "thank God there's someone else!" When you do it by yourself, it's really lonely...

MC: And the style of the play is a little ping-pongy. It's spare in a lot of sections... when you think of plays like [*Waiting for Godot*...] you have a lot of ellipses, lines that taper off, people finish each other's sentences, and that kind of acting work is really fun, once you are able to do it.

Why do you think the dog is such a hot button topic in this play?

MC: [*Italian accent*] Because he's an Italian Greyhound. Because it's an ancient breed, it's 2,000 years old, and also because in our sibling rivalry, at one point in the play, we come to the conclusion that Mother loved him best.

BK: She's an older lady, and she falls head over heels for this dog! She's never had a dog, and she just loves the dog so much. And I think that hits a chord too, because of the way people are about dogs.

MC: I've had a dog—sadly, my dog just passed away over the summer—and I was devastated. I had my dog for almost 14 years... we drove across the country together, And he did not like to be in the car. [But] that is not what killed him! That had nothing at all to do with the end of his life. You know... we both survived that experience, and we were better men and dogs for it.

BK: Bunny says in the play, that the dog—our dogs—become our hearts. And you know, it's sort of true... The time you spend, the amount of love you receive from the dog, the uncomplicated thing that is very much part of the play as well.

MC: A friend of mine, when my wife and I got our dog less than a year after we moved into our new house, said "Wait and see, that dog will become the spirit of the house..." And in a way that sounds [strange,] but that's exactly what happened.

BK: Our dog in this play is specifically an Italian Greyhound, which is a very specific, strange, small-but-swift breed. And they describe in the play how the tongue hangs out, and there's almost a smile... Not really, but you can interpret it as a smile. So it has this sort of Zen quality of looking into the dog and seeing what you want...

Have you done any interesting work in getting into your characters?

BK: When I got the part, I actually started looking at dog parks. I've never looked at a dog park particularly. I'd watch the people and their dogs...

The last scene in the play takes place in a dog park. And it's this

great world of dogs and their owners. The owners don't know each others' name, or anything about each other—it's really the dogs. You know all the dogs' names, know all the dogs' birthdays, know all the dogs' habits, and you almost know nothing about the other people.

MC: Part of my preparation was really easy, because I have an uncle who's an architect, and my character is an architect. He has a very distinctive kind of personality. There is a sense of self, a sort of ego that architects have, because they design and build things that people see every day, they influence the way people live their lives. So that's been the real challenge for me: getting my ego to be big enough so that I could actually play this part. That, and trying to be handsomer.

How have you gone about doing that?

BK: Plucking is one way.

MC: Plucking. And I have a lot more makeup on. When people come see the show, I'll be unrecognizable because of the amount of makeup I'll be wearing.

BK: Will I know you? I guess I'll know you, there's only one other person on the stage. You.

MC: He'll say, "That tart over there. Oh! That's him!"

BK: I wanted to go to Toronto to do some research.

To see what Canadians are like?

MC: Indeed. We've heard so much about them. And we see them, they're all over our TV shows.

BK: They come over here all the time. Michael J. Fox...

MC: Jim Carrey...

BK: Yeah! And... who's the woman who sings about the Titanic?

MC: Half the people on Saturday Night Live, they're all Canadians!

BK: Oh that's right. Mike Myers.

This play's been very popular in Canada. Because it's a Canadian play, and it's a very good play...

MC: [Playwright Daniel Maclvor] is very famous up in Canada.

BK: Yes, which means nothing to us, unfortunately. It should mean more, because this is a wonderful play! It deserves to be seen!



Bill Kux (Kyle) and Michael Canavan (Hamilton). Photo by Meghan Moore.

Fill in the blank: *The Best Brothers* is _____?

MC: *The Best Brothers* is delightfully brief. You know, you are going to be at the bar so fast when you see this show.

BK: And we will too! We'll be sitting right next to you!

MC: That Penny Fuller [in *13 Things About Ed Carpolotti*], you think she went fast?! Well, there's two of us, so we're just gonna rip right through it, and there's no intermission.

BK: 90 minutes of bliss. *The Best Brothers* is doggone good. Isn't that good?!

MC: Oh that's excellent!

BK: Doggone great!

MC: You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll wish you had a plastic bag in your pocket.

BK: And you'll have a drink afterwards.

MC: It's basically a love story. Like most good things, it's a love story.

BK: I love you, Michael.

MC: I love you too, Bill.



Kyle (Bill Kux) and Hamilton (Michael Canavan) give a eulogy for their recently-deceased mother. Photo by Meghan Moore.

