

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



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.