

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Merry Wives of Windsor

Royal Shakespeare Company

Barbican Centre

7 December 2018–5 January 2019

Courting popularity by dumbing down classic works is becoming increasingly common and has now even reached the august stages of the RSC.

The best way to describe this anachronistic, modern riff around the borders of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is to suggest that it might easily have been called “Carry on Falstaff” or possibly “Shakespeare does *EastEnders*”.

Lez Brotherston's set design reveals little of what is to follow, as the lights come up on a pair of ramshackle, revolving cottages. His costumes are colourful and evoke a confusion of periods, mixing Elizabethan with contemporary in a manner that could just become fashionable.

Elizabeth herself delivers a prologue after which the characters are introduced with signage that is not so much Brechtian as TV soap.

Thereafter, every cliché and stereotype in the book is mined, often in offensive style, so that at various points we have a Frenchman played by Jonathan Cullen who sounds and acts like Inspector Clouseau, a man with serious eyesight issues who becomes the butt of numerous crude jokes, a comic book Russian and Welshman, two Poles who are inevitably workmen and much more besides.

This impression is compounded by what appears to be a competition between most of the male characters as to who can be the campest, with the usually virile Pistol winning, courtesy of his fetching black handbag.

The central figures fare little better. David Troughton is the standout in the role of Sir John Falstaff, a massive figure who overstretchs his talents while trying to woo not one but two married women, Mistresses Page and Ford (Rebecca Lacey and Beth Cordingley) who sound as if they hail from Essex rather than Berkshire, while one of their neighbours must be exhausted from the efforts of constantly lifting her cleavage in the manner of Les Dawson.

While fending off the lusty Knight, the former does her damndest to marry off daughter Anne played by Karen Fishwick (alternating this role with Juliet), seemingly an exile from some downmarket reality TV show.

Much of the evening's entertainment is derived from the subterfuge as the headstrong young woman pursues the short-sighted man, while each of her parents attempts to find what they regard as a more suitable alternative.

One soon gets the impression that director Fiona Laird has little faith in Shakespeare as a comic writer since she constantly superimposes her own gags over and instead of those of the Bard.

As a result, the script is not very subtly adapted to overcome the original writer's perceived failures, for example his failure to introduce either Brexit or Vladimir Putin into the original script, let alone a remote-controlled golf trolley with a mind of its own.

One imagines that the intention behind this parody of Shakespeare is to draw fresh young audiences into the RSC's programming, with the hope that they will then progress on to something a little more authentic.

If that turns out to be the case, then the experiment will have been a success. However, it seems more likely that anyone addicted to this brand of lowbrow TV-inspired humour will run screaming from any theatre where a serious Shakespearean presentation is offered.

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)