

Maskers Theatre Company Present
in the open air

The Merry Wives of Windsor

By William Shakespeare

Mottisfont Abbey

Romsey, Hampshire

courtesy of

 THE NATIONAL TRUST



Wednesday 14th July to Saturday 24th July
(except Monday 19th July)

Shakespeare in the Open Ayre

Welcome to this year's Maskers at Mottisfont production. This year (our 22nd at this venue) marks a return for us to Shakespeare (our previous Shakespeare productions at this venue being *Much Ado about Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

It is difficult to pinpoint the appeal of performing Shakespeare's plays in the open-air - perhaps it is the romance of the language pronounced on a Summer's evening, a sense of nostalgia, a celebration of our most treasured playwright. For us, it is all of the above, but in particular the opportunity once again to perform courtesy of The National Trust in such a beautiful setting.



Mottisfont Abbey is set along the River Test amidst some of Hampshire's most glorious countryside. Originally a 12th-century Augustinian priory the building was converted into a private house after the Dissolution and has been adapted over the centuries by a series of owners. The grounds still retain the spring or 'font' from which the name is derived. The abbey contains a drawing room decorated by Rex Whistler and Derek Hill's 20th-century picture collection, but the key attraction is the extensive beautiful grounds with magnificent trees (the Great Plane is thought to be the largest of its kind in the country), sweeping lawns, and walled gardens which house the National Collection of old-fashioned Roses; the rose garden was designed in 1972 by Graham Stuart Thomas. The National Trust at Mottisfont also offer their facilities for corporate functions and entertainments as well as weddings and other private parties; see www.nationaltrust.org.uk

The *Merry Wives* is an expertly plotted farce which remains one of the most performed of Shakespeare's works and one of his most popular, and Falstaff one of his best-known characters. Falstaff meets Mistresses Page and Ford, two married women who are said to control their own financial affairs.

Severely lacking in finances, Falstaff hatches a plot to swindle the money but is constantly caught out by the connivance of the other characters as he is duped by the world and his wife...

We hope you enjoy your evening and we thank you for your continued support.

The Merry Wives of Mottisfont...

jottings from the Director

"When I first read through *The Merry Wives* it struck me that the play is particularly well suited to an open-air production. Yes, there are indoor scenes, especially those in the Garter Inn and in the Fords' house, but at least half of the play is set outdoors. This includes a number of street scenes plus, of course, the final magical scene set at midnight near Herne's Oak; and we could take advantage of a conveniently located real river. As to the oak tree, there was a time when we flirted with the idea of setting the final scene round the tree located in the middle of the lawn. However, it would have meant turning you, the audience, around, building a more complicated lighting rig, and frankly, the poor old tree is looking a bit sad. So we have reset the scene in Herne's Wood and challenged our lighting designer to create a fairy-like setting.

Playing in the open air allows us to have an expansive set and a large cast. We were also pleased to be able to include a large number of local young children who will work with us in shifts during the run. I also wanted to remind you that this play is one of the Garter plays, and was reputedly first performed in the presence of Queen Elizabeth on St. George's Day in 1597. It was a stroke of luck that as a result of the European Football Championship we found it very easy to buy lots of flags.

Finally I must remind you that our Mottisfont productions involve and depend on the whole company. There are nearly thirty in the cast (plus the children), at least as many take turns as Front of House stewards, there is a big stage management team, props, wardrobe, set design, building and painting, marketing and box office, programme design, production management, publicity photos and the incidental music (created and played by two of our members). I thank them all for their contribution to what, I hope, you will find a most enjoyable evening."

Harry Tuffill



Falstaff - fat rogue, Fortune hunter, fool

Henry IV was one of Shakespeare's most popular plays and its larger than life character Sir John Falstaff, one of his greatest creations. It is understood that he was based upon Sir John Oldcastle, an early protestant who was martyred for his radical religious views during the reign of Henry V. Shakespeare's Falstaff is a braggart soldier of rapier wit, cowardly yet cunning, a thief, a rogue and a liar. History has it that the then Lord Chamberlain, William Brooke, a direct descendant of Oldcastle, compelled Shakespeare to alter the name of Sir John Falstaff because he felt that Shakespeare's portrayal of the character in *The Merry Wives* amounted to defamation of his ancestors' name. In *Henry IV*, Hal refers to Falstaff as "my old lad of the castle". It is speculated that maybe Shakespeare was trying to get his own back on the Lord Chamberlain because of Brooke's reputed hostility to the theatre. It seems unlikely, however, that he would have set out to mock Lord Brooke who, as Lord Chamberlain, would have been a dangerous man to offend. It is also argued that Shakespeare intended no offence and merely chose the name because it would scan nicely!

