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## Hometown charm suits Bard

Updated 2 hours ago

Get ready for the "Scary Wives of Prescott."

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's *Trouble on Dibble Street*, a Prescott-based adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is chock full of wit, slapstick and Fort Town in-jokes, a fitting tribute to the town's bicentennial, while remaining in many ways true to the Bard's original.

The play, the festival's first-ever departure from an actual Shakespearean script, opened Saturday at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre.

Written by Kingston playwright and Queen's drama professor John Lazarus, the play sets the *Merry Wives* story in 1910 Prescott, where the infamous Sir John Falstaff becomes an aging veteran of the Fenian Raids, who even in his prime seems to have demonstrated the same cowardice the character displays in the *Henry* plays.

In desperate need of funds, Falstaff launches a scheme to woo two Prescott women, Meg Page and Alice Ford, in order to get his hands "on their purse-strings and their corset strings as well."

The wives discover this ill-executed plot immediately, and together scheme to lead Falstaff along in order to humiliate him.

Meanwhile, both husbands are alerted to the scheme by Falstaff's recently laid-off sergeant and ensign. Alice's husband, Frank Ford, flies into a jealous rage and launches a scheme of his own to trap the aging knight.

Woven into this hilarity is a subplot involving the Pages' daughter, Anne, who wishes to marry a poor farmer while each of her parents scheme to wed her to their own choices, both of them ridiculously unsuitable suitors.

Lazarus's story, although it replaces Shakespeare's language with dialogue more fitting for early 20th-century Upper Canada, remains nonetheless fairly close to the original story, with, of course, all the allusions to place turned into local references.

Figuring prominently in this local content is Wisser's Distillery, the product of which is served repeatedly to Falstaff and his men.

("Sorry, boys, but Wisser's doesn't hire fellows who are likely to drink all the merchandise," hostess Hazel tells Falstaff's two unemployed henchmen.)

The production is anchored by a remarkably talented cast.

Thousand Islands Playhouse mainstay Mo Bock is ideally suited for Falstaff, bringing to the role the kind of ridiculous bluster he has imparted to many a comic figure in Gananoque.

Shakespeare Festival regular Alix Sideris is similarly well cast as Alice Ford, the housewife who discovers her talent for adventure and deception through these comic misadventures, while Colleen Winton is spot-on as co-conspirator Meg Page.

Equally up to the task are the husbands, Daniel Giverin as the easygoing George Page and Pierre Brault as the jealous Frank Ford.

Notably, *Dibble Street* features this season's *Macbeth* (Kris Joseph) and *Lady Macbeth* (Kerry Ann Doherty) in exaggerated comic roles, respectively Dr. Caillou and Mrs. Quickly, a contrast the pair handle with skill.

Falstaff's men, Bardolph (Michael MacDonald) and Pistol (Brent Buchanan) are a joy to watch -and listen to,

with enough puns to make even Shakespeare proud.

The self-proclaimed "Scary Wives of Prescott" embark on a final scheme to humiliate Falstaff, assisted by the talents of some fine young dancers playing town children, leading to a very Shakespearean ending that has echoes of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Indeed, while there is little Shakespearean language in Dibble Street, the play is replete with echoes of the Bard, thrown in by Lazarus in comic tribute to the great playwright.

There is Pistol's exaggerated pseudo-Shakespeare, dismissed as nuttiness by the good residents of Prescott.

But the play is also filled with well-known lines from other Shakespeare plays, many of them staged at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre in previous years.

"I do begin to perceive that I have been made an ass," says Falstaff at a crucial moment, an allusion to Bottom's famous moment in A Midsummer Night's Dream that is suited to Falstaff's attire at that moment.

Earlier, Bock is given the pleasure of twisting a famous speech from The Merchant of Venice.

"The quality of whiskey is not strained," he opines, while imbibing some of Wiser's finest.

"Rather, it is distilled." Dibble Street may be a departure from Shakespeare, but in many ways it is less a departure from the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival than Macbeth.

The latter, which opens tonight, will for the first time, take the local audience away from comedy entirely, into the equally rich territory of Shakespearean tragedy.

Dibble Street, meanwhile, keeps the festival rooted in that comedic tradition, serving up Shakespeare in form if not in language.

A hundred years after this trouble is over, it is a street well worth visiting.

Trouble on Dibble Street runs until mid-August. More information about this season and its schedule is available online at

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