

# ASBURY PARK PRESS

## Two River offers two takes on Shakespeare



(Photo: COURTESY OF TWO RIVER THEATER)

### **TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT**

It's been called "one of Shakespeare's silliest comedies" — and it stands as evidence that even the exalted Bard was not averse to grinding out a crowd-pleasing trifle every now and then.

Picking up the character of Sir John Falstaff — the vividly memorable creation who appeared in the two parts of "Henry IV" — and depositing the rotund, rascally and often red-nosed knight down in the middle of a somewhat anachronistic setting, the playwright fashioned "The Merry Wives of Windsor" as a farcical fracas of amorous adventure, comical comeuppance and an almost slapstick sensibility.

While it won't soon be mistaken for "Titus Andronicus" or "Macbeth," it turns out that "Merry Wives" does possess something of a "dark undercurrent" — one that director Eric Tucker is

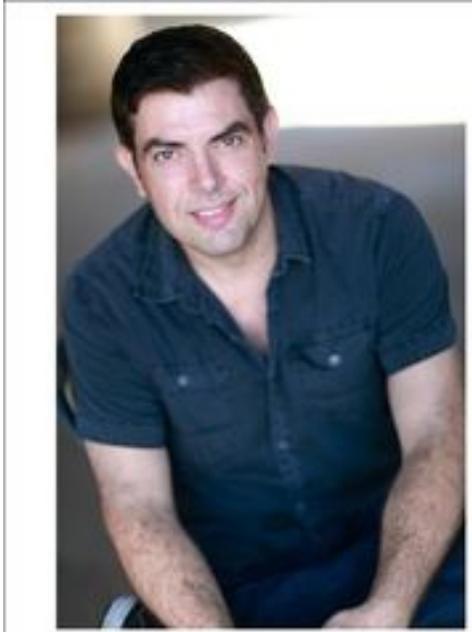
primed to explore. The artistic director of NYC's celebrated Bedlam Theater has adapted the circa-1600 classic — in which the lecherous Falstaff's attempts to con and seduce a couple of respectable married women find the tables turned on the veteran scoundrel in some often hilarious ways — into a shortened “three hander” version that takes the stage at Two River.



**Zuzanna Szadkowski**

(Photo: COURTESY OF TWO RIVER THEATER)

As one of the founders of the Bedlam company, Tucker made his name with a series of intimately scaled adaptations that condense well-known theatrical and literary properties into economical small-cast projects. More than mere novelties, the productions have been praised for getting to the essence of the original works.



**Jason O'Connell**

(Photo: COURTESY OF TWO RIVER THEATER)

In the Two River production begins previews Saturday and opens March 3, some 20 Shakespearean characters are performed by just three actors.

Bedlam veteran Jason O'Connell is joined on the Red Bank stage by Broadway vet Nicole Lewis and Zuzanna Szadowski, a familiar face to viewers of TV's "Gossip Girl" and Steven Soderbergh's "The Knick."

In his production notes for the show, Two River artistic director John Dias praises the threesome of actors for their "extraordinary combination of physical comedy and fresh, performative use of language.

Tucker "wrestles with the plays — and, at the same time, is deeply respectful of them. He makes Shakespeare's language joyously accessible to audiences," Dias said in a news release.

"The Merry Wives of Windsor" is also the focus of this season's production in Two River's ongoing program "A Little Shakespeare" — an annual project in which students from area high schools work with a professional director to put forth their take on one of the Bard's centuries-old scripts.

Beginning March 7, nearly 30 young actors and tech crew, representing a dozen Monmouth County schools (including Red Bank Regional, Middletown North, Freehold Borough, Christian Brothers Academy and Trinity Hall) will deliver director Nicole A. Watson's own 75-minute adaptation of "Wives" to audiences ages 9 and up during four school matinees, augmented by in-school pre-show workshops and post-show talkbacks with the cast.

Then from March 10 to 12, the Little Shakespeare company commandeers Two River's mainstage auditorium with four performances.

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

**WHEN:** In previews Saturday, Feb. 25, through Thursday, March 2; opens Friday, March 3, runs through March 26

**WHERE:** Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

**TICKETS:** \$20 to \$70

**INFO:** 732-345-1400 or [www.tworivertheater.org](http://www.tworivertheater.org)

A LITTLE SHAKESPEARE:

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

**WHEN:** 2 and 7 p.m. March 11; 2 p.m. March 12

**WHERE:** Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

**TICKETS:** \$20, \$15 ages 12 and under, \$12 students

**INFO:** 732-345-1400 or [www.tworivertheater.org](http://www.tworivertheater.org)