

Scoundrels be Wary of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

By Robin Stroll

A rollicking good time was had by all at the opening night of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum on June 11. The performance more than fulfilled the wishes of director Ellen Geer, who hoped the comedy would provide a measure of joy during these challenging times.

The production is set in a small town in Connecticut in the 1950s, and it features lively song and dance numbers from that era. It starts off with a bang, with the full cast dancing the jitter bug.

In her Director's Notes, Ellen Geer writes that she chose the 1950s for this comedy "in a time when everything was looking perfect and very moral, but underneath...American women were, once again, beginning to question their station in life. After Covid and all the difficult and glorious change we face in life today, may doing this play be part of the healing and give you JOY!"

As the play unfolds, we meet the delightfully silly, but lovable characters. There's John Falstaff, the rascal who plans to seduce the wives of the town's most wealthy men, Mr. Ford and Mr. Page. Falstaff, however, is no match for the wily wives, who turn the tables on him, tricking him into one humiliating situation after another. Jeff Wiesen plays the rogue, Flattest, to perfection,



Emily Bridges (top) as Mrs. Ford and Willow Geer (below) as Mrs. Page kick up their heels with Jeff Wiesen as Falstaff.

preening before the mirror, patting his ample beer belly, and congratulating himself on his ability to charm women. Emily Bridges and Willow Geer light up the stage as Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page, wholeheartedly enjoying the opportunity to engage in humorous hijinks.

Jonathan Blandino plays Mr. Ford, the hapless husband prone to jealousy who comes up with his own plot to foil Falstaff. His plans go wildly awry and he provides some of the most entertaining moments of the play as his

moods swing back and forth between high anxiety and mortification.

Melora Marshall is a wickedly funny Mrs. Quickly, carrying messages between the conniving parties, happily pocketing bribes from those she is working against as well as those she is working for.

Adding to the fun are the upbeat

'50s tunes, with lyrics adapted to the times. Mrs. Quickly performs a seductive rendition of "Rag Mop". Falstaff and the two wives tap dance through the forest to the strains of "Life Could Be A Dream."

Finally, Ernestine Phillips as hostess of The Garter, the local bar, owns the stage when she belts out "Love Potion Number Nine," her gold-capped tooth sparkling in the light.

The production could be strengthened by tightening the first half. It's hard to keep track of the wealth of characters and follow the two subplots. But the second half of the production provides pure, unadulterated joy.

So, if you are looking for a respite from the cares of the world, pack a picnic and enjoy an evening of laughter under the stars in Topanga Canyon's beautiful outdoor theater.

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 North Topanga Canyon Blvd. in Topanga, midway between Malibu and the San Fernando Valley. For a complete schedule of performances, to purchase tickets and for information including up-to-date Covid19 protocols on the day of each performance, call (310) 455-3723 or visit theatricum.com.



Ernestine Philips as Hostess of The Garter conspires with Jonathan Blandino as Mr. Ford.

June to July Events

■ **Special Reception, Saturday, June 25, 12:30-7 p.m.**—Steampunk artist Kit Plumridge invites you to a unique solo exhibit on the Isle of Plumii, a world that exists outside of time. Half steampunk renegades, half apocalyptic warriors, the residents exist off the grid. Join the games, join the fun with a Treasure Hunt for Golden Rings and a sneak preview of the upcoming graphic novel, "The Isle of Plumii—Quest for Tig." Music by Carly & the Universe. Food trucks. Free tickets. Through July 3.

■ **Tyzbir & Kim Solo Exhibits, July 8-24**,—Multi-medium artist Idelle Okman Tyzbir's **works in metal, watercolor and photography reflect her life.** June Kim builds her sculptures and installations by fabricating red thread on plexiglass structures based on her social media data.

Topanga Canyon Gallery, 137 S. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga,

CA 90290. (310) 455-7909; topangacanyongallery.org.

■ **Theatricum Summer Repertory Season** continues with the opening of Ernest Thompson's revised "all new" revival of his 1981 comedy *West Side Waltz* on June 25, featuring mother Ellen Geer, her daughter, Willow Geer, and her sister, Melora Marshall.

■ **The world premiere of *Trouble the Water*** opens July 9, adapted for the stage by Ellen Geer from the 2019 award-winning historical novel by Rebecca Dwight Bruff. Gerald C. Rivers directs and leads the large cast in the role of Robert Smalls, the first African American hero of the Civil War, who commandeered a Confederate warship carrying an arsenal of rebel weaponry to the Union army, as well as fellow slaves.



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