

Knight on the town

Review: Shakespeare Under The Stars

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by Michael Wilkins

IN his day, Shakespeare was considered a creator of popular culture, an artist catering to the masses whose talent lay in a unique insight into human nature.

This legacy makes the current version of his *Merry Wives of Windsor*, performed in Queens Gardens in Townsville, both a tribute to the Bard and a triumph for our local Shakespeare company, Shakespeare Under the Stars.

Drawing influences from a vast tapestry of contemporary artists including, believe it or not, Beyonce and the Spice Girls, plus film legends like Brando and Eastwood, this is a rollicking, well-performed production which makes the 400-year-old comedy accessible to a modern audience.

Wives is the tale of portly knight Falstaff (a suitably gross John Goodson) pursuing two wealthy married matrons of the city, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, who discover they are both objects of the errant knight's unwanted affections upon receipt of identical love letters, and together plot to toy with him through a series of embarrassing schemes.

At the same time Mistress Ford's jealous husband, played with maniacal intensity by the wonderful Brendan O'Connor (think Basil Fawlty crossed with pirate Jack Sparrow), spends much of the performance in



UNDER THE MERRY MOON: Cast members of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (front) Taylah Smith and Emma Smith, with (back, from left) James Thomasson, Anna Wallace, Campbell Smith, Brittany Santariga and Joseph Hallows Photo: CHRISY MAGUIRE

slapstick attempts to catch the knight in his home, only to be foiled by his wife (Arminelle Fleming) and the deft hand of '50s-inspired Mistress Page (a larger-than-life Terri Brabon). The ensuing interplay by the ensemble is a laugh-a-minute creation with some truly inspired scenes.

Watch for the one-eighth speed sword fight between the constantly furious Dr Caius (a Gallic tongue-twisting Bernie Lanigan)

and parson Hugh (Todd Barty). O'Connor's take on *The Godfather* is also a treat. As a showcase for emerging talent, *Wives* also excelled, with the side-story of the Pages' daughter Anne (Anna Wallace) being married off to the hapless Slander (James Thomasson), revealing two young stars of the future. Anne Page's pursuit of true love with Fenton (Campbell Smith) added a great teen angst element to the night.

Timing really is every-

thing in comedy and this troupe has it down pat.

There's a lot of movement around the Queen's Gardens stage and the company perfectly manages what must at times be a difficult environment in which to perform, although competing with falling mangoes and noisy wildlife adds to the charm of the evening. There's nerd love, bad guys and good guys... and look for singing troupe The Serviettes, who punctuate the performance with timely

renditions of pop favourites. If you've never seen Shakespeare, this is a terrific introduction. If you're an aficionado, go along and see how his work will be carried into the future - by original interpretation and engaging the audience.

Shakespeare Under the Stars' *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is at Queens Gardens until September 24, nightly at 6.30pm (5pm on Sunday September 18). For tickets go to www.shakespeare-under-the-stars.com.