

ASBURY PARK PRESS

Theater review: 'Merry Wives' at Two River



(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT

We've been here before, even if many of us are loath to admit it: A dingy room at a highwayside motor lodge, the kind that fairly screams "hourly rates," from its hideous paneling to its don't-go-there wall to wall.

As summoned by Lee Savage's gloriously dreadful set design, this godforsaken locale is among the last rest stops where you'd expect to encounter one William Shakespeare on the guest register. But for audiences who have seen the works of the exalted Bard relocated to corporate boardrooms, Miami drug wars, Nazi Germany and outer space, a Two River Theater production that repositions "The Merry Wives of Windsor" within a more or less modern motel setting isn't much of a shock to the system.



Jason O'Connell, Nicole Lewis and Zuzanna Szadowski (underneath the bed) check into Shakespeare's "Merry Wives of Windsor." (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

As it turns out, Shakespeare himself was not above playing fast and loose with the timeline. The original "Wives" took his early 15th-century knight Sir John Falstaff — the crowd-pleasing character who stole so much of the show in his "Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2" — and deposited the rotund rogue into a scenario of amorous adventuring and comical comeuppance, seemingly within the playwright's own era a century or so later. One of Shakespeare's most featherweight efforts, it's far more of a paycheck gig than the kind of sacred text that fills the pages of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

In the streamlined, intermission-free version now onstage at Two River's "black box" Marion Huber space, "The Merry Wives" makes waves not through its re-imagining of the play's Garter Inn, but in its casting — with a grand total of three very busy actors performing as Falstaff, those titular wives Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, plus more than a dozen additional gentleman callers, clergy, kinfolk, husbands and henchmen.



A scene from "The Merry Wives of Windsor" at Two River Theater in Red Bank. *(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)*

As a carefully choreographed series of transmutations — often accomplished via the addition or subtraction of a minor article of clothing — the show boasts an entertaining level of energy and laughs, with the players diving beneath beds, darting in one door and emerging out the other in the service of a script that finds them platooning in certain parts. As a coherent introduction to a 400-year-old favorite, however, this stripped-down exercise could boggle the attention span of anyone who hasn't seen the full "Merry" at least once (or who doesn't take time to digest the generous synopsis and illuminating notes furnished by the theater).

Adapted and directed by Eric Tucker, the Two River "Wives" bears the hallmarks of the award-winning co-founder of NYC's Bedlam Theatre, a company celebrated for its condensed-cast explorations of plays like Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Shaw's "Saint Joan," both recently performed in repertory at Princeton's McCarter Theatre. Taking a less reverent approach to the tale of the red-nosed rascal Falstaff than he did to the Bard's melancholy Dane, Tucker nevertheless mines the material for its relatively darker side; appropriate to a comedy that deals in sleazy carnal fantasies, brutal beatings, betrayals, deceptions, and precious few moments of sweetness and light.



Another scene from "The Merry Wives of Windsor" at Two River. *(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)*

At the center of it all is Bedlam regular Jason O'Connell — a not-at-all rotund figure whose Falstaff disdains the globe-shaped buffoon of so many other stagings, in favor of a lounge-lizard schemer in brown leather blazer. Blowing into town with a plan to woo the married middle-class mistresses Ford (Nicole Lewis, of Broadway's "Rent" and "Hair") and Page (Zuzanna Szadowski, of TV's "Gossip Girl" and "The Knick") and separate them from their husbands' money, Sir John finds himself subject to a series of increasingly humiliating paybacks when the women compare the love notes they received from the seedy seducer.

An additional trap is set for Falstaff when his own less-than-trustworthy cronies Pistol and Nym spill the whole scheme to husbands Ford and Page. This being a Shakespeare comedy, there is an additional major plot element involving a marital arrangement between the young Page daughter and a nephew of local judge Shallow.

Going deep into their “buck baskets” of quirky voices and mannerisms, the players earn laughs through such conjurings as Lewis’s rat-a-tat errand woman Quickly, or O’Connell’s trip-tongued snagglepuss of a village parson. Even if some of the choices fall flat, this econo-lodge Shakespeare remains a study in well-orchestrated bedlam, minus the continental breakfast.

Two River audiences have the opportunity to view a different take on “Wives” when a company of some 30 local high school students mounts a fully cast but even more condensed version (a 75-minute adaptation by director Nicole A. Watson) as the theater’s annual “Little Shakespeare” program. Public performances of that production run this weekend.

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

WHEN: Through March 26

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

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org

A LITTLE SHAKESPEARE:

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

WHEN: 7 p.m. March 10, 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday, March 11, 2 p.m. Sunday, March 12

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

TICKETS: \$20 adults (\$15 ages 12 and under; \$12 students)

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org