

## Theater review: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' at Theatricum Botanicum



It's hard to imagine a more perfect set for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" than the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum. You don't have to suspend even an iota of disbelief to see the rustic stage, nestled in a woodsy hollow in Topanga, as the enchanted forest where Athenians and fairies get all mixed up one night.

The actors make their entrances along winding paths and down staircases as nimbly as mountain goats. This "Midsummer," directed by Melora Marshall, who also plays Titania, is the company's bread and butter, served almost every season.

The current cast has its strengths and weaknesses. For a successful "Midsummer," as somebody once pithily told me, "You need a good Puck and a good Bottom." Thad Geer gives this show a solid Bottom. Yes, the character is a conceited blowhard, but Geer's energy and charisma make it clear why the other tradesmen look up to him. Samara Frame's Puck has a fixed grin and exaggeratedly elfin movements that grow tiresome. The best moment is the "rude mechanicals'" hilariously incompetent

production of "Pyramus and Thisbe," mocked by the watching aristocrats. This brilliant and poignant scene sums up the entire theatrical enterprise: No play can compete with reality, but there is magic in even the clunkiest effort.

"The Merry Wives of Windsor," a new production running in repertory with "Midsummer," with some of the same actors, provides an interesting counterpoint. "Midsummer" is admired as one of Shakespeare's best works, filled with his most flowery poetry, while the prosy, farcical "Wives" doesn't top anybody's list. Legend holds that Queen Elizabeth so enjoyed the character of Falstaff, who dies at the end of "Henry IV, part 2," that she asked Shakespeare to resurrect the decadent knight. Transplanted from the 14th to the 16th century, this Falstaff retains the original's vigorous sensuality and apple shape but none of his profundity.

Low on cash yet confident of his sexual appeal, Falstaff (Alan Blumenfeld) plots to seduce the wives of well-off Windsor residents and sends identical love letters to Mistress Page (Karen Reed) and Mistress Ford (Elizabeth Tobias). After comparing notes, the two friends conspire to humiliate him. Through Mistress Quickly (Melora Marshall again — I liked her better here than as Titania), the town's matchmaker-for-hire, they invite Falstaff to a series of assignations. Each time, the arrival of Master Ford (Ted Barton) forces Falstaff into a preposterous and painful escape — hidden under laundry in a wheelbarrow and dumped into the river; dressed in women's clothes and beaten with a cudgel.



Our sense of humor has not deteriorated as much as we might think in 400 years. Elizabethans made fun of fat people and foreign accents. (Doctor Caius, a Frenchman, offers to “make the third” in a group of duelers— pronouncing “third” without the “h”). “Wives” contains one-liners that would not be out of place in an Adam Sandler movie. Watching Falstaff flee in drag, Sir Hugh Evans (a charming Gerald C. Rivers) solemnly remarks, “I like it not when a woman has a great beard.”

Falstaff’s final humiliation, when he is terrorized by the gleefully howling

townspeople, has always struck me as creepy. All right, the guy thinks too highly of himself. No need to go all Manson family on him. Fortunately, director Ellen Geer (the company’s artistic director and a daughter of its founder) gets through this scene quickly, focusing on the happier themes of reconciliation and a community restored.

Blumenfeld is an excellent Falstaff. But he’s actually the straight man. The real star is Master Ford, the jealous husband desperate to catch his wife *in flagrante*. Barton plays up poor Ford's maniacal rage with an empurpled complexion and bulging eyes. The word that kept occurring to me was “apoplectic.” It works.

Both productions are unpretentious, high-spirited, and fun. Don't forget the kids, cushions for the wooden bleachers, and sweaters.

-- Margaret Gray

“**A Midsummer Night’s Dream**” and “**The Merry Wives of Windsor**,” Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. In repertory through Sept. 25 (“Midsummer”) and Sept. 10 (“Merry”). Contact: [www.theatricum.com](http://www.theatricum.com) or (310) 455-3723. \$20-\$32. Running times: 2 hours (“Midsummer”); 2 hours, 15 minutes (“Merry”).

*Photos, from top: Melora Marshall as Titania in “A Midsummer Night's Dream.” Credit: sMary Anne Dolcemascolo.*

*Alan Blumenfeld (Falstaff) and Melora Marshall (Mistress Quickly) in “The Merry Wives of Windsor.” Credit: Ian Flanders.*