



# **THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR**

**By William Shakespeare  
Directed by Terri McMahon**

**American Players Theatre Study Guide**

# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

Welcome to APT's Study Guide, created to accompany the Student Matinee performances of William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Use it however you see fit - before or after the performance, whatever is most valuable to your class.

In this packet, you'll find a number of resources designed to help your class better understand and engage with the play. Use them all, or select sections that best suit your needs. We hope you enjoy APT's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Find more information on the play and APT's education resources at [americanplayers.org](http://americanplayers.org).

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# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## Character Guide

A list of actors and accompanying photos to help your class follow the plot and introduce them to the characters in the play.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies, due in no small part to its wild and wacky cast of characters. Here's the who's who of the APT 2023 production.



**Sir John Falstaff** played by David Daniel  
Known to audiences from the Bard's "Henriad," the big lover-of-life sets out on the path of finding a rich woman to pay his debts.



**Mrs. Alice Ford** played by Dee Dee Batteast  
She decides to teach Falstaff and her jealous husband, Mr. Ford, a lesson



**Mrs. Margaret Page** played by Kelsey Brennan  
Also known as "Meg," she helps Mrs. Ford make a mockery of Falstaff



**Mr. Frank Ford** played by Nate Burger  
A citizen of Windsor, when he learns Falstaff is pursuing his wife, he takes the alias "Mr. Brook" and adopts a scheme because "A man may not be too confident."



**Mr. George Page** played by Reginald André Jackson  
A citizen of Windsor, when he learns Falstaff is pursuing his wife, he is sure that the only thing the knight will get from Mrs. Page is some harsh language



**Anne Page** played by Naomi Zhanel Kalter  
Daughter of Mr. Page and Mrs. Page, she intends to marry Fenton, whatever her parents think



**Widow Quickly** played by Tracy Michelle Arnold  
Dr. Caius' servant, she acts as go-between for all the courting lovers



**Doctor Caius** played by Jim DeVita  
A French physician and suitor of Anne Page, he unwittingly marries Bardolph



**John Rugby** played by Trevyn Wong  
A servant in Doctor Caius' household



**Robert Shallow** played by James Ridge  
A county justice, he refuses to continue suffering Falstaff's abuses after Falstaff and his group hunt on his land



**Abraham Slender** played by Ronald Román-Meléndez  
Shallow's kinsman, he is Anne's reluctant suitor



**Peter Simple** played by Kailey Azure Green  
Slender's page, they get caught up at Doctor Caius' home



**Fenton** played by Rasell Holt  
A young gentleman, he woos Anne Page



**Sir Hugh Evans** played by Josh Krause  
A Welsh parson, he appoints himself the umpire in everyone else's disputes



**Host of the Garter** played by Teri Brown  
Host of the Garter Inn, where Falstaff lodges. She has mischievous fun with Falstaff and Anne Page's suitors.



**Pistol** played by Phoebe González  
A follower of Falstaff, fired for refusing to deliver love letters



**Nym** played by Jamaque Newberry  
A follower of Falstaff, he is no mincer of words



**Bardolph** played by Marcus Truschinski  
A follower of Falstaff, he finds work at the Garter Inn serving beer



**Robin** played by Isaac Daniel  
Falstaff's page and go-between for the wives



**John and Robert** played by Joseph Green and David Van Hallgren  
The Ford's household servants

# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## Synopsis

A description of the play, from start to finish.



Justice Shallow, his nephew Slender, and Parson Sir Hugh Evans are upset at the behavior of Falstaff and his associates, Nym, Pistol, and Bardolph. Slender is one of several suitors for Anne Page, and her father's choice.



Evans sends a message to Widow Quickly, Doctor Caius' housekeeper and a friend of Anne, asking her to help Slender's suit. Caius is also a suitor for Anne, and her mother's choice; so when he hears of Evans' interference, Caius sends him a challenge. Fenton, a third suitor, also approaches Quickly, asking for her help.





