



# The Merry Wives of (West) Windsor

(Pettronello Gardens Amphitheater, Princeton, N.J.;  
300 seats; \$10)

By [ROBERT L. DANIELS](#)

A Princeton Rep Shakespeare Festival presentation of the play in two acts by [William Shakespeare](#). Directed by Victoria Liberatori.

[Frank Ford](#) - Donald Kimmer  
Mrs. Ford - Nell Gwynn  
Mrs. Page - Victoria Stilwell  
Sir John Falstaff - [Dennis McLaughlin](#)  
Dr. Caius - Jeffrey Guyton  
[George Page](#) - Van Zeiler  
Master Fenton - [Michael Sorvino](#)  
Bardolph - [Matthew Morgan](#)  
Pistol - Henning Hegland  
Nym - Chuck McMahan  
Robin - Kelly Forman  
Robert - Marcel Schachinger  
John - Michael Sheetz  
Anne Page - Karen Freer  
Sir [Hugh Evans](#)-Wiswesser - [Dan Matisa](#)  
Mistress Quickly - Carolyn Smith  
Jackie Rugby - Megan Catherine  
Robert Shallow - Richard Bourg  
Abraham Slender - [Christopher Franciosa](#)  
Simple - Kohli Hessler  
Broadcaster - [Marty Moss](#)-Coane

**Princeton landmarks and the small nearby community of West Windsor serve as the locale for an often-boisterous update of William Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor." The Bard's frothy spree was apparently whipped up in a fortnight to please Queen Elizabeth's request to bring Sir John Falstaff back to life for a bit of holiday fun. The inspired gesture of Princeton Rep artistic director Victoria Liberatori finds frequent local news flashes from commentator Marty Moss-Coane**

**of NPR's "Radio Times." It's an amusing conceit that adds a little spunk to a cumbersome comedy that needs all the help it can get to succeed.**

There's more local color. Sir John hangs out in the Nassau Inn, a popular Princeton watering hole, and the Princeton Junction rail platform finds principal characters milling about, waiting for the train to come in. Perhaps the most familiar sight is the roadside sign that warns motorists of a deer crossing.

Purely farcical, the play is a rather genial folly, and played under the stars it serves as a most entertaining summer funfest. The cheerful women, who stage a bogus seduction to outwit a foolish knight, were suitably amusing. Mrs. Ford is played by Nell Gwynn, who last season appeared as Regan in ["King Lear."](#) She is no less manipulative this time around, but far more endearing. Mrs. Page is played by Victoria Stilwell with foxy allure. Out for their brisk morning constitutional, they set a prankish trap for the fat fool.

The Slender of Christopher Franciosa is a quite giddy fool, and his performance is nimbly heightened by a skinny figure of a frame. There is also the presence of a most accommodating Chihuahua comfortably cradled in his arms.

There are nice supportive turns by Michael Sorvino as an eager Princeton grad and a romantic opportunist named Fenton; Jeffrey Guyton as a meddling doctor; and Matthew Morgan, Henning Hegland and Chuck McMahon as Falstaff's cronies Bardolph, Pistol and Nym, respectively. Carolyn Smith, as the go-between, Mistress Quickly, brings a bright sense of balance and order to the gossipy bar hounds.

Sadly, though he's portly enough, Dennis McLaughlin misses the bawdy grandeur of Falstaff. His voice fails to match his girth, he doesn't move comfortably, and his perf was marred by uncomfortable spasms of coughing. Falstaff's blowsy dignity, his passion for the glass and his roguish romanticism were embarrassingly muted. Chalk it up to a severe case of bronchitis.

Credit is due to choreographer Don Bill for the hip curtain call. The cast danced their way through bows and ultimately joined in infectious disco unity that very nearly had the aud dancing on the amphitheater steps.

Set, [Tim J. Armhein](#); costumes, Marie Miller; lighting, Troy A. Martin-O'Shia; sound, Shane Rettig; choreography, Don Bill; stage manager, Glenn Cooley. Artistic director, Liberatori, Opened Aug. 2, 2003. Reviewed Aug. 8. Runs through Aug. 17. Running time: 2 HOURS, 35 MIN.