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Theater

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Stellar Seattle Shakespeare cast brings mirth to 'Merry Wives of Windsor'

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1 of 2 | Jasmine Joshua stars as Falstaff, a bumbling would-be Lothario whose charisma evaporates when the microphone is gone, in "The Merry Wives of Windsor," on stage from Seattle Shakespeare... (Courtesy of Giao Nguyen) [More](#) ▾

By [Dusty Somers](#) *Special to The Seattle Times*

Theater review

In Seattle Shakespeare Company's new production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," Jasmine Joshua's Falstaff is an erstwhile rock star with charisma coming out of his pores.

"Your man thinks I'm a bad man, and I'm sure he's right," he seductively sings in a repeated refrain.

Then he puts down the microphone. What's left is a transparently pathetic striver who isn't fooling anyone into thinking he's a smooth-talking Lothario. The townspeople aren't so convinced by the music either. "Falstaff lip syncs!" one jeers as he's taking the stage.

Adapted by Eddie DeHais and co-directed by DeHais and Corey McDaniel, who joined the production team a few weeks before opening, this rendition of Shakespeare's

"Merry Wives" turns up the farce dial to 11, largely to positive results. Shakespeare purportedly wrote the play quickly upon the request of Queen Elizabeth I, who wanted to see "Henry IV" character John Falstaff in a love story. Like most pieces of fan-service, you can sense the creator's heart wasn't really in it.



From left, Vincent Milay, Iveliz Martel, Terence Kelly and Maddy Nibble star in Seattle Shakespeare Company's farcical rendition of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." (Courtesy of Giao Nguyen)

That's not the case for this production, which is rife with actors committed to the bit. Maddy Nibble squirms with dread as Slender, a suitor who seems unconvinced by the script's assertion he's interested in town beauty Anne (associate director Alanah Pascual, admirably filling in for Kataka Corn, who was [seriously injured](#) in a car accident a week before opening). Pistol (Rhys Daly, brimming with derring-do) and Caius (an amusingly florid Malex Reed) meanwhile pine for Anne themselves.

Of course, this is Falstaff's show, and Joshua's performance, which whiplashes from winking swagger to blubbing submissiveness, adds a highly entertaining wrinkle to the archetype, leaving no doubt that any bit of blustering confidence is completely unearned.

The rest of the cast is more than game to play along, whether that's Mari Nelson bemusedly humiliating Falstaff as one of his objects of attention or George Mount upping the ante on personal flagellation as Nelson's would-be scorned husband.

Falstaff's plot to simultaneously seduce Alice Ford (Nelson) and Meg Page (Joyce-Thi Brew) provides the plot engine and the fuel for Falstaff to repeatedly embarrass himself. It's great fun watching Joshua endure these indignities — from being yanked around by a bright red collar to being plunged into a dirty hamper. The latter prompts the play's best monologue, with Joshua, pushed to the brink, lamenting about an encounter "with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease."



Rhys Daly, left, stars as Pistol, one of many suitors for the affections of Anne (Alanah Pascual) in Seattle Shakespeare Company's "The Merry Wives of Windsor." (Courtesy of Giao Nguyen)

There are elements that signal a more ambitious staging lurking, particularly in the eclectic selection of songs the cast sings, from "Knockers" by glam rock revivalists The Darkness, to "Amazing Grace," to Annie Lennox's gorgeously ornate "Love Song for a Vampire" that was featured in Francis Ford Coppola's "Bram Stoker's Dracula." The baroque moodiness of that Act I closer seeps in from time to time, particularly in a climactic bit of witchiness set up to punish Falstaff.

Of course, that's all a farce, too, and the production soon returns to its dominant mode of goofy romp, allowing "Merry Wives" to peacefully live out its days as the lightweight bauble of a play that it is.

"The Merry Wives of Windsor"

Through Nov. 19, at Center Theatre at the Armory, 305 Harrison St., Seattle; \$35-\$62; wheelchair-accessible seating and assisted listening devices available; audio description performance 7:30 p.m. Nov. 12; two and a half hours with intermission; 206-733-8222, seattleshakespeare.org

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