

# Merry Wives of Windsor

Stronger casting perfects this forerunner to today's sitcom

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Written by  
**Charles Culbertson**  
footlights and spotlights

**I suppose if you wait long** enough, the theater gods will give you what you want.

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In 2005, I wrote a review in which I said the main character of a (then) Shenandoah Shakespeare play had been poorly cast. I opined that another, stronger member of the troupe would have been better in the role.

Patience — perhaps the least of my virtues — has finally paid off. While the play is not the one I saw in 2005, the character is the same and the actor who originally should have played him has returned to do just that.

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**what:** "The Merry Wives of Windsor"

**where:** Blackfriars Playhouse

**when:** Now through Aug. 29. Call for info.

**tickets and info:** (540) 851-1733,  
[tickets@americanshakespearecenter.com](mailto:tickets@americanshakespearecenter.com)

Of course, I'm talking about the American Shakespeare Center's current production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," and the character is Falstaff, a sodden, picaresque knight who shows up in several of Shakespeare's plays. James Keegan, an ASC veteran and one of the most accomplished performers to grace the Blackfriars stage, breathes boozy good life

into the affable yet roguish knight, giving us an unforgettable performance in a production loaded with memorable moments.

The story, which has been hailed as the forerunner to television situation comedies, has an insolvent Falstaff deciding to have affairs with the wives of two of Windsor's wealthy merchants as a way to improve his financial outlook. He writes identical love letters to the women, who eventually compare the letters and then scheme to give Falstaff his comeuppance.

Meanwhile, two of Falstaff's servants — angry over having been sacked — go to the husbands of the two women and spill the beans about his intentions. One of the husbands isn't concerned while the other one frets himself nearly to death. He disguises himself for a confrontation with Falstaff, and what ensues are some of the funniest and most engaging scenes in the play.

Shakespeare, of course, loved subplots. In "Merry Wives," the

subplot revolves around the daughter of one of the to-be-cuckolded merchants and her insistence on marrying a man not of her parents' choosing.

Keegan, as I have noted, has bigger-than-life talent and throws every bit of it into Shakespeare's bigger-than-life scoundrel. But his is not the only strong performance in "Merry Wives." John Harrell is particularly funny as Frank Ford, the disguised husband; Sarah Fallon and Denice Burbach as the merry wives, Mistresses Ford and Page, are deliciously engaging as they give what-for to the men; and professional acting apprentice Victoria Reinsel as Anne Page continues to turn in solid, appealing performances.

But my favorite character in this play isn't Falstaff, or Ford, or even any of the ladies. It's Doctor Caius, a quarrelsome French physician whose near-constant employment of the pseudo-expletive "By gar!" grows in hilarity with each use. Daniel Rigney, also a professional acting apprentice this season, very nearly waltzes away with every one of his scenes as he imbues the "by gar-ring" doctor with a side-splitting accent and an equally mirthful hauteur.

"Merry Wives," which is directed by Jim Warren, also features Luke Eddy, Tobias Shaw, Nolan Carey, Chris Johnston, Erin Baird, Rene Thornton Jr., Christopher Seiler and Allison Glenzer, all of whom dazzle audiences with their energy, skill and obvious love of the material.

**E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at [mail@stauntonhistory.com](mailto:mail@stauntonhistory.com).**

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