



Utah Shakespeare Festival Plays to Standing Ovations as Opening Week Audiences Applaud Bloody Good Season

by Jim Volz. Written on 2012-07-04. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (2012, Utah Shakespeare Festival, USA).

OPENING SIX SHOWS IN THREE DAYS TO SIX STANDING OVATIONS AND THOUSANDS OF AUDIENCE members is an exhausting experience for producers, actors, production artists, audiences and critics alike. Surprisingly, it's often hard to sleep in the ultra-quiet, cozy little town of Cedar City, Utah when haunted with the disparate visions of bloody hands and heads from *Titus Andronicus*, strains of 'One Day More' from *Les Misérables*, and the comic antics courtesy of the Molière inspired *Scapin*. All are now playing in repertory with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Mary Stuart*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the Tony Award-winning Utah Shakespeare Festival through September 1, 2012.

For audiences wanting to experience the true glory of repertory theatre (hard to find in American Theatre in the 21st century), Utah Shakespeare offers a poignant, seldom-produced *Mary Stuart*, a satisfying *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the riotous, no doubt sleeper hit of the season, *Scapin*, and an intimate staging of the blockbuster musical *Les Misérables*. Add two visually stunning, straightforward Shakespeares to the trip (*Titus Andronicus* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*) and visitors will understand the true power of theatre repertory in the hands of a savvy company with seasoned artistic and producing leadership and many of America's best actors, directors and designers.

What is it about repertory that's exciting? Consider the audience's amazement in watching a lying, child-abusing, disgusting Southern creature (played brilliantly by Max Robinson) in the Harper Lee inspired play, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in the afternoon and returning in the evening to see the same actor play a cheeky French scallywag and bring down the house as Thenardier, the comic relief, in *Les Misérables*. Even the tragic Fantine in *Les Misérables* (Melinda Pfundstein) bounces back in time from matinee to evening performance to delight audiences as one of the "merry wives!"

The Merry Wives of Windsor: The would-be, wannabe womanizing Falstaff is simply a rogue, a rake, a scoundrel, a cad—so why do audiences love him so? In Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the main plot is simple—the portly, cash-needy, egotistical knight devises a scheme to seduce two wives in hopes of securing their husband’s money. Unfortunately for Sir John Falstaff, the two women compare the love letters he sends them, discover his presumptuous intentions and joyfully plot their revenge! Revenge has evidently replaced romance as the feel-good audience-thrill of the 21st century. The dastardly soap opera-ish *Dallas* is back, revenge novels rule, first run movies are all about payback and one of the hottest new television shows this season is simply called, *Revenge*. This makes the 16th century *Merry Wives* ultra-timely and Falstaff the equivalent of an aging rock-star—pathetically lovable despite his philandering, egotistical ways.

In director Peter Amster’s hands, Utah Shakespeare Festival’s 51st Anniversary opening production by the Bard is in steady hands. Though the pacing is sometimes slow and the casting is uneven, the actors barrel through, find quite a few laughs and Falstaff is appropriately chastised and forgiven. Roderick Peeples is a boisterous, rowdy and delightful Falstaff, Melinda Pfundstein is charming as the playfully conniving Mistress Page and Matt Zambrano is amusing as the French physician (Doctor Caius) who hopes to marry her daughter, Anne.

The show’s best moments are when the jealous Francis Ford (pithily played by John Preston) barges into his own home (twice!) intent on catching Falstaff and his wife in a compromising position. Preston is apoplectically perplexed, the audience delights in his failed attempts and Shakespeare cleverly offers up two buffoons (Falstaff and Ford) and the promised merriment.

Robert Mark Morgan’s scene design serves the play well and the final haunted fairy scene (with Falstaff in horns as Herne the Hunter) is a lovely collaboration between Costume Designer Jennifer Caprio, Lighting Designer Donna Ruzika and Sound Designer Barry G. Funderburg. The production is a visual treat and the company rallies to produce a solid, straightforward Shakespeare season opener. The show will no doubt tighten up as the season progresses and the USF’s loyal opening night audience was enthusiastically supportive—rewarding the company with a standing ovation.

Utah Shakespeare is one of the world’s premiere Shakespeare theatres—perhaps why they have the corner on the best Bard website: www.bard.org. In season opening ceremonies, the company acknowledged the legendary work of Founder and Executive Producer Emeritus Fred C. Adams. With Executive Director R. Scott Philips and Artistic Directors David Ivers and Brian Vaughn at the helm, Utah Shakespeare is more than ready to take its place as one of the best regional theatres in America as well as a champion of Shakespeare in production worldwide.

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