FUNERARY FACTS

The Best Brothers is broken into scenes, each named for a particular practice in western grieving and funerary traditions: The Obituary, The Visitation, The Eulogy, The Condolences, and The Will.

THE OBITUARY

While most death notices are written by the family and friends of the deceased, major papers like the New York Times have full-time staffers who write just obits—the industry term is “walking the dead beat.”



The industry term for obituary writing at papers like The New York Times is “Walking the Dead Beat.” Photo by Jason Kuffer.

The format for these obits is structured with a remarkable consistency: From the opening (which identifies the deceased and gives a short explanation of their notable accomplishments) to the end (which gives a list of their survivors), every section has a specific purpose.

The Times also keeps around 1,200 “advances:” obits for major public figures who are still alive. (Just in case.)

THE VISITATION

“Visitation” is often used interchangeably with “Wake” to describe a pre-funeral gathering, either at a funeral home or the home of the deceased’s family.

The rowdiness of some Irish wakes is well-known, but indulgent feasts are a common sight across cultures:

- At a Belgian funerals, much of the food is black in color, such as black bread (“Soul Bread”). This often means high chocolate content, as in Belgian funeral cake.



Raisin Pie. Photo by Connormah http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raisin_pie_with_lattice_crust.JPG

- Traditional Amish funeral meals feature “Raisin Pie,” also called Funeral Pie. Its long shelf life has made it a good contribution from relatives traveling long distances without benefit of motorized transportation.
- In some parts of Jamaica, it is traditionally believed that the soul of a deserving person will travel to Africa immediately after death. Several “Johnny Cakes” (similar to cornbread), in addition to being eaten at the funeral feast, are place in the casket to nourish the soul on its travels. In fact, the name “Johnny Cakes” is a derivation of “Journey Cakes.”



Water buffalo are a common sight (and taste) at Toraja funeral feasts. Photo by Alexander Vasenin. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Water_buffalo_at_Rinca.jpg

- Indonesia’s Toraja tribe holds funeral feasts that last for days, even as long as week—and may not even start until years after the death. These feasts are enormous and extravagant, with guests bringing whole buffalo, pigs, and other livestock. The feasts can also include music, dance, and hunting and kickboxing events.

THE EULOGY



Many Christian reformers, such as John Knox (1514-1572) opposed the delivery of funeral sermons. Illustration from Theodore Beza’s Icones.

The eulogy, or funeral oration, has seen an ongoing shift in focus since ancient times and through the millennia:

- Ancient Roman speeches grieving the dead were given in the

public forum, and had a secondary purpose of reinforcing the image of one's allegiance to the empire.

- The Medieval funeral sermon took on a more religious tone, and commended the deceased for their role in society, as opposed to their individual merits.
- During the Protestant reformation, some extreme reformers such as John Knox denounced the recitation of a funeral sermon, citing its pagan roots.
- Funeral sermons in the 1800's saw a shift away from religious strictures. Family members would often select graveside orators to speak in praise of the deceased.
- With the secularization of the late 1900's, it became much more common for family and friends to deliver eulogies.

IN A 2006 ARTICLE FOR *ESQUIRE*, TOM CHIARELLA DESCRIBES NINE GUIDELINES FOR "HOW TO GIVE A EULOGY:"

1. Giving a eulogy is good for you.
2. The writing and reading of a eulogy is, above all, the simple and elegant search for small truths.
3. Work within the finite time you're given.
4. (The relatives and friends) in the front row are owed the most.
5. You must write it down.
6. Avoid similes.
7. You may cry. Accept it.
8. Don't read poetry unless you knew it going in...
Don't do imitations.
Don't sing, unless they ask you to. Even then, consider not singing.
9. You must make them laugh.

Tom Chiarella is Hampton and Esther Boswell Distinguished University Professor of Creative Writing at DePauw University and writer-at-large and fiction editor of *Esquire* Magazine. The full article is available at esquire.com

Esquire

THE CONDOLENCES

In 1980, Marsha McGee published an analytical study of over 100 American sympathy cards, and a similar study was repeated in 1998:



Coffin (display), Museum of Funeral Customs, Springfield, IL. Photo by Robert Lawton.

- Flowers remained the most prominent symbol; nature scenes also ranked highly.
- Seashells, rainbows, and butterflies were less popular in 1980, but had risen by 1998.

THE WILL

While most wills leave standard instructions for the division of wealth and property, some have made rather unusual last requests:

- 1862: English Gentleman Henry Budd (who detested facial hair) left his sons £200,000 on one condition: they must never grow mustaches.
- 1926: Canadian lawyer and practical jokester Charles Millar wrote a mischievous will, leaving anti-gamblers shares in racetracks, anti-drinkers shares in breweries, and a joint lifetime tenancy in a vacation home to three men who hated one another.



