



## SHAKING UP THE BARD

Emily Mattina spreads the word of Shakespeare throughout Waterbury

BY BRYNN MANDEL REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Emily Mattina is the kind of woman who can look at Salvador Dali and think of "Alice in Wonderland."

As artistic director of Shakesperience Productions, Mattina paints pictures using stages, sets and actors instead of oil, acrylic or watercolor.

Her medium? William Shakespeare.

For Mattina, also the theater troupe's chief executive, the love affair with Shakespeare began as a little girl.

How could she not swoon over "Romeo and Juliet," a copy of which her mother gave her around age 8 or 9 after Mattina danced in a ballet of the story? She became hooked, enveloping herself in a world of what Mattina called "never-ending paradoxes" that allow for unbounded artistic exploration.

"I always think of Shakespeare as a Rorschach test. You can see so many different things in there," said Mattina, 39, whose colleagues praise her knack for organization and wildly creative spirit. For more than a decade, Mattina and the troupe she co-founded have been spreading the gospel of Shakespeare. They do it in school workshops, presenting before an estimated 70,000 students yearly, and for the public in theatrical productions.

"It's through the eyes of this creative genius that we see the mysteries of life, love, beauty and meaning," said the Waterbury resident and mother of two. Her children are Thomas Charles, 4, and 2-monthold Viola Lucia. (After a difficult pregnancy Mattina named her daughter after the character who survives a shipwreck in "Twelfth Night.") Viola frequently sways peacefully in a rocker not far from her petite working mother at the company's Bank Street studio.

Mattina teaches students the same way she does adults. But she said she especially appreciates the unencumbered spirits of the young. The idea for a theater company devoted to teaching children lessons from Shakespearean texts percolated while Mattina was studying theater at the University of New Hampshire. After earning a master's degree in 17th-century English literature from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England, Mattina acted with a history theater company before following her passion for directing and teaching.

"I knew I wanted to create a company model," she said, emphasizing her mantra of personal growth and creative thinking.

While other acting companies focused on Shakespeare, or had educational programs, none blended the two as she envisioned. Mattina refined workshops before officially launching Shakesperience with Jeffrey Lapham in 1996. She met Lapham, now her husband, doing summer theater in upstate New York the previous year. Over the years, the company evolved from offering school-based workshops to acting instruction. It moved resident actors to Waterbury to work and See [MATTINA, Page 5D](#)

#### IF YOU GO

Shakesperience's Spring Festival of Theatre, which launched four consecutive weekends of Shakesperience events on April 24, continues this weekend with "Alice in Wonderland" Saturday at 10 a.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the Shakesperience Studio, 117 Bank St., Waterbury.



Ryan Gorton of New York talks with Emily Mattina, CEO and artistic director of Shakesperience Productions, before the start of their recent 'Beer and the Bard' event at the Howland Hughes Building on Bank

## MATTINA: Fresh Shakespeare served

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live. A workshop had brought Mattina and Lapham to Waterbury, and they stayed after deciding it was a good place to put down roots. Today, the nonprofit employs 10 people, including six full-time actors. For special events, they sometimes add to that roster.

Shakesperience branched into public performances, too, offering events like summer's fifth Shakespeare in Library Park and its ongoing spring Festival of Theatre, continuing this weekend with the Dali-imbued "Alice in Wonderland."

It's a Wonderland where going through the looking glass means slipping into the surreal world also inspired by Dali, as imagined by Mattina — a place where time is emphasized and tea cups can turn into egg timers.

"Artistically, Emily is fired by a number of different stimuli," said co-founder Lapham, recounting how visits to Museum of Modern Art trigger ideas for shows.

Like any Shakespeare fan worth their dagger, Mattina keeps things fresh. She has directed "A Midsummer Night's Dream" 15 times, once imagining the action inside the human body, setting the characters against the backdrop of floating red blood cells.

Another time, the troupe based the show's on-stage movement on the force between magnets.

Mattina is fastidious, studying sonnets before launching a production or workshop. She works on a show a year, sometimes spending up to two years refining her vision and scrutinizing the lines — and all that's between them. She applies her knowledge from other plays, looking at Shakespeare's cannon as a continuum.

Mattina can't envision a day when she will tire of Shakespeare's plays.

"In his genius he wrapped this incredible poetry around these stories," she said, leaning forward in the office chair and widening her eyes. "It's endless. No matter how many times you go back, there's always something new."

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