

Theater

The World's Mine Oyster

By Millicent Borges Accardi

Go. Do not walk. But run to see Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the first show in a six-play repertory season at Topanga's Theatricum Botanicum.

As the audience for the sold-out opening-night performance strolled into the beautifully decorated outdoor amphitheater, they heard "Greensleeves" playing in the background, setting the tone and ambiance. While *Merry Wives* is known as a bawdy, down-to-earth play, it is also known as one of the only plays that takes place during Shakespeare's contemporary time (circa 1600), so there is a sensibility about the play that rings true to a wide variety of people.

PHOTO BY MIRIAM GEER



In the dark of midnight, the horned Sir John Falstaff (Alan Blumenfeld), expecting a tryst with Mistress Ford (Elizabeth Tobias, left, and Mistress Page, right, behind Falstaff), is instead accosted by Windsor townfolk disguised as faeries and goblins as the final come-uppance for his scurrilous behavior.

This is not an historical play or a storyline based on a myth. This is an original tale of a pompous rogue who gets his come-uppance and, in turn, rallies together an entire community to bring justice upon him and his thieving, conniving, self-indulgent games.

Love. Money. Chance. A Wedding. A Wooing. A lesson. This play is a romping, almost-roll in the hay with cads and clever wives and a cast of characters who bounce off each other like ball bearings in an old pin ball machine.

Even if you are not a fan of Shakespeare, the physical comedy and pratfalls alone in this production will keep you laughing all evening long.

Directed by Ellen Geer with a distant touch, letting each character blossom and grow as part of the whole, every moment is a delight. The jokes come point blank and at times the whole audience is guffawing and chortling.

Geer says, "*Merry Wives* is often directed as a farce, but to me it's a beautiful piece about the coming together of a community." There are lessons to be learned, of course, but there is much merriment along the way. To compare it in today's terms, the plot is a cross between the TV shows "Desperate Housewives," "The Bachelor" with "The Three Stooges" thrown in for good measure! In fact *Merry Wives* has even been called "the original sitcom."

It is said that Queen Elizabeth of England enjoyed Falstaff as a character in Shakespeare's history plays so much that when the the bard killed him off in *Henry V*, she insisted he bring back the portly knight.

The play begins in the village of Windsor where the elderly Justice Shallow (played accurately by Jerry Hoffman), and his nephew, Slender, (Dylan Booth Vigus) are having a disagreement with Sir John Falstaff (Alan Blumenfeld).

In these first scenes, Slender (his name is the opposite of his physical appearance) steals the show with his caricature, using body gestures to punctuate phrases to great comedic effect. His apparent ease with the character offers a sensitivity that is not

usually evident in this role. In one scene Slender accuses Falstaff of stealing money and Falstaff, his pages Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol fervently deny the accusation.

The plot thickens when Slender sees the chaste Anne Page (portrayed delicately by Ella Martin who alternates in the role with Clare Fogarty) and falls deeply in love with her and her soon-to-be-inherited money, proclaiming: "She has brown hair, and speaks small like a woman." However likable Slender appears, within the context of the play, he is basically a yes-man who merely does what he is told.

Blumenfeld as Sir John Falstaff, plays the scoundrel down to his very scandalous soul.

Falstaff has come to Windsor short on money and his plan of action, which he announces at the Garter Inn, is to woo Mistress Ford (Elizabeth Tobias) and Mistress Page (Karen Reed) for the purpose of extracting an income from them: "I do mean to make love to Ford's wife: I spy entertainment in her; she discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation."

He is lazy and drinks, so instead of taking the time to write personal love letters, he uses the same note for each woman, announcing: "I will be cheater to them both. . .they shall be my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both."

He asks his cronies to deliver the letters and, when they refuse, he fires them and, for revenge, they, in turn, tell Mistress Ford's and Mistress Page's husbands of Falstaff's devious plan.

And so the fun begins.

The wives, who are close friends, never accept Falstaff's courting seriously, and compare their letters identical, save for the addressees!

Outstanding performances are turned in by Ted Barton as Master Ford, whose rage and jealousy comes to the boiling point for nearly the whole play. His emotions are nearly over the top. His forehead juts out in red anger and, for most of the play, he is livid with his own imaginings, nearly to the fault of over-shadowing the lechery of Falstaff.

A subplot has Master Ford in disguise as Mr. Brook offering Falstaff money to seduce Mrs. Ford and shows his intentions: "If money go before, all ways do lie open."

Master Page (Tim Halligan), serves as an energetic counterpoint to his friend. Unlike Ford, Master Page is a jovial, carefree man who trusts his wife and sees that all is right with the world. His comedic trademark gesture is to jump.

Also enjoyable is the playfulness and chemistry between Mistress Page and Mistress Ford; their fanciful, mocking dances are a highlight. The audience goads them on for each of their triumphant tricks. One physical gesture worth mentioning is the hilarious "walk" of Mistress Ford where her skirt glides across the stage, seemingly without feet to propel her. On opening night, it brought the house down in laughter.

Also hilarious is Melora Marshall as Mistress Quickly, the housekeeper of Dr. Caius, a French physician (more fop than physician), played skillfully by Paul Turbiak who brings his scenes to more comedic heights. Quickly's goal is more money-seeking than resolution, as she attempts to "help" Ann Page's suitors and ultimately helps no one but herself, acting as a go-between among all concerned.

With a commanding accent and presence, Sir Hugh Evans (Gerald C. Rivers) comes

across as the one voice of reason, trying to do his best to arrange a marriage between Slender and Anne Page and to organize the fairy show in Windsor Park. His Zen-like calmness lends a stability and air of sanity to the company.

Near the end of the play when Falstaff has been taken down a few notches from the lofty pedestal he places himself upon, he remarks after being nearly drowned with the laundry, "I have a kind of alacrity in sinking," then, finally, "I do begin to perceive that I am made into an ass." The restoration of order has been returned to the community and all is well with Windsor.

The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga, CA 90290 (midway between Pacific Coast Highway and the Ventura Freeway); (310) 455-3723; theatricum.com.

Tickets: \$32 (lower tier); \$20 (upper tier); Seniors, students, equity: \$20/\$15; Children 5-11: \$10.

Picnickers are welcome before and after shows. Snacks are available at intermission at the Hamlet Hut.

The audience is advised to dress warmly in layers (since summer evenings get chilly). Bring pillows or cushions for the bench seating.

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