Unlike the drama and pathos brought out by the Falstaff of *Henry IV*, where, set against a historical plot of politics and war, his wit bears resonance, Falstaff's function in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is quite different, and the world he inhabits, markedly different. Penniless, he becomes a fortune hunter and self-styled soldier-lover but he finds himself in a world in which his "art of love" is no match for the machinations of the "merry wives" he pursues. He remains a humorous master wordsmith and trickster (as portrayed in *Henry IV*) but the difference is that in *The Merry Wives* all his tricks no longer work and he ends-up Fortune's fool.

It is possible that the enduring appeal of this character - a quick witted loser, the butt of jokes who is funniest when he fails, is that there is something "notably" English about him and, like all good British figures who make mistakes, he is forgiven (but only after he has been utterly humiliated and vilified)!



Wily Women

The concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign to most in Shakespeare's day and yet, in *The Merry Wives* the women are almost always as clever as the men, if not the cleverer and gain the upper hand with delightful dexterity.



Falstaff may be this play's central character but it is the assertiveness of the wives he pursues that is crucial to the development of the plot. It is to them rather than to the male characters (as was the format in earlier comedies, including Shakespeare's) to whom Shakespeare has given the initiative; bold in their actions and their language, they repeatedly lead Falstaff on. Although he remains markedly cocksure in his connivance the wives always get the upper hand and Falstaff's ignorance of their cunning gives rise to much humour. These women are symbols of order against misrule and corruption and it is through them that Shakespeare indicates the high value he placed

on female influence in human affairs. These empowered, yet understated "Wives" prefigure Shakespeare's later more bold and venturesome heroines and anticipates their prominence in his later work; and, perhaps, if this play were indeed written for Elizabeth I, gives a subtle nod to her dominance as Queen of England.



Cast

Citizens of Windsor

Mistress Alice Ford
Master Frank Ford (her husband)
John and Thomas (their servants)
Mistress Margaret Page
Master George Page (her husband)
Anne Page (their daughter)
William Page (their son)
Doctor Caius (a French doctor)
Mistress Quickly (his housekeeper)
Jane Rugby (her servant)
Sir Hugh Evans (a Welsh parson)
The Hostess of the Garter Inn
Children of Windsor (and fairies) from

Hazel Burrows
Richard Hackett
Ken Hann, John Carrington
Maria Head
Alan Watson
Catherine Andrews
One of the children of Windsor
Ian Morley
Jenni Watson
Mini Setty
Bruce Atkinson
Joanna Iacovou
Conor Bevan, Molly Bevan. Georgia Hackett, Ben Hughes. Jack Lane, Katherine Leyden, Susanna Leyden, Isabelle Ryan, Juliette Ryan, Katya Sheath, Olivia Thomas, Tom Woods, Lucy Wiggins plus members of the company

Visitors to Windsor

Sir John Falstaff
Robin his page
Bardolph
Pistol
Nim
Master Fenton (a young gentleman)
Master Robert Shallow (a country justice)
Master Abraham Slender (his nephew)
Peggy Simple (servant to Slender)

John Souter
Michelle Davies
Ron Randall
Adam Taussik
Paul Baker
Paul Mills
Albie Minns
Jez Minns
Brenda Atkinson

Royal Party

Queen Elizabeth
Baron Hunsdon
Lady Hunsdon
William Shakespeare
Royal pages

Molly Manns/Avril Woodward
David Pike
Moyra Allen
David Collis
Alex Austin, Rachel Thomas

The action of the play takes place in Windsor



Crew

Director	Harry Tuffill
Production Manager	Ken Hann
Stage Manager	Angie Barks
Marketing/Publicity	Angie Stansbridge
Photography	Clive Weeks
Programme	Helen White
Box Office	Angie Stansbridge
	TurnerSims Concert Hall
	Heather Christiansen
	Helen Officer, Sandy White,
	Lyn Austin, Kay Hann,
	Betty & John Riggs,
	Sheana Carrington
Front of House	Julia Jupp, Julie Baker,
	Pam & Geoff Cook and team
Lighting	Tony Lawther, Clive Weeks,
	Nathan Weeks, Buzz Askew, Julia
	Campone, Catriona Burns. Ivan White
	Martin Clift, Jai Mitchell, Lawrie Gee,
Sound	Kathryn Salmon, Ralph Bateman,
	Nick Browne
Assistant Stage Managers	Mark Morai, Simon Procter
Set Design	Pete Liddiard
Set Construction	David Jupp, Geoff Cook
	John Carrington, John Jones
Costume	Christine Baker, Kay Hann
Props	Gill Buchanan, Ella Lockett, Liz Hill
	Alison Tebbatt, Lyn Austin,
	Margaret Lund
Transport	Tony Austin, Martin Hann
FOH	Julia Jupp, Geoff Cook
Incidental music played by	Patrick Stevens (keyboards)
	and Paul Mills (recorder)
Rehearsal prompt	Nina Jensen, Peggy Souter
Guns	John Hamon

