

The Star-Ledger

This dark and seedy “Merry Wives of Windsor” is a fresh take on the classic



Zuzanna Szadkowski, Jason O'Connell and Nicole Lewis star in a new production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," now playing at Two River Theater in Red Bank (Photo by T. Charles Erickson)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media

Perhaps Shakespeare's goofiest play, "The Merry Wives of Windsor" may seem an odd choice for a dark and racy modern rendering. But if anybody can pull off such a version it is Eric Tucker. The acclaimed director and adapter has made a name for himself in the last few years, principally with *Bedlam*, the company he co-founded in 2012.

His agile and stunningly original theater troupe breathes inventive new life into classic theater, as it did recently when the company brought its signature productions of "Hamlet" and "Saint

Joan" to the McCarter in Princeton. Tucker and his collaborators have shown that small casts and unconventional techniques can unlock exciting revelations from well-worn scripts. Tucker's "Merry Wives" is not as sharp or finely crafted as previous work, but it is certainly adventurous and refreshing. The dark raciness put forth here does not feel imposed. The aesthetic is rather an alternative view of the play refracted through a fresh, unexpected lens. That which theaters so regularly treat as cheeky, Tucker and company render seedy; and where others find lighthearted pranks, this production locates sinister plots.

The play centers on Sir Jack Falstaff, most famous as the full-of-life drunken carouser from Shakespeare's "Henry IV" plays, and here conniving to woo some wealthy wives -- Mistresses Ford and Page -- out of their considerable wealth. The familiar legend is that Queen Elizabeth herself asked Shakespeare to write a play in which the fat knight falls in love, but "Merry Wives" is less a love story than a running joke at Falstaff's expense. Ford and Page discover Falstaff's ruses quickly, and rather than simply rebuffing him decide to concoct a variety of snares for his optimal embarrassment.

In familiar fashion, Tucker reduces his cast to the bare minimum -- he does "Hamlet" with four actors, but "Merry Wives" uses only three -- asking each performer to take on a variety of roles. Different vocal registers, costume pieces, or even simple mannerisms distinguish when one actor moves between roles, and if those distinctions are blurry and confusing in the play's opening portion, they come into more clear focus as the show progresses.

As Falstaff, Jason O'Connell crafts not the gallant of bombast we might expect, but a two-bit hustler, concocting his seduction scheme as only his latest ill-fated caper to make a buck. Lee Savage's impressively drab (and often surprisingly utilitarian) set -- a rundown roadside motel -- where Falstaff sets up shop complements O'Connell's version of the knight: this is a man who crawls along the underbelly of society.

O'Connell is joined by Nicole Lewis (Mistress Ford and others) and Zuzanna Szadkowski (Mistress Page and others), both of whom are at their best as the women duping Falstaff. With the exception of Szadkowski's Mr. Ford, though, the actresses don't do much to fill out their other characters. The same is true of O'Connell and indeed most of the production: everything is vibrant and fully articulated when focusing on the three main characters, but the other portions of the play seem undercooked. The show is advertised as 100-minutes, but in reality is closer to two hours. Tucker could have easily and productively trimmed the show, especially by losing the distracting Shallow-Slender subplot.

The easy maneuver is to romanticize Falstaff as an outsized clown, but this production eschews the straight-and-narrow in an exploration of alternative gazes. Tucker gave a similar treatment to Shakespearean comedy masterfully in 2015 with Bedlam's "What You Will, or Twelfth Night," upending that romantic comedy in both title and mood. "Merry Wives" does not reach those lofty heights, but succeeds nonetheless in asking us to reassess any calcified expectations for both romance and comedy.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Two River Theater

21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

Tickets: \$40-\$70; available online at www.tworivertheater.org. Through March 26