

British Theatre Guide

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The Merry Wives of Windsor

William Shakespeare

Globe touring production

Bath Theatre Royal

(2010)

The Merry Wives of Windsor is not, it has to be said, Shakespeare's finest hour. And perhaps, as with Dr Johnson's second marriage, the decision to embark on a new staging represents a triumph of optimism over experience.

Falstaff, magnificent Falstaff, that force of riot of the *Henry IV* duology, is here utterly cast down, the butt merely of other people's (feeble) practical jokes. Not only is he not witty in himself, he is scarcely the cause of wit in others.

Fortunately, if there is a company which is likely to make a good fist out of such unpromising stuff it is the Globe for which this was a hit with the critics and crowds alike in 2008. The Globe method with comedy - and sometimes with tragedy too - is to keep it broad. In the original programme notes for the production it is suggested that the play was the progenitor of the TV sitcom.

It is a suggestion that at least one character takes too literally, offering almost a note-for-note impersonation of Basil Fawlty. But it would be churlish to carp.

Christopher Benjamin as the fat knight plays a captain's innings, leading a spirited cast from the front. There's good work from Gareth Armstrong (Hugh Evans) and Peter Gale (Robert Shallow), while Serene Evans (Meg Page), Sarah Woodward (Alice Ford) and Philip Bird (Dr Caius) provide lively support.

There is, as always with the Globe, attractive accompaniment (lute, cornett, recorders and sackbut, among others), led by musical director Michael Lyons, and stage director Christopher Luscombe keeps the action suitably fleet.

Not from the author's top drawer then but merry enough to provide an enjoyable slice of festive entertainment.

Reviewer: [Pete Wood](#)