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Bitterne Historical Society



Humiliation and Revenge

The Merry Wives of Windsor bears notable similarity to both medieval morality plays and the highly popular revenge plot. Morality plays exposed human foibles by making fun of them in a convoluted plot, resulting in the perpetrator's exposure, humiliation and, finally, forgiveness. This forms the basic structure of the narrative in *The Merry Wives*. Similarly, in this play vengeance is a motif from the outset, but unlike in Shakespeare's other studies of revenge, here it becomes a subject for comedy rather than tragedy. Although there are several acts of vengeance throughout the play, the creative and mischievous devices by which Mistresses Page and Ford punish Falstaff are the most memorable. Upon discovering their mutual insult they foreswear to be revenged and their efforts result in the entire town of Windsor shaming the poor foolish knight.

Underlying the farcical comedy of this play is the strong theme of the power of good over evil. Research has shown that Falstaff's ordeals were familiar punishments in 16c. England - shaming rituals, which served to highlight the evil behind any attempt to overturn the social or economic order of the town.



Falstaff is forced to hide in a laundry basket full of filthy clothes and is then dumped into the muddy Thames; he agrees to dress as a witch and is beaten; finally he is bedecked in a cuckold's horns and joyously mocked by the husbands he would have cuckolded and bankrupted had he succeeded in his plotting. In this scene Falstaff refers to Acteon the hunter who accidentally disturbed the goddess Diana in her bath. Enraged, Diana turned Acteon into a stag and set his own hounds upon him. This is one of Greek mythology's cruellest and most horrific tales of revenge and the imagery here seems, perhaps, a little overly potent. Like Acteon, however, Falstaff is a hunter, albeit a hunter of spoils, who is punished at the hands of affronted women. He too, ends up with horns and these provide a potent visual symbol of his thwarted plans.



“Well, thereby hangs a tale” (1.iv)

The origin of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is unsure. The general opinion is that George Carey, the second Baron Hunsdon, commissioned it and that it was probably performed at the Garter Feast on April 23rd 1597. Having recently been appointed Lord Chamberlain, George Carey also inherited the position of patron of the company of players to which Shakespeare belonged. The company was known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men, thus it would have been appropriate that he ask Shakespeare to write a new play. There is also rather flimsier evidence that Queen Elizabeth, having been so delighted by the character of Falstaff, the drunken companion of the future king in *Henry IV* (part 1), requested that Shakespeare pen a play showing this roguish knight in love. Thus we find Falstaff resurrected and set on a series of comic misadventures along with a number of familiar characters who are carried over with him.