Falstaff has met Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page and imagines they are taken with him. He writes them both love letters and asks Nym and Pistol to deliver them. When they refuse, his page Robin takes them. Falstaff dismisses his crew, who decide to take revenge by telling Mr. Page and Mr. Ford of the letters.



Mr. Page dismisses the matter, but Mr. Ford is suspicious of his wife's fidelity and decides to test it. He gets the Host of the Garter to introduce him to Falstaff as 'Mr. Brook'. The Host also averts the duel between Dr. Caius and Sir Hugh Evans by directing them to different places.



The two ladies compare their letters and decide to teach Falstaff a lesson. Widow Quickly brings Falstaff a message from Mrs. Ford, asking him to visit her.



Meanwhile, 'Mr. Brook' has persuaded Falstaff to act as a go-between to Mrs. Ford on his behalf, and when he learns about the appointment Falstaff has already made, he is furious and resolves to catch him.



Falstaff is in the middle of expressing his love to Mrs. Ford when Mrs. Page brings news of Ford's approach. Falstaff escapes by hiding in a laundry basket and he is dumped in a ditch. Mr. Ford is embarrassed in front of his friends to find no one with his wife.



Widow Quickly brings Falstaff another invitation from Mrs. Ford. 'Mr. Brook' meets Falstaff and learns what happened at the previous encounter, and that a second appointment has been made.



Once again Mr. Ford arrives during the meeting, but this time Falstaff escapes when the women disguise him as an old dance teacher. The ladies then tell their husbands what has happened, and all four decide to trick Falstaff one final time.



The women persuade Falstaff to disguise himself as Herne the Hunter (an old Windsor legend), and meet them at night in Herne's Oak, where they plan to frighten him with everyone dressed as fairies. Page decides to take advantage of the occasion by having Slender elope with Anne; Mrs. Page makes a similar arrangement with Caius; and Fenton arranges with the Host to take Anne himself, with her approval.



Falstaff meets the wives in the woods, but is terrified by the sight of the fairies, who playfully pinch and burn him with their lanterns.



Slender and Caius choose Peter Simple and Bardolph by mistake, but Fenton finds and marries Anne. All reveal themselves to the discomfited Falstaff. Fenton and Anne return as husband and wife, and the Pages accept the marriage.

# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## About the Production

Learn more about this production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.



## Written by Assistant Director Brandon Zang

### THE ROLE OF COMEDY IN *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR*

In creating the world of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, director Terri McMahon and I wanted to start from a place of love. Knowing that we are presenting this play to a world that's only beginning to emerge from isolation, we wanted to highlight the importance of community and the inevitable joy that comes from inclusion and celebration. Though the play is often considered the most farcical piece of Shakespeare's repertoire, we knew that there was something more meaningful – and perhaps timely – to all the hilarity.

Aristotle famously characterizes comedy as “an imitation of characters of a lower type... [that] consists in some defect or ugliness,” since he believed that humor comes from the worst aspects of people. Perhaps this is evident in the script of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; we see an outsider who is mocked for his transgressions and affinity for sin. But when Terri and I read through the script, we saw a different perspective: instead of a story about deserved punishment, maybe *Merry Wives* is about forgiveness. **Could the town accept Falstaff as one of their own at the end? Does he bring something to the community that wasn't there before? Can humor come from people being good?**

