

Intensely Theatrical 'Hamlet' at GRSF

Mike Fischer,, June 30, 2014

No one dismisses the poem unlimited that is "Hamlet," which Great River also opened over the weekend, in a production being paired with Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" (scheduled to open on July 5 under Gale Childs Daly's direction).

Different from "Merry Wives" in nearly every other way, "Hamlet" shares this comedy's metatheatrical focus on our incessant efforts to stage manage our lives, through scripts that inevitably entangle others in the plots through which we exercise our will to power.

In keeping with this theme — which is also crucially important in Stoppard's play — director James Edmondson spotlights the rivalry between would-be

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embodying Horatio's frustrated protest that Hamlet speaks in "wild and whirling words."

Carlson's intensely physical Hamlet is considerably less animated before he first sees the ghost of his father; in his opening soliloquy, he comes across as self-dramatizing and affected — almost as though he were indulging melancholy

rather than feeling it.

Benjamin Boucvalt's relentlessly demanding ghost changes all of that, giving birth to a manly and active Hamlet, from an actor who vaguely resembles the young Kenneth Branagh of "Henry V." No matter how antic this Hamlet's disposition may thereafter seem, we never doubt that there's method in his madness.

This is most readily seen — and Carlson is at his best — when the Dane is looking outward rather than inward; in all but the final soliloquy, which is itself directed outward and heralds the imminent end of all such reflection, Carlson can seem overly emphatic and purposeful.

But when Carlson spars with others — playfully or otherwise — look out.

In addition to riveting exchanges with Hendrickson's Polonius, this production features terrifically played scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia (Sutter) as well as Hamlet and school chums Rosencrantz (Gerson) and Guildenstern (Doug Scholz-Carlson), registering Hamlet's hurt and anger that these would-be allies have betrayed him. The alternately flat and histrionic closet scene with Gertrude (Leslie Brott) is the lone exception; both Carlson and Brott clearly want to say more about this charged relationship than they were yet conveying as of opening night.

Appropriately enough in a production so focused on theatricality, it's Carlson's interactions with the players that are most memorable, culminating in a great rendition of the play within the play scene. This Hamlet is clearly at one with the players (led by Daly); viewed one way, his tragedy concerns how the prison of Denmark has short-circuited his creative, role-playing exploration of who he might be, forcing him to play for keeps instead.

Which Carlson does. As he verbally and physically parries and thrusts while waiting for his elaborate trap to catch the conscience of the king, Carlson seems downright dangerous — and not just to Claudius and the Danish court. In a play that continually blurs the line separating actor from audience, Carlson reminds us yet again that it's the younger Hamlet's ghost who continues to haunt us.



playwrights Hamlet (Andrew Carlson) and Polonius (Steve Hendrickson).

As Polonius informs Hamlet, he was "accounted a good actor" when in school; as he tells us in an aside, he fashions himself as having once been as madly in love as Hamlet now seems to be. All of which makes Polonius sure he knows how Hamlet's script is supposed to play: As a version of his own.

Hendrickson's game-changing Polonius isn't the doddering old fool we're sometimes given, but a sharp and ruthless leader as well as the true power behind the throne — a point reinforced by Michael Fitzpatrick's Claudius, whose mix of good cheer and sputtering anger are no match for Polonius' single-minded design.

But that unilateral approach to scriptwriting ensures that Polonius will be no match for the nimbler and more playful approach taken by Carlson's bobbing and weaving Hamlet, who seems to make it up as he goes along, in bursts of energy that send him careening about the stage,

Great River Shakespeare finds surprising depth in 'Merry Wives of Windsor'

Mike Fischer, June 30, 2014

cast presented this same seemingly sleepy world, about to change forever.

In "Merry Wives," those changes involve how we think about love, with Daly's Falstaff unwittingly serving as one of the catalysts. Old and fat as he is, Falstaff fancies himself a ladies' man, hoping for trysts with married women Alice Ford (Tarah Flanagan) and Margaret Page (Sigrid Sutter). They lead him on only to take him down — while also teaching Frank, Alice's jealous husband, a few valuable lessons about relationships.

