



The North American Premiere of “Dandelion” will be in Stratford’s Market Square starting Dec. 15, 2023. Photo courtesy of Amigo & Amigo

# Lights, camera, action: Stratford shines on the winter stage

## 2023 WinterLife Award

*The City of Stratford, Ont., is the proud recipient of the 2023 Communities in Bloom WinterLife Award. The WinterLife Award is an outstanding achievement award sponsored by Municipal World. It recognizes outstanding achievements in community engagement – both indoors and outdoors – during the winter months.*

Stratford is widely celebrated as a cultural destination of choice during the warmer months with its world-class theatre, restaurants, shops, gardens, and parks. The city is the home of the famous Stratford Festival, best known for its presentation of the plays of William Shakespeare, and has been attracting tourists from all over the world since 1952. From April to October, people flock to the beautiful theatres, and the city is bustling with activity.

When the theatre curtains close in late autumn, the city’s collective creativity shifts focus to embracing and celebrating the long winter ahead.

Stratford is now becoming a year-round destination. From Winterfest to Santa’s Parade of Lights, the community revels in gathering throughout the winter

with free-to-the-public, accessible, and inclusive family-friendly events and activities for all ages. These free, family-oriented activities entice people of all ages to escape their cozy homes to experience the joy of a Canadian winter day or evening.

### Stratford Turning Lights on in Winter

Lights on Stratford (#LightsOnStratford) is an annual winter festival by Destination Stratford. For a whole month, luminous art and interactive light installations transform the heritage downtown core and park system into a delightful winter wonderland, creating many smiles as its visitors explore and engage in multi-faceted activities.

The winter festival made its debut in 2020, but the looming darkness of the pandemic did not keep the lights from shining and spreading hope throughout the city. Families were able to enjoy the festivities that allowed social distancing from others.

At a time when entire extended families were unable to celebrate this magical

time of the year together, many felt uplifted as a result.

Lights on Stratford continues to evolve each year toward the goal of becoming an Ontario signature experience. The goal is to become a leader in the world of city light festivals while also tackling the significant seasonality issues for the local tourism sector.

“Lights on Stratford, in all its magical glory, certainly provides a great destination for visitors looking for a getaway during the winter season. It also delights our local residents,” said Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma. “From a child’s first experience using public city transit on the free Lights On Stratford shuttle bus,



Barbara Hacking is Stratford’s Communities in Bloom committee member and author of the *When a Butterfly Speaks* trilogy.



Zac Gribble is festival director at Lights on Stratford and executive director of Destination Stratford.

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“Lightwall” by Clare McClung. Photo courtesy of Destination Stratford

to the joyful laughter emanating from the interactive light installations across the city, this winter festival excels at making our community shine.”

## Celebration of Local Talent, Community

Stratford is home to some of the world’s best artists, lighting designers, props builders, and creative minds. Lights on Stratford supports and collaborates with these artists to harness this precious resource of local talent, crafting a truly unique experience that cannot be found anywhere else.

In addition to its economic goals, the winter festival also has a strong focus on social, cultural, and community benefits:

- **Community cohesion and inclusion** – Lights on Stratford is a free festival that contributes to Stratford’s community building, bringing the community together, strengthening relationships, and encouraging volunteerism.
- **Local economic revitalization and support for local businesses** – The festival boosts economic activity in the region, providing new revenues for local businesses during the low-season period.
- **Strengthening the position and image of the country, region, and city** – The festival enhances the national and international recognition of Stratford as a travel/tourism destination.

- **Support for Canadian artists** – As Stratford is home to great artists and lighting designers, the festival is a lifeline for local artists and theatre professionals, bringing them new opportunities during the off-season period.
- **Health and well-being** – Lights on Stratford is a catalyst for encouraging outdoor activity in the winter, with subsequent improvements to physical and mental health, and the overall well-being of citizens.

Lights on Stratford continues to expand bringing joy and light to all at a time when the world needs it.

Each year, the market square behind city hall becomes home to a unique winter playground where movement creates a symphony of colour and sound. An example of the ingenuity and creativity associated with the festival is a new year-round display of lights that has been installed on the side of the historic Pazzo building illuminating the downtown.

Other art displays include:

- **“Lightwall” by Lights on Stratford** – An interactive light display by Kaileigh Kryzstofiak that responds in real time to people speaking into a sculptural flower by local artist Dylan Mundy. The human voice is transformed into spectacular colour and movement patterns, a visual feast for onlookers.
- **“Dandelion” by Amigo and Amigo Studio** – New this year, this exhibit





The Stratford Festival Tom Patterson Theatre's 2022 Light Installation reflects in Lake Victoria. *Photo courtesy of Destination Stratford*

will travel 15,000 kilometres from Australia to Stratford to entertain and delight the nightly visitors.

Still smiling from Lights on Stratford's festivities, people are treated to exciting winter activities in Upper Queen's Park in late January.

Winterfest is run by a dedicated committee and involves many community volunteers. Even the lack of snow does not keep it from happening each year – although the pandemic did.

### Bringing the Community Together

Stratford's winter is once again enhanced greatly by the creation of winter activities such as a slide made from ice, children's play areas with ice building blocks, a petting zoo, various snow games, and a visit from BJ the swan mascot.

This celebration of winter is fun for everyone and creates an opportunity for beautiful winter photos. The fire pit warms up cold toes and helps make even the coldest winter day bearable.

“On behalf of the Stratford Winterfest committee, we are thrilled to have played a part in the WinterLife award for Communities in Bloom,” said Stratford Winterfest Chairperson Jamie Cottle. “Stratford is a wonderful community and an amazing year-round destination.”

The city's ongoing efforts to enable and support year-round vibrancy with winter cultural activation is being recognized at a local and provincial level with Innovation Awards from Tourism Industry Association of Ontario and Stratford & District Chamber of Commerce, and most recently, the City of Stratford is the proud recipient of the 2023 Communities in Bloom Award.

“It was a delight to be presented with the WinterLife Award in the council chambers, as it recognized the vision of one day not having to refer to a tourist season; one season would blend into the next,” Ritsma said. “We know that this type of growth benefits businesses as well as the people who live here.”

The future of Stratford is bright, and this is reflected in Lights on Stratford's manifesto:

- We bring light and joy to Stratford's public spaces.
- We are free to the public and accessible for everyone to participate.
- We are a cultural anchor tenant that enables additional events and experiences.
- We celebrate and embrace winter.
- We help grow a vibrant year-round visitor economy for the region.
- We improve the quality of life within our community.

Stratford opens its doors to visitors every day of the year. Free to the public, Lights on Stratford will light up this winter, starting Dec. 15 through to Jan. 13, 2024, Thursdays to Sundays from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.

This year's theme is “Emergence – Just as something comes to light or shows up where there is darkness or nothing before, an emergence happens.” For more details about this year's Lights on Stratford festival, visit [lightsonstratford.ca](http://lightsonstratford.ca). **MW**