

## A The Merry Wives of Windsor

by Leigh Kennicott



One of Shakespeare's most original comedies, *Merry Wives of Windsor* is purported to have been written upon Queen Elizabeth's command for a play featuring the heavy drinking, womanizing, rotund Falstaff. As portrayed in Ellen Geer's new production of *Merry Wives* at Theatricum Botanicum, the country offers Falstaff (played here by Alan Blumenfeld) and his city slickers, not only a hideout from authority, but an opportunity for fresh lechery.

Some of the nuances that brought mirth to 16th Century London are lost to us now, but Geer presents an historical version that pays homage to the stereotypes around Falstaff's character, beginning with his oversized costume. The country folk he meets are not taken in by his citified airs, especially when the two matrons Mistresses Ford (Elizabeth Tobias) and Page (Karen Reed) each receive her own identically written invitation to love. Their plot to give Falstaff his come-uppance provides the spine of the comic tale.

What would a Shakespearean comedy be without further intrigue? The women go one direction, while their husbands. Ford (Ted Barton) and Page (Tim Halligan), are distracted in trying to marry off Ann Page (Ella Martin) to Master Slender (a rotund Dylan Booth Vigus) even though she loves the callow and penniless Fenton (Michael Aurelio). The Garter Inn becomes the center of the men's plotting, with barmaid, Mistress Quickly (Melora Marshall) egging them on.

Shakespeare's country dalliance works perfectly in Theatricum Botanicum's idyllic setting, especially as the tempo and the mayhem increases as the whole town turns out to cuckold Falstaff taking him to a masque that turns into an hilarious haunting in the woods.

Geer's meticulous direction pulls the tension ever tighter as the scenes tumble from one plot to another. It is particularly fun to witness actors about to go onstage who have been choreographed to spar and wrangle as they enter the scene. Alan Blumenthal's Falstaff is almost as big as outdoors and he charges ahead with hilarious wrong-headedness. Ted Barton as Master Ford has mastered the slow burn; he is perfect foil for his good humored wife. But it is Melora Marshall as Mistress Quickly who steals the show. Looking and sounding exactly like a slightly soiled Katherine Hepburn, her rendition of the character highlights Quickly's role in Falstaff's downfall.

*Merry Wives* anchors the season of "outdoors and inspired" performances including the beloved *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Richard III* by Shakespeare, *Tartuffe* by Moliere, a new play *Rose Cottages*, and a cry for justice *My Name is Rachel Corrie* on the S. Mark Taper Foundation Pavilion.

*Merry Wives of Windsor* continues some Thursdays and Fridays, most Saturdays and Sundays in repertory with *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga 90290 through. Tickets \$20.00 to \$50.00. Phone (310) 455-3723 or online, [www.theatricum.com](http://www.theatricum.com) for exact schedule and ticket information.