## **THE ROLE OF DANCE IN *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR***

Our first foray into our vision was through the language of dance. Throughout history, dance has always been a way of celebrating community. Dance can be spontaneous, choreographed, improvised, or devised. It is constantly in flux, changing with each generation that inherits the ritual, and it is a movement language that defies the literal and embraces the abstract nature of interpersonal relationships. And most importantly, it invites all to participate. When we see the town practicing for a dance at the beginning of the play, it represents a commitment that each individual makes to the greater whole, even if some people (ahem, Mr. Ford) are not particularly good dancers. Additionally, we wanted the dance at the beginning to feel rigid and rehearsed, because all rituals, even those that are founded in spontaneous celebration, become bound by our notion of tradition. Windsor is a town that is stuck in its ways, with unwavering beliefs and societal roles that are rigid, just like the dance. This is a town that was not ready for a person like Sir John Falstaff, who shakes everything up with his disregard for convention. The payoff then becomes the dance at the very end, where the characters feel empowered to break the rules and reveal their true self, and in doing so, strengthen their love for each other. After all, it is our differences that make our communities better.

## **THE WORLD OF *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR***

We also wanted to step away from setting the story in a specific period and place. Though written long ago, *Merry Wives* in 2023 should feel fresh and relatable for a modern audience. That's why our design choices – everything from soundbites to shoelaces – are influenced by a variety of forms across history. **The music**, composed by the brilliant Sartje Pickett, blends elements of jazz, hip hop, and classical to create a sense of an underlying rhythm and rhyme. Each character has their own set of **movements**, inspired by dances from a plethora of cultures and choreographed by the amazing Brian Cowing, all to illustrate their indomitable individualities. Susan Tsu's intricate **costumes** are inspired from all periods, and take a surprising turn when we get to Herne's Oak (more on that later). Perhaps the most visually striking of all is the set, adorned in bold neon colors and centerpiece with a beautifully crafted statue of a hot pink stag, standing erect on a pillar. Designed by Scott Penner, the **set** is meant to evoke a sense of pop art and minimalist anachronism (what's up with the giant boombox?) the moment the audience walks in. Even in our earliest production meetings, we were committed to the idea that Windsor is not just a rural town in 16th century England. Instead, Windsor should invoke all communities everywhere: from Spring Green, Wisconsin to Chicago, Illinois to the whole country of America. There is a reason that Shakespeare continues to get produced today, and we wanted to home in on the story's timeless universality.

## **THE SYMBOLISM OF DISGUISE IN *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR***

We also brought in a lot of symbolism and metaphor into our staging. In creating our concept of Herne's Oak, Terri and I were deeply inspired by pagan rituals and borrowed from their philosophy to create a completely different world. We learned that fire is a symbol of renewal, not destruction, and so Falstaff is burned by the ghostly flame to mark his rebirth as a member of the community. Many characters hide behind animal masks, cementing their relationship to nature and thus connecting to their true selves as fellow altruistic humans, despite their urban origins. In fact, we saw disguise as an essential element of the story; for instance, Falstaff disguises his true intentions, and as payback, he is disguised by the wives as the dance teacher of Brentford. Mr. Ford disguises himself as Mr. Brook, yet finds genuine connection with Falstaff in their moments together. False identity is not only a device of deception, but a portal for characters to reveal and discover their truths. Herne's Oak, then, is the epitome of disguise in the play, where everyone, including Falstaff, finds themselves in ridiculously outlandish costumes to inhabit a different world. But as the prank unfolds, true love emerges when Anne and Fenton declare themselves as a couple, disguised against all the disguises deceptively set into place by the Pages. By working with designers to create the haunting, strange, and often beautiful world of Herne's Oak, we set the stage for big revelations and conclusions, all while the characters posed as woodland creatures and ghostly spirits.

## **THE RELATIONSHIPS IN WINDSOR**

In the rehearsal room, we tackled the daunting task of deciphering the complicated relationships between Windsor's residents. With the help of our wonderful **voice and text** coach Sara Becker, whose wealth of knowledge led us through the cryptic waters of Shakespearean text, we ensured that everything was intentional and precise. We had to answer the many questions the story left for us; for instance, how stable is the Fords' marriage? What are the wives risking by hatching their plans? What happens after Herne's Oak and everyone has reconciled with each other? The stakes had to be clear: though the pranks are elaborate, they are ultimately harmless. After all, it wouldn't be much of a community if everyone is out to really get each other!