The particulars of how this gets engineered — Falstaff hiding in a huge hamper of dirty laundry, before impersonating an old woman and then a great, horned stag — always make audiences laugh; a primping and fatuous Daly ensures this happens here.

But long before Falstaff gets his final comeuppance, Daly also gives us the slightest hint of melancholy, reflecting a man who might be wondering whether there's more — or

Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor" doesn't get any respect. Critics grumble that the Falstaff who gets snookered by the wives he hopes to bed is a pale copy of the larger-than-life Falstaff of the Henry plays. The play's farcical elements are disparaged as predictable. The writing — in a script with the most prose of any Shakespeare play — is deemed second rate.

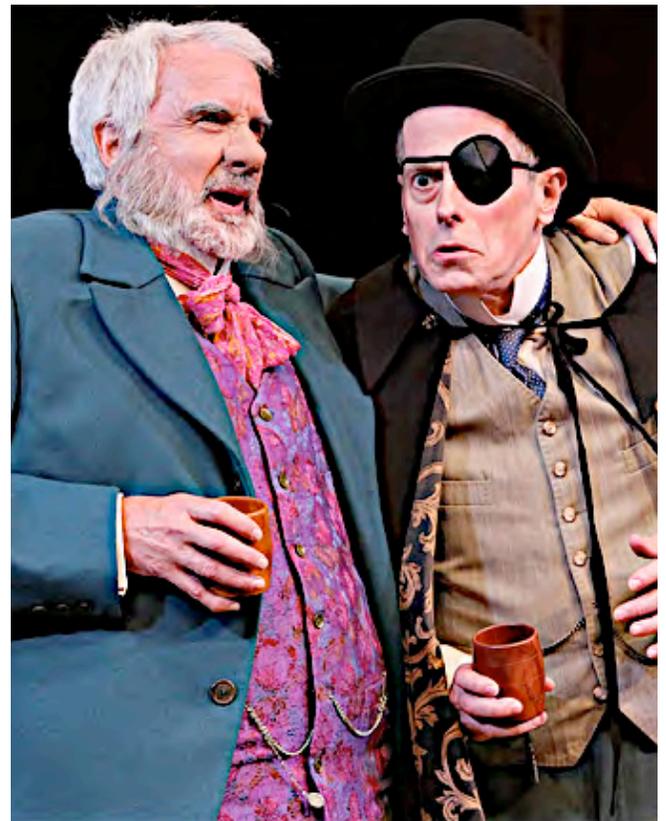
Whatever. After watching the ingenious and moving confection on stage during the opening weekend of Winona's Great River Shakespeare Festival — with Milwaukee Repertory Theater regular Jonathan Gillard Daly playing the fat man — I'm prepared to tell all the naysayers to stuff it.

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Light as this play is on the page, it can light up a stage, particularly when the dynamic duo of Paul Mason Barnes (director) and Jack Forbes Wilson (music director) work their mojo together. I enjoyed their fun and inventive Great River productions of "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" in 2012 and "Twelfth Night" last summer; their "Merry Wives" makes it a hat trick.

Barnes has set the play around 1900, and when the cast first came on stage together, introducing their characters and then launching into "Daisy Bell (A Bicycle Built for Two)" I had a moment of déjà vu involving the opening moments of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's recent production of "Ragtime," in which a similarly costumed



should be — than yet another variation on this tired theme.

To a degree I'd never sufficiently appreciated, in any staging of "Merry Wives" I've seen, the Great River production made me aware of how many characters are similarly searching, for a new way to think about both love and themselves. Not for nothing does Wilson insert "I Want What I Want When I Want It," from a 1905 operetta about forbidden love.

In watching how these characters write new and better love stories, one must start with the magnificent wives.

Flanagan's beleaguered Alice isn't even permitted to dress in a different color than the teal suit worn by the jealous Frank; conversely, Sutter's fresh-faced, pink-bedecked Margaret glows with animal vitality, reflecting her comparatively less troubled marriage.



