

At Two River Theater: a radical reimagining of 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'



T. CHARLES ERICKSON From left, Zuzanna Szadkowski, Jason O'Connell and Nicole Lewis co-star in "The Merry Wives of Windsor," which is at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through March 26.

By: JAY LUSTIG

In December 2015, the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in Madison presented a pretty traditional version of Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor," with some wreaths and mistletoe added to give it a bit of a holiday season feel.

The Two River Theater in Red Bank is using more or less the opposite approach for its current, thoroughly unsentimental version of the same play.

This production's Falstaff, played by Jason O'Connell, is no lovable rogue. Instead, he's monumentally crass and selfish — in other words, perfect for the Trumpian Age. But that's only one of many things that's unconventional about it.

The production uses three actors (playing about a dozen roles), who wear modern clothes. And it's set in a modern motel room, with actors sometimes disappearing into the room's bathroom and then re-emerging as a different character. The narrative jumps back and forth in time. Some characters and subplots have been cut out to get the play down to a crisp, intermission-less 110 minutes.

Director Eric Tucker recently directed and appeared in four-actor versions of "Hamlet" and George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan" that were presented by his Bedlam theater company at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton. As in those plays, the "Merry Wives" actors use changes in accent and costume — some major, some subtle — to differentiate the various characters they play from each other. Actress Nicole Lewis, for instance, uses a comically exaggerated Hispanic accent only when playing Mistress Quickly.

But while "Hamlet" and "Saint Joan" were both serious and powerful, this production often goes for low-brow laughs (reflecting the abundance of sexual innuendo in the play) and has, in general, an air of squalid chaos. It is never really made clear how or why the characters ended up in the motel room (though scenic designer Lee Savage deserves credit for giving it a believably messy, seedy, tacky atmosphere).

In a way, Tucker is just taking Shakespeare to his logical conclusions. Sir John Falstaff, despite his title, was always a bit of a lowlife, so why not lower him all the way to the gutter? In "The Merry Wives of Windsor," women whom Falstaff is attempting to seduce mock him with glee, so why not add an element of S&M?

The humor is hit-or-miss, and the rapid character changes lead, inevitably, to some confusion. But this "Merry Wives of Windsor" is still, at the very least, quite lively, and overall an absorbing experience.

"The Merry Wives of Windsor" will be at the Marion Huber Theater at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through March 26. Also, a different "Theater for Young Audiences" version of the play will be at the venue's Rehnitz Theater through March 12. Visit tworivertheater.org.