

# NEW JERSEY Stage

## REVIEW: The Merry Wives of Windsor at Two River Theater

*By Annalisa DeSeno*



(RED BANK, NJ - MARCH 2017) -- In tradition of performing classical Shakespeare plays and selecting wild artistic aspects to add, **Two River Theater** in Red Bank produced *The Merry Wives of Windsor* using only 3 actors to portray all of the characters. This quick-witted script and mature content kept the audience on the edge of their seats as the story twisted and turned into a situational mess and a seedy, dark and hilarious masterpiece.

The black box Marion Huber Theater stage was transformed into a disastrous, gritty mid-western motel room complete with a red luminescent sign. Overturned as if a college fraternity-style party had just taken place, empty pizza boxes, wine bottles, disheveled furniture and mounds of clothes were draped across the stage. Muffled sounds of traffic were heard as the audience took their seats.



The lights dropped to pitch black, then illuminated the stage revealing the terrifying glimpse a woman in sexy lingerie pointing a gun at a man tied to the bedposts. Blackout again to a magical display of live theater- in less than thirty seconds, the stagehands renewed the motel room to a clean, just-checked-in state with absolutely no visibility while conducting the scene change. Here, the story began.

Actors Nicole Lewis, Jason O’Connell and Zuzanna Szadkowski commanded the stage displaying impressive versatility as they would transform characters right before the audience’s eyes using only minimal costume pieces and body language. Using only 3 actors in a play originally written for 25 characters that also features a deceitful, sometimes-confusing plot was risky, yet successful. An actor could exhibit a complete change in gender in less than a second by crafting vocal tricks and clear mannerisms.

Jason O’Connell, actor and co-creator of this version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* had the initial idea to use a small cast. “A friend of mine and I, we had both been in it multiple times and we really said to ourselves, ‘well maybe we could do the whole thing just the two of us.’” O’Connell told *New Jersey Stage*. “We work shopped it up in New York and I brought the idea to Eric [the director] because I know he specializes in small cast Shakespeare.”

At first, the storyline was difficult to follow. A mixture of Elizabethan language, on-stage character fluctuations and a stationary set that forces the audience to imagine the cast in

different rooms could prove to be nearly impossible for an audience member not well-read in Shakespeare to understand. But, the actor's dedication and hilarious ad-libbing kept the audience engaged, carefully analyzing the classical story unwind into a fantastic theatrical masterwork.



**All Photos by T. Charles Erickson**

***Next on stage at Two River Theater is *The Women of Padilla* by Tony Meneses.  
The production runs April 8, 2017 - April 30, 2017***