

AVON CALLING! STRATFORD AWAITS

Cynthia Dale gives us a backstage tour of her hamlet By Hailey Eisen

WALKING OUT OF Stratford's Avon Theatre with Cynthia Dale, an elderly couple pulls up in their car and asks for directions to a bed-and-breakfast. Dale responds, pointing them in the right direction, while the man in the passenger seat watches her intently. Before the couple drives off, the man points at Dale and exclaims, "I recognize you — you are the star of the show!" Though Dale doesn't like to admit it, she is one of the most well-recognized personalities in this small southwestern Ontario city. Having been the lead in Stratford Festival musicals for the past 10 years, Dale recently moved to the city. "I grew up in Toronto, but chose to move here because it is a lovely place to raise a child," says Dale who bought a house near the Avon River five years ago with her husband, CBC news anchor Peter Mansbridge. Dale says Stratford offers her family the best of all worlds, from a fabulous theatre community for Dale to work, to a great hockey community for her seven-year-old son to play. "Even though this will likely be my last year with the festival, I will certainly continue to call Stratford home."

THE HEROINE OF STRATFORD TAKES THE STAGE

I met up with Cynthia Dale at **Balzac's Coffee** (149 Ontario St.), a neighbourhood haunt that she visits every day to either pick up a cup of coffee or meet a friend to chat before heading to the theatre.

This year — the 55th season of the acclaimed Stratford Festival — Dale is performing as the leading lady in the lavish Gershwin musical, *My One and Only*.

I recognize Dale immediately (though I have only seen her on stage) because she carries herself like a dancer. Her confident posture, friendly disposition and beautiful smile make her seem like a person you'd want as a friend.

She greets the staff at Balzac's (who know her by name) and when I offer to pay for our coffees she pulls out her wallet and exclaims — "Welcome to my town!"

Since the inception of the Shakespearean theatre festival in 1953, Stratford has been a popular destination for both Canadian and American tourists. Already, at 11 a.m. on this sunny spring morning, students are flooding off busses and crowding the city's main streets.

Dale and I find a table on Balzac's quiet back patio and she offers me the inside scoop on this picturesque city that's just a two-hour drive from Toronto.

"There's a certain ease about Stratford," she says. "It's just so relaxed."

DISCOVER YOUR INNER SHAKESPEARE

For those who can still recite the balcony scene from *Romeo & Juliette* and for those who barely kept their eyes open during English class — the Stratford Festival has something for everyone. From big, Broadway-style musicals to literary classics, the Festival stages 14 shows from May through October.

This year you might want to check out, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* followed by *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Of Mice and Men*. For musical lovers there's *Oklahoma* and Dale's *My One and Only* that should not be missed. For information visit stratfordfestival.ca.

STAY THE NIGHT

If Dale were to plan a weekend in Stratford for visitors, it would go something like this: The couple would stay in **The Three Houses Inn** (100 Brunswick St.), an exquisite and comfortable bed-and-breakfast that's walking distance to most of Stratford's sites. (Note: the city has more than 130 licensed B&Bs from which to choose.)

The visitors would see a show at each of the Festival's four theatres. They would treat themselves to dinner at **Rundles** (9 Cobourg St.), a

phenomenal eatery and Stratford favourite. They would visit the local Farmers' Market on Saturday morning, and have ice cream at **Scoopers Ice Cream and Treats** (28 Erie St.). They would take a **Costume Warehouse Tour** (350 Dour St.) to see thousands of costumes and props housed in the third-largest costume warehouse in North America.

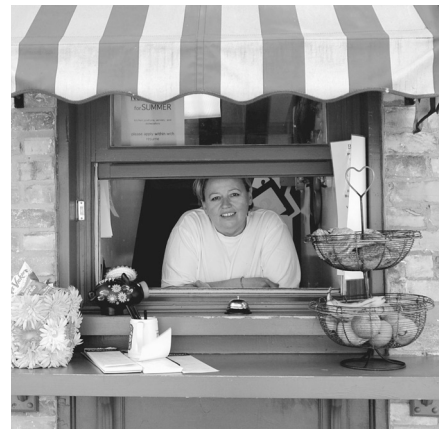


After theatre they would either go for drinks at **Foster's Inn** (111 Downie St.) or **Down The Street** (30 Ontario St.), the city's most popular after-theatre destination.

Finally, no trip to Stratford would be complete without a lovely picnic by the Avon river where Stratford's swans can be found.

ENJOY THE GREAT OUTDOORS

What makes Stratford such a great getaway in the summer months is its expansive and beautiful outdoor space. Dale says she often takes long walks through the city's many conservation areas



Clockwise from top: Cynthia Dale, the staff at Family & Company toy store, and Susie Palach, owner of York Street Kitchen

and spends a great deal of her time enjoying the 115 acres of parkland.

"When I'm out in the parks I love watching the kids rumbling on the grass and climbing in the trees," she says with a smile.

SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

The small boutiques that line Stratford's streets offer unique gifts, clothing, books, jewellery, accessories, toys and art.

"I tend to shop locally whenever possible," says Dale. **Chapter 3** (23 Downie St.) is where Dale goes to buy funky clothing and jewellery, **Bradshaws** (129 Ontario St.) is where she shops for gifts and home decor and **The Book Vault** (131 Ontario St.) is one of her favourite local booksellers.

As we wander onto the street the first shop Dale takes me to is **Rhéo Thompson Candies** (55 Albert St.) a must-try for any visitor.

Next, Dale takes me to **Family & Company** (6 Ontario St.) which she describes as a world-class store.

"I buy gifts for adults and kids here," says Dale as I step inside the bright toy shop and admire the oversized frisbees, elastic wind-up toys and blue feather boas.

When we get to the bottom of Ontario street we turn the corner and stroll along York Street. Here

you'll find one of Stratford's finest tea shops, **Distinctly Tea** (18 York St.) with over 350 loose-leaf teas. For lunch, York Street is home to Stratford's acclaimed sandwich shop, **York Street Kitchen** (41 York St.). I try an Italian sandwich, made with local goat cheese and am delighted with how fresh and delicious it is!

A FOOD-LOVER'S PARADISE

Stratford is known as a "food town" for its obsession with high quality, locally produced foods and its renowned chef school.

With a vast selection of high-end eateries and fresh-food shops no one should go hungry here.

For wood-oven pizza and pasta, Dale and her family frequent **Pazzo** (70 Ontario St.). When she's stocking up for a picnic she'll often visit **Pass da Pasta** (127 Albert St.).

When it comes to a special evening out, the finest restaurants in town include **The Old Prune** (151 Albert St.) celebrating 30 years in Stratford, and **The Church Restaurant** (70 Brunswick St.) both of which continue to receive rave reviews.

A TASTE OF CULTURE

With summer music festivals, Art in the Park exhibits, outdoor concerts and world class theatre, Stratford will fill your quota of culture for the summer! This quaint but diverse city is so close to Toronto that it's easy to visit just for the day — but once you get here you may find yourself in no real hurry to leave.