Working together, the two women won't just script Falstaff's downfall while teaching Frank to treat his wife as a partner rather than property, in hilarious scenes that spoof Victorian melodrama. Equally important, they'll also realize what women can accomplish together — driven home through increasingly sophisticated and very funny renditions of patty cake.

The lessons Frank learns will liberate him. Sketching a portrait of a jealous husband, the excellent [Steve Hendrickson](#) channels Othello, even if his rage is rendered ridiculous by the comic medium in which it's unleashed. Once sufficiently chastened, a softer and humbler Hendrickson recalls Leontes — and the redemption potentially awaiting those who can learn to love more freely.

Such love can even make friends of onetime enemies, including a French doctor (Andrew Carlson) and Welsh cleric (Christopher Gerson), whose reconciliation is accompanied by a moving rendition of "Tenting Tonight," which gives the outstanding Gerson a back story, as a sensitive man who has seen too much hatred. Shakespeare



tells us the cleric is melancholy and gives him a song that leaves him wanting to cry; Wilson helps us understand why.

In a world that can be so heavy, shouldn't people at least be free to choose who and how they love?

So thinks Anne Page (Jenni McCarthy) and the penniless Fenton (John Maltese), even though Anne's parents have other ideas. Here too Wilson's additions take stock characters and elevate them; Fenton proclaims his love in the context of the cast's rendition of "Moonlight Bay," with its suggestion of the heartache that awaits if these potentially star-crossed lovers aren't permitted to tie the knot.

Staged in a state that allows gay marriage, it's fitting that in this production, Gerson's cleric is presented as one of several men for whom such binding ties might involve another man.

And why not? "Merry Wives" concludes with a play within a play in which characters who have been speaking at cross-purposes — in a variety of often fractured prose styles and accents — somehow manage to pull together despite their differences. They honor the power and importance of true love — even when it runs contrary to expectation or intention.

True to the syncopated, ragtime scoring through which Wilson periodically accompanies the text, the citizens of this Windsor have learned to reconcile the past's traditions with the future's promise. Watching their final reconciliation, who is to say — as too many critics have — that Windsor hasn't been transformed by what it's been through?

I was as I watched, learning anew what Shakespeare always teaches: No matter how familiar these plays may seem and no matter how often one sees them, smart and creative productions like this one will regularly remind us that there's always still more to discover. Even in those plays one is most apt to dismiss.

Festival opens with fun and funny 'Merry Wives'

Dominic Papatola, June 30, 2014

Those who find the works of William Shakespeare inaccessible are advised to hop into their cars and head south on Highway 61 this summer. Get as far as the river town of Winona and Great River Shakespeare Festival will take you by the hand and lead you unambiguously and enjoyably through "The Merry Wives of Windsor."

Great River, a professional summer repertory company, is entering its 11th year on the campus of Winona State University. The bill of fare this summer also includes "Hamlet" and Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead." The season opener, "Merry Wives," is considered one of the Bard's lesser comedies, but it receives a full-throated production by a company unafraid to milk the comic material for all it's worth.

Director Paul Barnes sets his telling of the tale about a century ago, in the era of ragtime and bicycles built for two.

Steve Hendrickson's Ford gets the biggest laughs of the evening...stalking and prowling the stage like he's in need of a distemper shot.

Music is pervasive, chiefly that of Scott Joplin and his contemporaries but also such standards of the period as "Shine on, Harvest Moon" and "Tenting Tonight." By the time the show reaches its lengthy, singing curtain call, one might be tempted say the music is overdone ("I didn't know



Shakespeare wrote musicals," my companion quipped), but it's an overt choice for an overt production.

At the beginning of the play, for instance, the characters introduce themselves, their relationships to each other and their objectives. Changes of settings, times and venue are announced. And the style of acting is so broad that there's no possibility of mistaking characters or motivations. Even Shakespeare novices won't have difficulty following the antics of the vain, wine-loving, cash-strapped Falstaff, who arrives in Windsor with a plan to seduce two married women of means. The merry

wives, who see what's happening right away, seize the opportunity to have a little mischievous fun at the bloated knight's expense. The sub-plots concerning young lovers and nosy servants are also delivered as if on a platter.

