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Falstaff OSJ Review – ‘Tis the Season to be Merry (Wives of Windsor, that is)

By Philip Hodge



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I've read the script a couple of times, but I've never seen a performance of **Shakespeare's** play, **The Merry Wives of Windsor**. I did see **Nicolai's opera** of that title this summer, but it's been 12 years since I last saw **Verdi's** masterpiece, **Falstaff**. That drought is being ended with a vengeance this fall. Yesterday, September 8, 2013, I saw **Opera San José** perform it, and I'm looking forward to seeing it again on the 15th with the other cast. Next month I'll see what **San Francisco Opera** does with it on October 15. And in December it will be on **MetHD** both live on the 14th and encore on the 18th.



Program Cover; photo by Chris Ayres

The play is quite lengthy, has numerous sub-plots, and is, of course overflowing with **Shakespeare's** wonderful language. The opera must add a lot of **Verdi's** beautiful music, so obviously much of the play must be jettisoned to end up with a 2-1/2 hour opera. **Verdi** and his librettist **Boito** have skillfully used all the tricks of the trade: elimination of whole scenes, characters, and sub-plots, combining of characters, tightening of words, and even the introduction of some material from **Henry IV** to efficiently move the plot forward. The resulting six scenes in three acts is a self-contained masterpiece with perfect harmony between the words and the music – a fact which is amazing in that **Verdi** was in his eighties and the music is entirely different from any of his earlier works.

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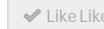
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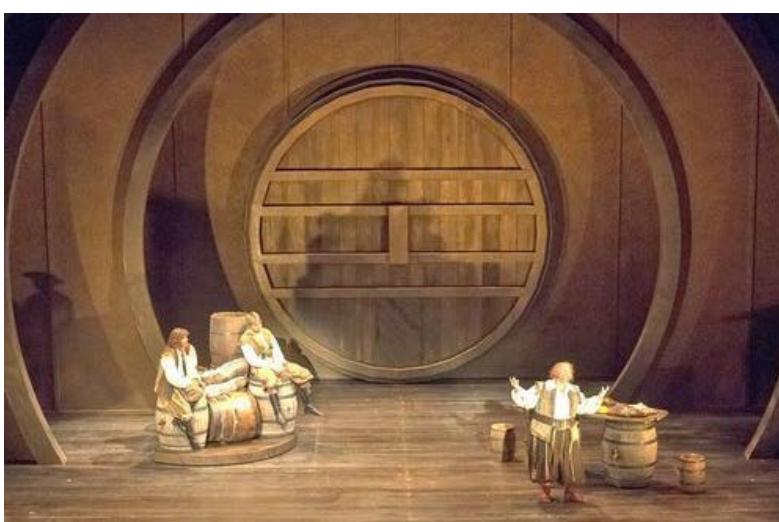




Steven Condy as Falstaff

To the world, the lead character, Falstaff*, is elderly, obese, and ridiculous – an object of scorn – an obvious butt for amusement; he is totally oblivious to all of this and regards himself a handsome, dashing nobleman in the prime of life – completely irresistible to all women. The smirk on **Steven Condy's** face in the above photo tells it all.

* The opera is double-cast; a complete list of all roles for both casts is at the end of the review.



Interior of Falstaff's "room" at the Garter Inn; Johann Schram Reed as Pistola, Chris Coyne as Bardolfo, Steven Condy as Falstaff; photo by Bob Shomler

Thanks to Director **Jose Maria Condemi** and Set Designer **Steven Kemp**, the setting for Act I, Scene



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1 is fantastic. In his straitened circumstances Sir John Falstaff cannot afford a regular room at the Garter Inn but lives in a converted giant wine barrel in the back yard. Sir John has conceived a brilliant scheme to restore his finances: “There is a young woman in the town of Windsor by the name of Alice Ford who is young, beautiful, married to a rich man, and has easy access to the family fortune; I will seduce her and she will be so grateful for my attention that she will shower me with money. And come to think of it, that same description applies to another woman, Meg Page. Man that I am, why not seduce them both?” and he has written out two letters, identical except for name. However, his two servants Pistola and Bardolfo, rogues though they be, balk at this duplicity, so he fires them and entrusts both letters to a pageboy.



