

The Merry Wives of Windsor

**CITY PAPER**

Summer  
Theater Review

Baltimore Shakespeare Festival



“Kelly’s Anne...  
gave the play a heart  
and a brief but welcome grounding in reality.”

Kelly Thorne as Anne Page





(Continued)

putting him in a series of horrible situations to avoid detection—making him hide in a wagon filled with dirty laundry, dressing him up like an old woman who gets beaten as a witch, and fairy pinchings. Meanwhile, the women's husbands have heard what Falstaff is up to. Page is unfazed. Ford goes crazy with jealousy and, for reasons that could only make sense to his therapist, ends up disguising himself and paying Falstaff to seduce his wife. If that weren't complicated enough, Page's daughter Anne has three men seeking her hand in marriage, one her dad likes, one her mom likes, and one she likes. All these plots come together to create an absurd Elizabethan *Three's Company* episode.

Though the BSF production embraces the plot's craziest notions, for every triumph a misstep keeps it from soaring. Jessica Sherlock's multilevel Tudor inn set is charming among the Evergreen House's foliage, but the decision to move the stage from the center of the field to the corner makes the great outdoors feel strangely cramped. Director Drew Kahl, the text and voice coach for BSF's 2004 *The Tempest* production, coaxes some great deliveries out of his actors, getting the humor and meaning out of lines that other directors would have considered throwaways. His staging isn't as impressive, however. Periods of frantic slapstick alternate with painfully static scenes, and every time the show accrues momentum Kahl slams on the brakes.

Falstaff, the character who should hold this play together, is the one slowing things down. Lewis Shaw looks trapped in this character: Not a small man, Shaw is put in a fat suit that leaves him looking like a pantaloon-clad Stay-Puft marshmallow man moving with the attendant grace. His movements are so labored that he spends most of his time seated while other characters revolve around him.

Fortunately, some great performances keep the play moving. Bruce Nelson walks—and in some scenes, limps—away with the show as the increasingly loony Ford; his jealousy-fueled madness becomes the play's most compelling plot line. Allison Lamb's Mistress Ford and Sarah Wiggin's Mistress Page have a nice conspiratorial chemistry. Kelly Tuohy's Anne, along with Matthew Charles as Anne's preferred suitor, Fenton, give the play a heart and a brief but welcome grounding in reality. And perennially underutilized BSF workhorse Dana Whipkey puts in another fine performance as the creepy clergyman Sir Hugh, gamely playing off both Thomas Brown's pleasantly understated Justice Shallow and Gregory Stuart's entertainingly exaggerated turn as freaky Frenchman Dr. Caius.

All of this adds up to an enjoyable production, but not a must see. Part of the problem may have been due to the inauspicious opening night, but some of the show's shortcomings are due to Shaw's foam-rubber prison. While we are big supporters of loving yourself just the way you are, we really think BSF's *Merry Wives of Windsor* has a better chance to live up to its name if Falstaff shed a few pounds.

