

St. Lawrence EMC

Rave reviews for Prescott-centric play on the Merry Wives

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BY CONAN DE VRIES

EMC Entertainment - What Shakespeare couldn't quite pull off, it would appear, John Lazarus can.

The early reviews of *Trouble on Dibble Street*, an original play by Lazarus, now featured at Prescott's St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival, have been unfailingly positive - quite a departure from the consensus as to its source material, Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

"It's a mess," says Lazarus, a professor of drama at Queen's University, who has been writing plays for nearly four decades.

Literary scholars regard *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as, at best, unfinished, and while any string of words Shakespeare cared to put to paper were still better than most, the bard wrote *Merry Wives* in the same year he wrote his masterpiece, *Hamlet*, so why such a difference in quality?

BLAME THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND.

Having seen one of Shakespeare's earlier history plays, featuring the character of Falstaff, Queen Elizabeth I requested that the playwright come up with a comedy featuring the same character falling in love. She wanted to see the finished product, however, in two weeks.

It is to this near-impossible royal request that most scholars of English literature attribute the uncharacteristic flaws in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Five-hundred years later, however, the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival decided it would make a silk purse out of Shakespeare's sow's ear.

"Ian called it a goofy idea, but I thought it was a great idea," says Lazarus, recalling the day two years ago that the festival's artistic director, Ian Farthing, first ventured the idea of basing an original, Prescott-centric play on the *Merry Wives*.

"It was an ideal play to adapt. It's full of interesting characters. It seemed like a good match," says Lazarus.

EIGHT DRAFTS

Eight drafts later, *Trouble on Dibble Street*, set in turn-of-the-century Prescott, was ready for the stage.

"The first draft was pretty much line for line *The Merry Wives of Windsor* written in modern-day English," says Lazarus. "It was like the *Merry Wives of Prescott*."

As he learned more about the historic little town by the river, though, and began to weave Prescott and Elizabethan England together, a unique and novel story developed out of

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Conan de Vries, St. Lawrence EMC
Alix Sideris, as Alice Ford, gets an unexpected kiss from Mo Bock, as Sir John Falstaff, in *Trouble on Dibble Street*, a new, original play based on Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, being performed at Prescott's St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival.

Shakespeare's reluctant misstep.

"Part of the fun for me was to have two years to fix Shakespeare," says Lazarus.

With his commission complete and rave reviews pouring in for Trouble on Dibble Street, the first play performed at the Shakespeare Festival not written by the festival's namesake, Lazarus is content to satisfy himself with a job well done - almost.

He hopes Farthing will consider renaming the annual event the St. Lawrence Shakespeare and Lazarus Festival.

"I'd gladly take third billing," joked Lazarus, "even though St. Lawrence never wrote a play."

The 62-year old writer and teacher, a graduate of Canada's prestigious National Theatre School, has spent a career among the first order of this country's playwrights, authoring more than a dozen plays and seeing his work performed in major theatres throughout Canada and abroad.

LIGHT AND COMEDIC

Though he has assiduously avoided sticking to one genre and tilling the same literary field over and over again, he has found his work tending towards the light and comedic.

"I've been at this a long time now, and there have been some trends popping up in my work despite me," he says.

That ought to change by the time his next work is ready for the stage. A confessional, personal show based on his experiences as a young man in his twenties living in Vancouver, this play will reveal much more about the author than can be gleaned from prior works, such as Babel Rap, Dreaming and Duelling, The Late Blumer or Village of Idiots.

"It's been quite bracing," says Lazarus. "It's scaring me a little bit, but that's good."

One may not learn much about the author, or about anything really, from watching Trouble on Dibble Street, but one thing Lazarus can guarantee is that the audience will be entertained. In the end, that's all Shakespeare ever wanted to do. He wanted his audience to keep coming back for more.

Putting people in seats has been something the organizers of the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival have proven particularly good at, and it's something that factored into Lazarus' decision to take their commission.

"I've been a huge fan of theirs from the beginning, long before they hired me," he says. "I think they're fantastic."

He credits the large, 23-actor cast and sterling direction by both Farthing and his Queen's colleague Craig Walker for making the most out of his lines and turning his two years of work into two hours of top-drawer entertainment.

"Everyone in the show is doing really fine work."

For a performance schedule and ticket prices, people are invited to visit the festival's website at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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