(Standing): Sara Duchovnay as Nannetta and Buffy Baggott as Meg;

(Seated): Rebekah Camm as Alice and Patrice Houston as Dame
Quickly

Alice receives her letter at the start of Scene 2. Her first reaction is indignation – “How could he think me so gullible” – but she soon sees the humor in the situation and can’t wait to share it with her good friend Meg. Meanwhile Meg is rushing off to tell her friend Alice. They meet, each waving her letter and saying, “You won’t believe this, but . . .” When they discover that the letters are identical, their merriment knows no bounds, and they are happy to share the joke with Alice’s daughter Nannetta and Dame Quickly (a gossipy neighbor). They immediately decide that such insolence deserves punishment and resolve to set a trap for Sir John. Alice baits the trap with herself; she writes a note pretending to be fully taken in by his overture, declaring her own passionate love for Sir John, and asking him to call between 2 and 3 the following afternoon when her husband will be away.



Patrice Houston as Dame Quickly; Steven Condé as Falstaff

Act II, Scene 1 has two distinct episodes. First, Dame Quickly shows up and delivers the bait – and Falstaff swallows it hook, line, and sinker.



Evan Brummel as Ford

Meanwhile, Pistola and Bardolfo have told Alice's husband of Falstaff's letter to his wife. In his stupidity, Ford concludes that Alice is having an illicit affair with the plump knight and has devised a highly improbable scheme to catch them in the act. Disguised as an out-of-town visitor "Mr. Fontana", he appears right after Dame Quickly leaves and offers Sir John a bag of gold to seduce Alice! He says that he has fallen for Alice, but she has snubbed him, claiming that she is virtuous. He has heard that Sir John is irresistible to women, and he figures that if she has been seduced once, she can no longer claim virtue and hence must then give in to him. Needless to say, Sir John is ecstatic: a sop to his vanity and a purse of gold for doing what he was already going to do anyway. "I am happy to accept your proposition Mr. Fontana, and I anticipate a speedy outcome; if fact, I will be seeing

Mistress Alice at 2 this afternoon, when her stupid husband is guaranteed not to be home.



Buffy Baggott as Meg, Rebekah Camm as Alice, Patrice Houston as Dame Quickly, and Steven Condy as Falstaff; photo by Bob Shomler

Act II, Scene 2 – 1:55 PM – Room in Ford’s house – The ladies review the plan. Alice will be alone when Sir John arrives at two. She will lead him on. Meg will be secretly watching. Before things go too far she will rush in shouting that Ford is on his way. Panic will ensue – Falstaff’s real; the ladies feigned. In desperation Falstaff will hide in laundry basket. They’ll throw more dirty laundry on top of him, then summon stout serving men to carry basket to window and dump it’s contents into Thames (apparently the usual way of starting the weekly family wash). Every one will laugh.



Rebekah Camm as Alice and Steven Condy as Falstaff

Sir John arrives and the plan proceeds smoothly up to a point. However, shortly after Meg has given her false warning, Dame Quickly bursts in with the news:



James Callon as Fenton, Jonathan Smucker as Bardolfo, Zachary Altman as Ford, Chris Coyne as Bardolfo, and Robert Norman as Dr. Caius

Ford is really on his way – along with a whole gang of men. Now all the panics are real as Ford and his gang burst through the door. No time for the laundry basket. Quick! Get behind this screen. Ford pounces on basket, flings everything out of it, down to the last flimsy undergarment. No Falstaff. Gang ransack room, searching everywhere (except behind screen): under small chairs – in desk drawers, flinging all papers out in case he was hiding under them. Frustrated, they all rush off to search the rest of the house.



Marc Schreiner as Fenton and Sara Duchovnay as Nannetta

I take advantage of their momentary absence to bring you up-to-date on the opera’s sub-plot – the love between young Fenton and Nannetta. Ford has no intention of bestowing his daughter’s hand on a mere employee of his - het has promised her to his old friend Dr. Caius. Although Nannetta is miserable about this, she feels powerless against her father, but Alice reassures her: “No way will I allow a daughter of mine to marry a man old enough to be her grandfather! Don’t worry, dear, I’ll think of something.” Nannetta relaxes and the two lovers resume their slightly furtive courtship.