But for all this clarity, the show travels a fair piece through its first half before it really gains momentum. Then, like a roller-coaster after pausing at the top of its first rise, it plunges into antics and visual gags.

The cast rides the swells with panache. Tarah Flanagan and Sigrid Sutter play the eponymous "merry wives" as a pair of BFFs, exchanging confidences and ever-more-complex handshakes. They're clearly the smartest characters on the stage, and Flanagan (with her giggly flirtatiousness) and Sutter (with a more down-to-earth, big-sister vibe) display the kind of wise chemistry that makes the friendship of their characters feel fast.



Their husbands react very differently to Falstaff's seduction scheme. The secure George Page sees it as a lark, while the jealous Frank Ford goes to insane and fruitless lengths to catch his wife in flagrante. Michael Fitzpatrick brings a homey warmth to Page's wry good humor; [Steve Hendrickson's](#) Ford gets the biggest laughs of the evening, and works like a dog to earn them, stalking and prowling the stage like he's in need of a distemper shot.

Overstuffed in a padded "fat suit," Jonathan Gillard Daly is an amiable oaf as Falstaff, but he doesn't command the stage the way one might expect of one of Shakespeare's great comic characters. Daly offers a more subtle, acted-upon interpretation of the role, which gives this production of "Merry Wives" more the feeling of an ensemble comedy than a star vehicle. That's a legitimate way to proceed and given the talent that permeates the ensemble, it works in a production that -- though hardly subtle -- is worth the journey.



Music keeps 'Merry Wives of Windsor' hopping at Great River Shakespeare Fest

Graydon Royce, July 12, 2014

It is curious that “Bicycle Built for Two” should be the enduring earworm of Great River Shakespeare Festival’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor.” Or did “Harvest Moon” stick in your head? Or one of the Scott Joplin rags that stitched scenes together?

Director Paul Barnes has plopped Shakespeare’s frothy farce about love and jealousy in fin de siècle Windsor, where innocence rules the sunny skies. The costumes (Lou Bird) are bright, the mood is light and musical director Jack Forbes Wilson keeps those songs ringing in our ears. The cast sings choruses at the beginning of the evening and then snippets throughout the show. Anyone up for ice cream and a stroll on the veranda?

Barnes’ choices perfectly match the mood for “Merry Wives,” one of the bard’s slightest comedies, and everything about the production aims at accessibility. Actors announce who they will play, narrate scene changes and occasionally thump a line with modern irony. Two stories ramble through the play. Sir John Falstaff attempts to woo two wives of Windsor’s upright citizens. Chicanery and wit thwart his clumsy affronts. The subplot concerns three suitors for a young woman and how she conspires to snare the right man.



Actor [Steve Hendrickson](#), in his festival debut, breathes fire and rage into the ridiculous portrait of a husband aghast that he might be a cuckold. Hendrickson has impeccable timing in milking a moment, in holding the audience at bay and curdling his words with just the right

sour look. Jonathan Gillard Daly slides into a sly W.C. Fields affectation to play Sir John — more friendly buffoon than sleazy Lothario.

All of Barnes’ actors get into the felicitous spirit. Sigrid Sutter and Tarah Flanagan show sharp minds and cunning wit as the merry wives; Michael Fitzpatrick finds the even-tempered ease of one of the two husbands (Hendrickson’s frenzied for the other). Christopher Gerson threads the needle with a gnarly accent as the Welsh parson, though Andrew Carlson is not quite so fortunate as the French physician, Dr. Caius.

Oddly, what makes this production perplexing is the same thing that makes it so much fun: Barnes and other Great River artistic leaders have for the past decade preached a

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gospel of “text-based” Shakespeare. Language drives the show, not director concepts and tricks. How does that square with a 10-minute curtain call that turns into a sing-along with the audience?

I’m not throwing water on it, because, as I say, this bubbly treatment makes the show so easy to watch. But let’s not get too righteous about the thrill of textual acuity. Those are issues for critics to munch on. “Merry Wives” is a delight. It makes the trip to Winona worth the effort.