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The Merry Wives of Windsor

USU Opera Theatre

Dallas Heaton

Utah State University, dallas.heaton@usu.edu

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What is it about Windsor's Merry Wives?

It amazes me that a story written more than 400 years ago (Shakespeare's play was published in 1602) can still delight audiences today. Full of comic moments and lovable characters that we can still identify with, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of Shakespeare's most famous comedies and has been a staple of the theatrical and operatic repertoire since its premiere.

Although there are at least four different operatic adaptations of the play, two of these are better known – one in German and the other Italian. The German version was created first. *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* by the German composer Otto Nicolai premiered in 1849 in Berlin. This adaptation follows the 'Singspiel' format, where large musical numbers are connected by shorter scenes of dialogue, atypical of standard opera. Full of light, danceable tunes, this style of staged musical work has much more in common with operetta and the later comedic works of Gilbert and Sullivan than it does with German romantic opera and a piece like Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, which premiered just a few years before Nicolai's work in 1843.

Nearly 50 years later, the great Italian composer Verdi also set Shakespeare's play in Italian translation. His *Falstaff* premiered in 1893 in Milan and became one of the masterpieces of Italian opera. In the United States, Verdi's adaptation tends to overshadow Nicolai's, but the same is not true in Europe, especially in German-speaking countries where Nicolai's setting continues to be very popular.

The USU Opera Theatre will be presenting Nicolai's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* translated from his German back into English – not exactly Shakespeare's English, but still Shakespeare's story. We've further adapted the piece by trading out the standard Elizabethan setting for a more modern time and place. Shakespeare's characters easily align with their modern equivalents. Sir John Falstaff, once a fat, bumbling, and overconfident knight past his prime, transforms into a former member of a one-hit-wonder boy band who still has an appetite for the celebrity lifestyle but doesn't quite realize that his fame has already come and gone. Mr. and Mrs. Ford become a successful professional, two-income couple. The Page family, on the other hand, struggles to make ends meet as they put their daughter Anne through school on Mr. Page's blue-collar income. Add a few other typical neighborhood eccentrics, and one gets a story that translates very easily into our modern society.

I expect that listeners will be surprised to find how universal and timeless Shakespeare's story is – themes that run the gamut from Anne Page's desire for independence and Falstaff's eventual acceptance that things change, to Mr. Ford's hurt at his wife's suspected betrayal and Mrs. Ford's witty schemes that verge on costing her what she holds most dear.

Put these themes to Nicolai's brilliant music that is simultaneously joyful and sincere, and a fantastically enjoyable and memorable evening of theater is created. Nicolai's retelling of Shakespeare's story clothes it in delightfully charming attire that can be appreciated by opera veterans and first-time initiates alike. By the time the final chords sound, it should be equally evident to the audience why this story has lasted these four centuries!



The Merry Wives of Windsor

A Comic Opera in Three Acts

by Otto Nicolai

German libretto by Hermann von Mosenthal (after Shakespeare)

English translation by Josef Blatt, adapted by Dallas K Heaton

presented by USU Opera Theatre

Friday, April 11, 2014, 7:30 pm

Saturday, April 12, 2014, 7:30 pm

Morgan Theatre at Utah State University

Production Credits:

Musical Direction/Stage Direction/Pianist:.....Dallas K Heaton
Assistant Stage Direction/Stage Management/Costuming:.....Sarah Butterfield
Production Services:.....Tim North
Set Design:.....Dennis Hassan
Lighting Design:.....Steven Piechocki
Costumes Consultation:.....Nancy Hills
Additional Coaching:.....Cindy Dewey, Brianna Krause, Laurie Hart
Assistant Stage Manager:.....Hannah Lovato
Choreography:.....Abi Iverson
Rehearsal Pianist:.....Ali Snow

USU Opera Theatre also gratefully recognizes the generous contribution of time and resources given by the USU Department of Theatre Arts and USU Production Services.