Cast 1: Climax of Act II; photo by Bob Shomler

Back to the action. The ladies waste no time hustling Sir John from the screen to laundry basket and covering him with dirty laundry. Nannetta and Fenton immediately scramble into the shelter and resume their smooching. As the men return and notice the screen, Alice leaves the room; the serving-men follow their instructions, pick up the basket (with difficulty) and dump its contents through that inviting window at the rear. Ford's attention is focused on the screen as kissing sounds issue from it. His men pull back the screen, expecting to face a guilty wife and desperate knight fighting for his life. When the young lovers are revealed, Ford is doubly frustrated and angrily chases Fenton off stage as the curtain falls.



Scott Bearden as Falstaff, disguised as the Black Huntsman

Act III Scene 1. Schemes are formed. Alice has explained all to her husband who has begged her forgiveness for having doubted her virtue. Together they have plotted Scheme 1 to permanently clip Falstaff's wings. Alice writes a new note to Falstaff blaming the servants for the unfortunate outcome of their rendezvous and reaffirming her love for him. “Meet me at midnight by Herne’s oak, disguised as the Black Huntsman.” The villagers are instructed to come as witches, ghosts, and goblins and be prepared to torment the Black Huntsman. Nannetta will have a special costume and be Queen of Fairies, leading a group of village girls.

Dr. Caius is becoming antsy about his chances with Nannetta and Ford reassures him with Scheme 2. He describes Nannetta's costume in detail and instructs Caius to grab and hold her; before the evening is over he will publicly marry them in disguise. Dame Quickly overhears this scheme and hastens to Alice and Nannetta to thwart it with their own Scheme 3. Bardolfo, who has his own grudge against Caius, has agreed to wear a duplicate Fairy Queen costume and allow himself to be “found” by Dr. Caius. Fenton, disguised as a monk, will find Nannetta, and the couple will stay hidden until just before the wedding. When they do appear Alice will ask Ford to make it a double wedding.



Cast 1: Double Wedding; photo by Bob Shomler

In Scene 2, all 3 schemes progress according to plan, with Fenton paired up with Fairy Queen #1 and Dr. Caius with Fairy Queen #2. After the ceremony is complete with both couples legally married (apparently 21st century United States still hasn't quite caught up to 15th century England with regard to same-sex marriage) all disguises are removed – Ford is embarrassed, Dr. Caius is furious, Falstaff is happy not to be the only fool at the party, and everyone else is delighted. Ford gracefully accepts the *fait accompli* and blesses his daughter and new son-in-law, and Falstaff leads the company in the magnificent double grand fugue – the whole world is foolish; we are all a big joke.

And there you have it. An ideal combination of humor and music inextricably bound together. A real challenge for any opera company to provide singing, acting, and orchestra worthy of what **Verdi** and **Boito** have provided and direction to make it entirely self-consistent. A challenge that **Opera San José** has met with utmost success. When the whole is so great, I see no point in trying to single any particular aspect or person for individual praise. Come experience it yourself on one of the six dates listed in the table below.



Act III Finale: James Callon as Fenton, Cecilia Violetta López as Nannetta, Lisa Chavez as Meg Page, Nicole Birkland as Dame Quickly, Steve Howe as the Innkeeper (supernumery), Jennifer Forni as Alice Ford, Zachary Altman as Ford, Jonathan Smucker as Bardolfo, Silas Elash as Pistola, Robert Norman as Dr. Caius

My review is based on seeing Cast 1, but knowing **Opera San José** I am confident that I will equally enjoy hearing Cast A when I go again this Sunday, September 15. If you come then (you are coming to some performance, aren't you?), look for me in seat B1 during the first intermission.



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CAST	A	I
	Dates	I
Role	9/15, 9/20	9/17, 9/22
Falstaff	Scott Bearden	Steven Condy
Fenton	James Callon	Marc Schreiner
Alice Ford	Jennifer Forni	Rebekah Camm
Ford	Zachary Altman	Evan Brummel
Bardolfo	Jonathan Smucker	Chris Coyne
Pistola	Silas Elash	Johann Schram Reed
Meg Page	Lisa Chavez	Buffy Baggott
Dame Quickly	Nicole Birkland	Patrice Houston
Dr. Caius	Robert Norman	Michael Desnoyers
Nannetta	Cecilia Violetta	Sara Duchovnay
Innkeeper (super)	Steve Howe	Steve Howe
Page (super)	Chloe Allen	Conner Chancey

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