

THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR By William Shakespeare

Date **23RD April 2026**

Reviewed by Nina Jarram District 3 SW NODA Representative

Society **The Tamaritans Theatre Company**

Venue **Barbican Theatre, Plymouth**

Directed By: Vince Sutton

Welcoming audiences into the Barbican Theatre, this inventive production immediately signalled its playful departure from convention. A montage of familiar songs, reimagined in a Renaissance style, set an irreverent tone before two “audience members” revealed themselves as cast, politely excusing their exit and dissolving the boundary between spectator and performer. This early disruption established a recurring motif: a bold willingness to fracture the fourth wall in a way not typically associated with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, yet here it fostered an unexpectedly intimate rapport between audience and character.

The decision to introduce the ensemble en masse proved highly effective, showcasing a confident command of staging. Each actor delineated status and personality with clarity, ensuring coherence despite the play’s famously brisk and intricate plot. Often classified as a farce, the work’s reliance on stock characters, disguises, and escalating comic scenarios was evident, though not always fully realised. The limited opportunities for entrances and exits somewhat constrained the farcical machinery; nevertheless, the direction maintained narrative pace and purpose throughout.

A standout moment came with Falstaff’s concealment in the laundry basket—executed with precision and physical flair, evoking echoes of classic musical comedy such as *Annie* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The production also employed cross-cutting techniques to sharpen narrative clarity, juxtaposed with direct audience address that added layers of insight and vulnerability. The actor playing Ford, in particular, handled these moments with assurance, forging an immediate emotional connection that deepened audience sympathy.

Visually, the set design demonstrated the company’s customary versatility, enabling fluid transitions between scenes and sustaining momentum. The director’s sensitivity to William Shakespeare’s linguistic diversity was evident in the varied regional accents, which effectively reflected distinctions in class, education, and profession. This attention to vocal identity enriched characterisation and enhanced the production’s sense of authenticity.

However, some stagecraft issues detracted from the overall polish. Occasional lapses in projection, moments of actors turning away from the audience, and static ensemble formations slightly undermined the otherwise dynamic staging. Similarly, while the play's predominantly prose-based dialogue—unusual within Shakespeare's canon—offers fertile ground for wit and wordplay, not all performers navigated its rhythms with equal confidence. The more experienced actors demonstrated a keen grasp of comic timing, whereas others appeared overly focused on textual accuracy, resulting in diminished spontaneity.

In contrast, the actor portraying Falstaff anchored the production with a commanding vocal presence and assured delivery, guiding the narrative with clarity and energy. The integration of music from ABBA, adapted to suit the period aesthetic, added a layer of charm and cohesion. Yet some choreographic elements, including the fencing sequence and the fairy ensemble's climactic dance, lacked refinement. The latter, in particular, leaned toward pantomime rather than embracing the potential for a darker, more unified communal response to Falstaff's misdeeds.

Costume design presented an intriguing but occasionally confusing visual language. While the men's contemporary suits suggested a timeless setting, the women's attire lacked consistency: Mistress Ford appeared in an authentic looking bell sleeved Elizabethan gown, while Mistress Page's 1920s-inspired ensemble introduced a contrasting aesthetic that was never fully reconciled.

Ultimately, while the male performances brought vigour and robustness to this text-heavy work, it was the titular Merry Wives who truly captivated. Their deft navigation of social and personal power, delivered with wit and subversive charm, provided the production's most compelling moments. In a play that interrogates gender dynamics within a male-dominated society, their mischievous intelligence and theatrical confidence ensured they not only held their own—but decisively stole the show.

PLEASE NOTE: Any observation made by the reviewer can only be based on what he sees at the performance in question. The reviewer may have received information in advance of the performance and it is

inevitable that his assessment will be affected by that knowledge.

The N.O.D.A. Representative's intention is to give an objective critique of the overall production and in particular the performance viewed. It should be remembered that any review of this nature can only be objective as far as the techniques used during the performance observed. Any criticisms expressed may not have been valid at other performances, and are only made to encourage higher standards in Amateur Theatre.

It is hoped that the audience's appreciation of your efforts will have given everyone a lift and encouraged you to greater achievements in the future and that the observations made by the reviewer will prove helpful in improving future productions.