Like most Shakespeare plays, we can pull relevant and important lessons from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. For us, this story is all about finding community. Despite accessible communication and social media, it is so easy to feel lonely and isolated in today's world. Sometimes we forget that humans are social creatures who crave – and need – the company of each other. Kindness is not only a building block of our civilization, but an evolutionary trait that runs in our genes. It is with this knowledge that we bring forth our interpretation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a modern comedy imbued with a gentle reminder that inclusion, patience, and grace are essential to our society, and that forgiveness is always a virtue. That after all our misunderstandings and accusations, we can learn to come together around a bonfire and celebrate each other for who we are.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

At the end of the day, it's good fun to laugh at Falstaff for his appearance, his misjudgments, and his self-proclaimed brilliance. But the more memorable kind of laughter comes from joyous celebration, and that is the laughter, we hope, that takes over at the end of the play when the town forgives Falstaff, and in true Windsor spirit, teaches him the dance of community, compromise, and jolly good company.



# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## Classroom Activities

Discussion Questions to get chatting about *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.



**CHECK OUT THE “WHERE DO YOU STAND?” ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR MORE INFORMATION ON BRINGING THESE QUESTIONS TO LIFE IN YOUR CLASSROOM**

- 1) It's okay to deceive someone if it's for a good cause.
- 2) It's generally better to marry for financial security.
- 3) It's generally better to marry for love.
- 4) I would protect a friend's secret, even if it got me in trouble.
- 5) People should only marry within their own social groups.
- 6) It's okay to seek revenge when you've been wronged.
- 7) Family traditions are important to me.
- 8) Some of my family's ideas need to change.
- 9) It is better to tell the truth, even if it might hurt someone.
- 10) I should always follow the instructions of those in authority.
- 11) I am different to different people.
- 12) Jealousy is healthy in a romantic relationship.
- 13) It is more important to be free to do as I please than to have rules that deliver security and stability.
- 14) I have seen people change themselves to fit into a group.
- 15) I would never change myself to fit in with a group.
- 16) People can be happy dating even if they're not in love.
- 17) Older people are always out of touch with the younger generation's concerns.
- 18) I've done things even when I didn't think it was a good idea just because someone else did too.
- 19) I have learned **IMPORTANT** lessons from the bad decisions of others.
- 20) Love has caused as many problems as hate.

# THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

## News & Multimedia

Immerse yourself in the story of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.



## DIRECTOR'S NOTES

**Program notes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* director, Terri McMahon**

Whether Queen Elizabeth wanted a comedy written with her favorite theatrical character, Sir John Falstaff, in love, OR, William Shakespeare had a last minute commission to create some entertainment for a big shindig his patron was throwing...it doesn't really matter. Hundreds of years later we've got ourselves "a merry tale of sexual misadventure." *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with utterly recognizable human foibles at its heart, is meant to not only entertain, but actually open our minds – for that's what laughter does! And, Shakespeare doubles the fun with not just one, but two married women, friends in cahoots, to make Queen Elizabeth's beloved Falstaff wish his Jumbotron ego had never ever made a play for their sexual charms and family money

Over and over looking at *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for APT's summer of '23, I have asked myself, what do Alice Ford and Margaret Page get for their troubles? What kind of cashback, BOGO does the town of Windsor receive for sustaining their identity and denying Falstaff his big win? The answer for me doubles back to: 1) Laughter... ALL the loveable, idiosyncratic townspeople of Windsor ultimately turn toward laughter in response to being pranked, duped, one-upped or singed a little emotionally or monetarily. And 2) Without a Falstaff in their midst, this group of Windsor characters could never have advanced out of the ruts they were in at the top of this merry tale. Watch and see!