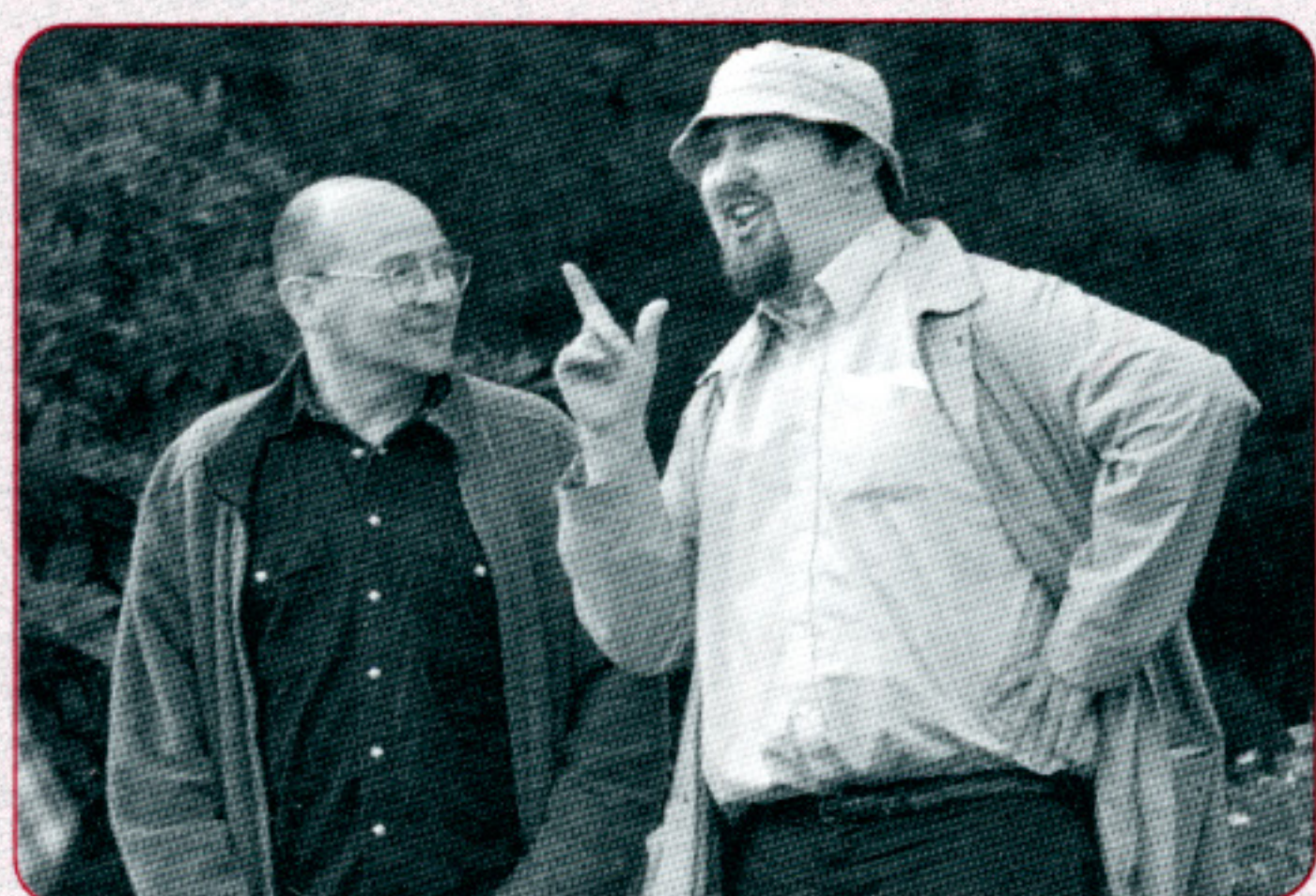
Two notable aspects differentiate *The Merry Wives* from other Shakespearian plays. Firstly, around ninety percent of the text is in prose, rather than the verse that we usually associate with Shakespeare. Secondly, the play is so contemporary. The Fords and Pages may well be drawn from acquaintances of Shakespeare. We could even imagine that Anne may also have some of the characteristics of his older daughter Susanna, who would have been fourteen at the time (Shakespeare and his wife may well have been contemplating the marriage of their daughter).

Additionally, this play differs from Shakespeare's other comedies in that it is not set in an imaginary country but exclusively in Windsor, in Shakespeare's own day. This is one of the play's most striking features. There are no kings, nobles or politics; instead Shakespeare presents a delightful picture of rural 16th Century. His characters enjoy country entertainments; are familiar with country features and customs; and specific geographical references lend great realism to the piece.

Some critics suggest that the play was written in fourteen days. It is often disregarded as being a shallow comedy, a mere diversion in Shakespeare's canon. It is true that it lacks the stirring poetry, monumental characters and sophisticated psychological exploration of Shakespeare's other works; yet, its lasting popularity continues to engender greater interest from commentators. The most farcical of Shakespeare's comedies, this play is expertly plotted. Motifs such as jealous husbands, rival suitors, mistaken identity, connivance and lovers triumphing over the adversity of parents are common elements of storytelling and of many of Shakespeare's plays. While the story does not itself have a known source, this merry tale of practical jokes, trickery and deception bears reference to several works by writers such as Chaucer, Boccaccio and Plautus and to the Italian novella and, particularly to an earlier story (1558) by Giovanni Fiorentino called *Il pecorone* in which a young student asks his professor to teach him the art of seduction. With that plot in mind and the secondary plot of the three suitors for Anne, Shakespeare was in a position to intertwine the two stories with his usual skill until all is satisfactorily resolved in the final scene.



The Merry Wives of Windsor in Rehearsal



Would you like to Join Us?

The Maskers Theatre Company was founded in 1968. Several hundred productions (large and small) later we are firmly established as one of the South's leading Amateur groups. We are always pleased to welcome new members. Alternatively you may join the Friends of the Maskers in order that you can be kept up to date with advance notice of all our productions.

If you are interested in joining us as a full member or as a Friend, please contact our Membership Officer, Julia Jupp on 023 8044 6600 or see our website:- www.maskers.org.uk for further information.



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The Man in the Iron Mask
By ALEXANDRE DUMAS
Mottisfont Abbey - July 2005
Box Office 02380 551489

Romance
Sarcasm
revenge
Shakespeare
Falstaff
Deer
adorable



'a loveable roughe'