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Innes, Paul ORCID: 0000-0001-5375-5341 (2016) The Merry Wives by William Shakespeare (review). Theatre Journal, 68 (4). pp. 664-665. doi:10.1353/tj.2016.0118

Official URL: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/645408>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/tj.2016.0118>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/4318>

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THE MERRY WIVES. By William Shakespeare. Directed by Barrie Rutter. Northern Broadsides and The Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham, UK. April 19, 2016.

Shakespeare's Windsor comedy is said to have been the result of a request from Queen Elizabeth for even more of Falstaff, the knight of excess from the three plays of the so-called *Henriad*. In this production, the play was updated by Northern Broadsides, a company well-known for keeping a deliberate distance from the metropolitan theatrical tastes of the English south. The combination of Shakespeare and Yorkshire produced a fresh, innovative, and irreverently vibrant reworking of the city play, with its title deliberately foreshortened.

The Merry Wives of Windsor is not often produced by modern theatre groups, perhaps because of its layered complexity. The two main characters of the title, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, provide the major narrative strand as they manipulate and then gull poor old Sir John, while he tries and fails to do the same to them. However, there is also a whole series of other minor manipulations among various members of the ensemble cast. This presents something of a problem for a modern audience, since it is very easy to lose track of who is who, and who is doing what to whom. Barrie Rutter's responded by addressing the intricacies of the text directly; rather than shy away from them, this is a production that foregrounds them.

The play opened with a somewhat loose 1920s feel, especially in terms of costuming. Mistresses Page and Ford, however, had an energy to them as they tried to jog or play tennis; the props were mixed, with exercise machinery to hand, as well as the occasional drink. These might be characters of a certain age, but they showed plenty of movement in their interactions with each other, the other charac-

ters, and (especially) Rutter's Falstaff. The company managed the various levels of the multiple plots by making full use of Shakespeare's stereotypes. The French doctor and the Welsh parson were overplayed to comic effect, as was Master Ford's jealousy.

This last element was used to good effect by the production to bind together the various complications that ensue, since Master Ford provides a lynchpin, as well as a great deal of physical comedy, as he searches for Falstaff in a huge basket of dirty laundry. Much of this ended up all over the stage and in the middle of the audience as well, incidentally breaking down the proscenium stage's barriers between cast and theatregoers. Taking their cue from the Shakespearean "aside," many of the performers directly addressed to the auditorium, which served the further purpose of making each figure memorable as each had a moment in the limelight.

The production tackled the various stage types with some gusto, marking the performance with Northern Broadsides' trademark willingness to take on just about anything. Comic overacting added to the fun, with Doctor Caius's atrocious Monty Python French accent and exaggerated actions vying with Sir Hugh Evans's Welsh caricature, all deliberately overplayed. As the plots moved forward, the thread of the interaction between Falstaff and the two female leads took more and more precedence, and the improbable events that resulted were managed with some inventiveness. This led to some memorable slapstick, especially when the servants tried to carry the enormously indomitable Sir John out of the house in the basket in the first instance, and then when he was disguised as the fat woman of Brentford, here rendered as the old woman of Ilkley (in Yorkshire). A wardrobe of cloth hangings became a set of clothes and a large floppy hat, and Master Ford beat "her" off the stage with a golf club.



Nicola Sanderson (Mistress Page), Barrie Rutter (Falstaff), and Becky Hindley (Mistress Ford) in *The Merry Wives*. (Photo: Jackie Rodgers.)



Becky Hindley (Mistress Ford), Barrie Rutter (Falstaff), and Nicola Sanderson (Mistress Page) in *The Merry Wives*. (Photo: Jackie Rodgers.)

The attention to detail paid off with the final emerging plotline, the marriage of young Anne Page. The audience of this production managed in all the confusion to comprehend that her father looks to marry her off to Evans and that her mother looks to marry her off to Master Slender, with neither parent telling the other what they are doing. The short appearances by Master Fenton and Anne nevertheless managed to convey that they had their own agenda. Costume was used effectively here, with Anne, initially at least, dressed in a manner similar to her mother.

Everything came together in the final scene, with Falstaff dressed as Herne the Hunter and most of the cast pretending to be fairies. The Northern Broad-sides technique at moments like this, familiar from their other Shakespeare productions, is to increase the tempo markedly. In this instance the various suitors left the stage separately on different types of bicycles in the midst of all the dancing and action. The last laugh was on Mistress Page, as she was equally manipulated by her daughter and Fenton, and the performance came to a satisfying conclusion.

The theme of maneuver, move, and counter-move runs throughout the play and is deliberately reinforced. This is a difficult trick to pull off on the modern stage, but Northern Broad-sides managed to thread a way through the interleaved, episodic narrative structure without losing the plot.

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