Double Parking. Creative Commons Photo. http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/31/Double_parked_car_with_diplomatic_tags.jpg

- 1995: In a stand against his city's unruly traffic, Robert Allan Miller left an annual \$5,000 to whichever Bethlehem, PA police officer wrote the most double parking tickets.
- 2007: Billionaire Leona Helmsley made her dog the largest single benefactor in her will: the Maltese, named Trouble, received \$12 Million.

Sources:

The Whole Death Catalog, by Harold Schechter
"How to Give a Eulogy" by Tom Chiarella. *Esquire*, Sept. 1 2006
Death Warmed Over, by Lisa Rogak
www.deathreference.com



Daniel MacIvor and John Beale in *"The Best Brothers"* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival.
Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.

DANIEL MACIVOR'S LESSONS IN LOVE AND DRAMATURGY

This article was reprinted by permission from the Dec. '14 issue of AMERICAN THEATRE magazine, published by Theatre Communications Group.

The Canadian playwright of *The Best Brothers* didn't know he had a play in him about an annoying but ultimately lovable new best friend.

SANTA BARBARA, CALIF.: Nova Scotian playwright Daniel MacIvor learned two valuable lessons in the writing of *The Best Brothers*, his popular two-man comedy, which has played all over Canada and is now making its U.S. premiere at the Ensemble Theatre Company, Dec. 4–21. (Another American production goes up at Massachusetts's Merrimack Repertory Theatre in January.)

Lesson one: Sometimes a dramaturg can be the best kind of spy. While working on an earlier play at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, where MacIvor is the resident playwright, dramaturg Iris Turcott secretly took notes whenever MacIvor regaled her with off-topic rants about a new special someone in his life.

That certain someone constitutes lesson two: Don't get a dog if you don't want to be driven mad, then fall madly in love.

"I happened to mention to Iris that the Stratford Festival wanted a play from me, and I didn't know what to write," said MacIvor by phone. "She said, 'How about the play about the dog?' I said, 'What play?' " Turcott showed him her notes: a series of complaints about his Italian greyhound puppy, Buddy, who blithely ate its way through MacIvor's personal effects. "Willfulness in bodily form" is how MacIvor described his puppy—which, now that it's five, he has come to cherish like a child.

He wrote *The Best Brothers* as a vehicle for himself and the actor John Beale. The play follows two contrasting siblings, reunited by the death of their mother—and joined in their love/hate relationship with a pesky (offstage) canine.

"There's a conversation about metaphysics buried in it, if you're tuned into it," said MacIvor. "But it's a very friendly play. Even my harshest critics said they liked it." And his dog? He thought the play tasted great.

BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT



BIRTHPLACE OF THE BROTHERS: THE STRATFORD FESTIVAL

Kyle and Hamilton are making their American debut this month at MRT, but it's not their first rodeo (or funeral?). *The Best Brothers* debuted in 2012 in what had been, decades before, a Canadian railroad town in decline: Stratford, Ontario.

These days, Stratford is a world-renowned cultural destination thanks to the monumental festival of live theatre that bears its name: *The Stratford Festival* (formerly called the "Stratford Shakespeare Festival") is enormous (the upcoming festival will feature no less than thirteen separate fully-mounted productions). The festival runs from May to October, utilizing four different performance spaces. About a third of its productions are Shakespearean; the rest are a blend of new work, musicals, and other classic plays.

In July 2012, *The Best Brothers* debuted in the most intimate of those spaces, the Studio Theatre. Nicknamed "The Chapel," its 260-seat auditorium (compare to MRT's 279) surrounds the stage on three sides. The play's writer Daniel Maclvor himself appeared as Hamilton.



Stratford Festival Stage. Courtesy of the Stratford Festival.

The Studio Theatre was built as a scaled-down, more personal version of the festival's mainstage, the legendary Festival Stage. Inspired by the Elizabethan apron stage structure, the Festival Stage's five-sided thrust platform boasts pillared balconies, trap doors, and underground entrance tunnels, bringing a total of nine different entrance points for actors. The Studio and the Festival Theatres alike create a drawn-in, near-participatory experience for the playgoer—and the origin of the stage's design is closely intertwined with that of Festival itself.

When founder (and lifelong Stratfordian) **Tom Patterson** got the idea for a Canadian Shakespearean Festival in the early 1950's, thrust stages were not widespread; Legendary British director **Tyrone Guthrie** saw in Patterson's vision an opportunity to bring back some of the intimacy of the Elizabethan theatres where Shakespeare's plays were first seen, and Patterson saw an opportunity to revitalize his (aptly named) hometown of Stratford, which was struggling after the withdrawal of the railroad industry that had been its lifeblood.