We need Falstaffs in our midst to show us what is important and what is not. Sometimes – many times – we secretly love what we disapprove of. As human beings, we hold contradictory realities in our hearts and minds constantly. However, I think we would all relish a little more Falstaff in ourselves: the self-promoter, the seeker of continuous pleasure, and yes, even the liar and the cheat. Because if we press the edges of civil boundaries, or even go beyond like John Falstaff, we may discover possibilities we never imagined for ourselves!

One more word about laughter. There are lots of kinds: the short-lived groaners produced by punchlines. The empathetic “oh no, not that” laughs that we often use as humble preludes to temper our own downfalls. The “we’re all stuck in this together” laughs about politics. But the one that is most enduring to our psyche is the “I know you” kind of laughter that a Mark Twain, Erma Bombeck or name-a-comedian-who-susses-out-the-awkwardness-of-life-for-you. It just makes you feel better. Makes you feel understood. William Shakespeare was an expert at drawing out the I-know-you laughs. Laughter protects our mental health!

I hope you are not only entertained with our Merry Wives – lovingly brought to you by some of the finest actors I have ever seen collected on any stage – but that it will make you want to get cozy with someone. To be a community for a bit. That it will make you want to think generously about laughing at yourself, and others around you, as we trip through this strange and wonderful gift called life together.

**Terri McMahon, Director of The Merry Wives of Windsor**

## **PORTABLE PROLOGUES PODCAST**

Host Orange Schroeder talks to the directors and actors to bring you background information that will make you appreciate each APT performance even more! Listen on Apple Podcast or Spotify! Produced by Buzz Kemper, Audio for the Arts.

**EPISODE DESCRIPTION:** APT Core Company member David Daniel, who portrays Sir John Falstaff, discusses the 2023 production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, directed by Terri McMahon, at American Players Theater in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Enhance your experience and appreciation by listening to this lively interview before or after your theater visit.

**FIND THIS PODCAST ON THE APT WEBSITE OR ON APPLE PODCASTS AND SPOTIFY!**

# SEASON SELECTS: MERRY WIVES

An APT blog series for more info about upcoming productions

FAST FACTS ON THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR AT APT

**Playing: June 10 - October 8**

**Featuring: Tracy Michelle Arnold, Dee Dee Batteast, Kelsey Brennan, Teri Brown, Nate Burger, David Daniel, Jim DeVita, Kailey Azure Green, Rasell Holt, Reginald A. Jackson, Josh Krause, Jamaque Newberry, Ronald Román-Meléndez, James Ridge**

**Genre: Shakespeare Comedy**

**Last Seen at APT: 2015**

**Go If You Liked: *Love's Labour's Lost* (2022), *The Taming of the Shrew* (2021)**

Dating back to 1597, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* comes to 2,612 lines, which puts it right above *Much Ado* at 2,581 lines, but right below *Julius Caesar* at 2,636.

The not-so-secret ingredient of *Merry Wives* that keeps audiences returning to its hijinks and heart year after year is the community of Windsor at its center. Shakespeare celebrates this town, and the regular people who call it home, in a way that was new for the time. Most of the dramatic focus of the period was cast either to the fantastical or to the noble, ruling class. (Side note: The last play Shakespeare completed prior to *Merry Wives* was *Hamlet*, and we don't need to tell you about that castle and that Prince.)

Instead, *Merry Wives* turns to the people we identify with on a fundamental level - a community made up of families and friends that would have felt familiar to audiences in 1600. The town feels not only lived in, but loved, by all the people who call it theirs.

FIND THIS POST ON THE APT WEBSITE AS PART OF OUR SEASON SELECT SERIES!

## VIDEO

The merriment has just begun! Find educational videos, play trailers, interviews and more on APT's YouTube channel that the whole class will love!



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# STUDY GUIDE CREDITS

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION BY BRANDON ZANG  
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS PROVIDED BY DAVID DANIEL  
PHOTOS BY LIZ LAUREN  
STUDY GUIDE DESIGNED BY ERIN MILLEVILLE