Cast Credits: (listed in order of appearance)

Mrs. Alice Ford:.....Taylee Beckstead
Mrs. Meg Page:.....Brooke Myers (Friday)
.....Sarah Brenay (Saturday)
Mr. Page:.....Brad Summers
Slender:.....Bric Slade
Mr. Ford:.....Jaron Putnam
Fenton:.....Jacob Spjute
Dr. Cajus:.....Nicholas Hanny
Sir John Falstaff:.....Sam Meredith
Anne Page:.....Elizabeth Tait
Ensemble: Carolee Beck, Emily Cottam (maid), Amber Farrow (maid), Sarah Gee, Shalayna Guisao (Mrs. Ford cover), Emily Hess, Jeunée Roberts (bartender), Morgan Ruesch (drunk), Justin Taylor (drunk)

Setting:

Just a few weeks ago in a suburban neighborhood not far away

Act I

The neighboring Ford and Page homes and the street out front

10 minute intermission

Act II

Inside the Garter Inn, a nearby bar

The Page's front yard

Inside the Ford home

10 minute intermission

Act III

Windsor Forest, up a nearby canyon

Act I:

Having both received the same love letter from the neighborhood drunk and has-been, Sir John Falstaff, Mrs. Alice Ford and her best friend, Mrs. Meg Page, decide to turn the tables and teach him a lesson. Mr. Page, hoping for his daughter Anne to marry the rich but socially-inept Slender, is irritated by both his wife's desire for their daughter to marry the ex-military French expat Dr. Cajus, and Anne's own boyfriend, who comes seeking Mr. Page's permission for her hand.

Meanwhile, the wives have made their plans and Mrs. Ford prepares for the dangerous plot as she awaits Falstaff's arrival at her home. He arrives, clueless, only moments before Mr. Ford 'unexpectedly' returns home. Falstaff hides in a laundry basket to get away while the suspicious Mr. Ford only succeeds in being mocked by his neighbors and employees for his 'unfounded' distrust of his wife.

Act II:

Falstaff, recovered from his near escape, tells his cronies in the bar of his past conquests. Mr. Ford, disguised as Mr. Brook, visits Falstaff promising drink and money if he'll make another attempt at Mrs. Ford. Falstaff eagerly agrees.

Slender finally summons up the courage to speak with Anne Page, but is interrupted by Dr. Cajus who has the same intention. Both are then thwarted as Fenton arrives. Anne and Fenton confess their love and encourage each other to remain strong.

Falstaff returns to make advances on Mrs. Ford as Mr. Ford comes home again. This time Falstaff avoids detection by dressing as Mother Pratt, one of the housekeepers' aunts that Mr. Ford detests. Mr. Ford argues with his wife, then unknowingly beats Falstaff out himself, stymied again in his efforts to find evidence of his wife's infidelity.

Act III:

Realizing that the joke on Mr. Ford has gone far enough, Mrs. Ford reveals her schemes to him. Mr. Ford apologizes for his suspicion and together they plot one last deception for Falstaff. Both wives send love notes to Falstaff with a special, identifying costume, informing him to meet them at midnight in the nearby forest.

Mr. and Mrs. Page make plans of their own, each hoping to see Anne their preferred suitor. Anne decides to make her own choice, however, and informs Fenton to meet her that very night so they may elope. Falstaff meets up with the wives at midnight, but before he can run off with them, a number of 'unexpected' cultists start to gather, invoking the name of Kerchak, King of the Apes. Falstaff unsuccessfully tries to hide and get away. Finally, fearing for his life and sorry for his lust, Falstaff begs forgiveness.

Kerchak and the cultists reveal themselves and Falstaff learns his lesson. Fenton and Anne return triumphantly as husband and wife while Slender and Dr. Cajus return somewhat less triumphantly as husband and... husband. The couples, all newly united or reunited in love, join in a happy chorus.