And so on July 13, 1952, **Alec Guinness** (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Star Wars*) stepped out as Richard III for the Festival's inaugural production. Guthrie had signed on as Artistic Director (and has since gone on to found the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis). No enclosure had yet been built at Stratford: the stage stood before a poured-concrete amphitheater, under a canvas tent.

The Best Brothers came riding on 60 years of theatre history. "With William Shakespeare as its foundation, the Stratford Festival aims to set the standard for classical theatre in North America... for more than half a century, our mission has evolved to address the ever-changing, ever-challenging Canadian cultural landscape," so says the Festival's vision and mandate. Thanks to its ongoing commitment to theatre that is at once innovative and grounded in tradition, plays like *The Best Brothers* make it from Canada to the international sphere. Their universal stories reach from Manitoba, to California, to Massachusetts.

MRT is thrilled to bring the playfulness, wit, and heart of *The Best Brothers* to Lowell.

Source: www.stratfordfestival.ca

THE BEST BROTHERS ACROSS THE CONTINENT

The Best Brothers premiered in Stratford, Ontario in 2012. On the heels of several more Canadian performances, the script is making headway into the States.



-  **1 JULY 2012** *The Best Brothers* premieres at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario
-  **2 SEPTEMBER 2013** The Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, Ontario
-  **3 OCTOBER 2013** The Prairie Theatre Exchange in Winnipeg, Manitoba
-  **4 AUGUST 2014** The Victoria Playhouse in Victoria, Prince Edward Island
-  **5 DECEMBER 2014** The Ensemble Theatre Company in Santa Barbara, CA
-  **6 JANUARY 2015** Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, MA
-  **7 JANUARY 2015** The Belfry Theatre in Victoria, British Columbia
-  **8 JANUARY 2015** The Williamston Theatre in Williamston, MI

GLOSSARY

ARABESQUE: Ornate style of decoration from Islamic art. Motifs often contain plant-like components, and can be seamlessly repeated ad infinitum.

BEHEST: An order, or urgent request

BLACK FLY: Small, humpbacked, blood-sucking fly. Only the females can bite, and in large enough numbers they are capable of killing large birds, or even horses.

MARCEL BREUER: 20TH-century Hungarian architect. Working in the International Style, he strove to create art expressive of an industrial age.

COCKATIEL: Small Australian parrot, usually gray with a yellow head and red ear patches. One of the most common pet parrots.

COTILLION: Originally a French court dance with four couples in a square, it eventually came to mean any ballroom couples dance, or the formal ball itself.

GHERKINS: Small pickled cucumbers.

EMMA GOLDMAN: Lithuanian-born anarchist writer and orator, who worked for leftist causes internationally in the late 19th and early 20TH centuries.

KNIGHTS TEMPLAR: Religious military order established during the Crusades. The Freemasons claim a secret inheritance of knowledge from the Templars.

NIETZSCHE: 19TH-century German classical scholar and philosopher.

SNAIDERO: High-end Italian kitchen outfitter, founded as a small cabinetry shop near Venice in 1946 and now operating internationally.

TOASTMASTERS: Nonprofit organization that operates clubs in 126 countries intended to help members improve their public speaking, communication, and leadership skills.

THANK YOU

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think it is possible for a parent to love one of their children, as Bunny says, “not more, but harder?”
2. What place does (or doesn't) celebration have amidst a tragedy such as a family death?
3. Hamilton and Kyle remember certain childhood events, like the Orange Crush incident, differently from one another. What might account for the differences? Whose version do you think is more accurate?
4. Do you see anyone mentioned in the play as being responsible for Bunny's death?
5. Kyle asserts that Hamilton needs to have some “poo in his kitchen.” Is there anything you think Kyle needs?
6. What is the difference between, in Bunny's words, “learning to love” and “letting oneself love?”
7. Are there ways that dogs (or other animals) can show us things in life that humans can't?

FURTHER READING

PETS AND THEIR PEOPLE

The Genius of Dogs: How Dogs are Smarter Than You Think by Brian Hare

The Powerful Bond between People and Pets by P. Elizabeth Anderson

The Reign of the Greyhound by Cynthia A. Branigan

Greyhounds Big and Small by Amanda Jones

FUNERARY CUSTOMS

How to Give a Eulogy by Tom Chiarella, *Esquire Magazine*, Sept. 1 2006.

The Whole Death Catalog by Harold Schechter

Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth Century America by Gary Laderman

Death Warmed Over: Funeral Food, Rituals, and Customs from Around the World by Lisa Rogak