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Julie Cohen, left, interviews Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival interns Kelsey Olson and Max Polski for the documentary "Shakespeare on the Hudson," airing on Thirteen/WNET at 8 p.m. Thursday. The documentary will be followed by an airing of the festival's production of "Twelfth Night."

BACKSTAGE

with the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival

Behind-the-scenes film, 'Twelfth Night' will be aired on PBS

Peter D. Kramer
The Journal News

When independent filmmaker Julie Cohen went to see "As You Like It" at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival in Garrison last summer, she had Channel 13 on her mind: She was working on a documentary for the local PBS station at the time.

But when she and her family spread their blanket and settled in for a pre-show picnic, Cohen noticed something.

"Half the people at the picnic had Channel 13 tote bags," she recalls with a laugh. "I was like 'This is our kind of crowd.'"

Some people might laugh at the coincidence and then pass the pasta salad, but Cohen connected the dots and saw an opportunity.

Later, she approached festival executive director Susan Landstreet and artistic director Terrence O'Brien and was granted full access to this year's festival.

For four months, from auditions to previews, she and her team covered every aspect of this summer's production of "Twelfth Night," including filming the entire play.

The result is "Shakespeare on the Hudson" — a behind-the-scenes look at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival — airing at 8 p.m. Thursday.

Introduced by Tony-winner Kristin Chenoweth, the documentary will be followed by the festival's production of "Twelfth Night," directed by John Christian Plummer.

"Twelfth Night" is the story of a shipwreck, divided twins, a woman



William Marsh

Wesley Mann and Gabra Zackman perform in the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's production of "Twelfth Night."

'Shakespeare on the Hudson'

What: A behind-the-scenes look at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's production of "Twelfth Night," introduced by Kristin Chenoweth, followed by an airing of the complete production.

When: 8 p.m. Sept. 18.

Where: Thirteen/WNET.

Note: "Shakespeare on the Hudson" and "Twelfth Night" will be rebroadcast on WLIW at 8 p.m., Sept. 26.

who dresses as a boy, a fool who speaks the truth and, in the end, a happy ending.

It begins with the line: "If music be the food of love, play on" and is Shakespeare's most musical comedy.

Getting access was only the start of the journey.

"I don't really know that much about theater," Cohen says. "So I didn't know anything about what the rehearsal process was like. It was re-

ally interesting to watch it unfold."

The documentary has a rough look to it, shot by Cohen and a field producer who are not professional camera people.

"But the performance is just the opposite," she says. "We used top quality high-definition cameras, in a five-camera shoot, with one camera on a great arm to pan out."

Some of the most remarkable scenes, though, were those Cohen

captured behind-the-scenes:

■ As Olivia, Gabra Zackman rehearses the scene where she discovers she's in love with the servant Cesario. (Who is, in fact, the lady Viola in disguise.) In a Midtown rehearsal hall, Zackman's face is flushed, her hair wild, her breath rapid. She's creating the moment as the camera rolls.

■ Maia Guest, who plays the fool Feste, is director Plummer's wife. The veteran actress expresses some reservations about her ability to pull off such a demanding role. She and Plummer are filmed at their Cold Spring home, in a Manhattan rehearsal studio and under the tent in Garrison.

■ Two apprentices, Kelsey Olson and Max Polski, are followed as they try to fit into the company of seasoned professionals.

■ Festival veterans Wesley Mann and Paul Bates, two of Cohen's longtime favorites at Boscobel, are among those shown learning their lines, in a remarkably simple but effective montage that shows the work an actor must do to prepare for any role.

"I hope, if we've done our job well," Cohen says, "that seeing the documentary will really make you want to see the performance."

The end result of all that rehearsal was a seamless blending of music and story, the product of a remarkably loose process from first-time festival director Plummer.

But it made for some sleepless nights for Cohen along the way.

"There were definitely times in the middle of it where I couldn't tell how the play was going to come out," she says. "It feels very different when you're in those little crappy rooms with the radiator and everything's kind of messy."

"I was like, 'I hope this is going to be good because I sold this idea to Channel 13 by saying 'Oh, these guys

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Film explores Shakespeare troupe

BACKSTAGE, from 1D

are great, the play is hilarious, it's going to be cool.'

"And then I realized that I was promising that the play was going to turn out great and, like, how do I know?"

The only thing that gave Cohen confidence early on was the music.

"On the first day of rehearsals, the composer Ray Bokhour came in and played some of the music and Maia sang some of the songs and I went home that day and told my husband, 'Well, the music is going to be beautiful, but the rest of it? I have no idea.'"

If Cohen's risk was large, so was the reward.

"When I saw the play the first time, in the first preview, I felt so proud of the actors, having followed them through it all," she says.

Having shot 60 hours of footage, Cohen had to make tough choices about which actors to feature to get "Shakespeare on the Hudson" down to its one-hour running time.

Most of the company were rehearsing "Twelfth Night" and "Cymbeline" simultaneously. Katie Hartke plays leading roles in both and was so busy with rehearsal that she's seen little in the documentary.

But on the night the "Twelfth Night" performance was filmed, the tote bags were back at Boscobel. And Cohen and her crew was ready.

"When it was announced that Channel 13 was filming the performance, the audience just went wild," Cohen recalls with a laugh. "Having worked at NBC for years, I can't recall anyone ever responding as positively to my presence."



William Marsh

Maia Guest, left, plays Feste, and Katie Hartke is Viola in the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival production of "Twelfth Night," directed by John Christian Plummer.

She also had to trim "Twelfth Night" slightly to fit it into two hours, losing about 15 minutes but still keeping the full flavor of the play.

Cohen says everyone was open to the project.

"These are people who, by nature, want to perform and want to be on camera and want to express themselves in an extremely public

way," she says.

"And it helped to know that, in the end, they'd be seeing their performance on Channel 13."

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