Dear Friend,

I am pleased to introduce the final issue of *Asides* of this 25th Anniversary Season. I have many fond memories of directing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1990, starring Pat Carroll as a very funny and groundbreaking Falstaff. It was lovely to read Norman Allen’s walk down memory lane with Pat and some other famous Falstaffs from STC's history, including the star of this production, David Schramm.

I am also pleased to welcome British director Stephen Rayne to STC to stage this quintessentially English play. He has directed for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre and many other companies around the world. Stephen understands the many ways in which this play—Shakespeare’s only play to be set in Elizabethan England—reflects on English society.

Stephen has decided to set the play in historical Windsor, just after the end of World War I. There are a number of historical parallels between Shakespeare’s 16th century and the early 20th century in Windsor, and Stephen has found a way to make the play speak across different eras. It’s sure to be different from any other *Merry Wives* we’ve done, and I’m very excited to see it.

I hope to see you in the theatre to celebrate the end of this anniversary season, and that I will see you again during our 2012-2013 Season.

Warm regards,

Michael Kahn
Artistic Director, Shakespeare Theatre Company

The Creation of Windsor
A note from the director
by Stephen Rayne

There is a great deal of conjecture about when *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was written. According to one school of thought, the play was written for Elizabeth I’s Garter Feast, held at Westminster Palace in 1597. In the play, Falstaff belongs to the Order of the Garter, and the order’s chivalric motto is quoted at the end of the play. There is also a theory that the play was written years later, in 1602, when a Quarto bearing the play’s second, longer title appeared: *The Most Pleasant and Conceited Comedy of Sir John Falstaff and The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Along with a number of scholars I believe the play is actually two plays, joined together later. Shakespeare probably wrote a masque for the 1597 Garter Feast, which survives in acts 4 and 5. These two acts are written mainly in verse, while the rest of the play is in prose. This part was probably written around 1602, most likely to capitalize on the success of the characters of Falstaff and his followers, who were made famous in the *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays. *Merry Wives* is unique, the only play of Shakespeare’s to be set in his own contemporary society. It is a world in which the economic imperative is never far from the surface, one where subterfuge driven by greed is the accepted norm.

There’s another theory, that Queen Elizabeth commissioned Shakespeare to write a play for her depicting “Falstaff in love.” Now, anybody who has read the play knows that only a small part of the play is about love, and Falstaff’s attempts on the merry wives have precious little to do with it!

The play is not really about Falstaff in love, but Falstaff in the poorhouse. By the late 1590s, England was close to being bankrupt. Since Elizabeth had assumed the throne in 1558, the country had been at war with Spain and Portugal. In 1594, England became embroiled in another war with Ireland, which didn’t end until 1603. These wars drained the finances of the exchequer, and Elizabeth was forced to grant favors to members of her court in return for their support. It was a gravy time for those at court. But for the ordinary man in the street, taxes had gone up, and the quality of life had gone down. The England that soldiers were returning to at the end of the century was very different than the one of the 1570s and 1580s.

Those decades had marked the Age of Discovery. Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake and others had plundered gold-laden Spanish galleons in the name of war. But they had also begun trading with the New World and the Far East, returning with great riches and a whole new vocabulary. It’s no accident that Falstaff makes reference in this play to Guiana, as well as to the East and...
West Indies, as part of his get-rich-quick schemes. All of a sudden, anybody, not just those born into the royalty, could make their fortune through trade.

Adventurers such as Drake and Raleigh were emblematic of a rising middle class which was transforming England. Between 1500 and 1600, the population of London grew 400 percent, from less than 50,000 to more than 200,000. More than half of the population of England was under 25 years old, and many of them would become more prosperous many times over than their parents’ generation.

Merry Wives is built around these two new social types of Elizabethan society. Destitute soldiers and knights had returned from war to find an England in which it was difficult to earn a penny. Meanwhile, the rising merchant and middle classes were earning the money previously reserved for the now withered aristocracy. Falstaff and his followers, rather than being in love, are forced to cheat and lie to make a living, with predictably farcical results. The Fords and the Pages, on the other hand, are characters we recognize as being rather like us. They are married couples from middle-class homes, who only want the very best for themselves and their children.

All of this brings me to our production. We’re setting the play at the end of the First World War, which I believe offers a vibrant window into the social world of the play and makes it more accessible to a modern audience. In 1919, just as 300 years before, England was a bankrupt, postwar country, in which soldiers returning from the battlefield found themselves displaced by a rising middle class; in 1919, the British Empire was still at its zenith. In the late 16th century, it was just getting started. The two periods bookend each other in a way, and throw light on the quintessential Englishness of this comedy.

Falstaff, the title character of the 1602 version of the play, and the “merry wives,” who are given prominence in the Folio, are all English. But they come from different social worlds, and they regard each other from either side of a great cultural and historical divide. Falstaff represents the Old World, and Shakespeare is quite hard on the fat old knight in this play, almost as if he knows that the post-Restoration stage will gravitate to tales of merry wives. Mistresses Ford and Page, meanwhile, are wise, powerful and independent, created very much in Elizabeth’s image. And they are surrounded by a rich panoply of characters who delineate the many aspects of the English experience. You could make a good argument, in fact, that Merry Wives stages modern English society for the first time, while depicting the twilight of an earlier age.

The twilight of the First World War is perhaps the earliest date at which our contemporary version of English identity emerges. In fact, the early 20th century is when the House of Windsor itself came into being. In 1917, King George V changed the name of the English monarchy from its original German surname. Lucky for us: “The Merry Wives of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha” just doesn’t have the same ring.

Audiences have loved Sir John Falstaff since Shakespeare first put him on stage, four centuries ago, in Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2. Indeed, the character was so popular that the playwright brought him back for a comic romp in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Audiences at the Shakespeare Theatre Company have been no less enthusiastic, enjoying a series of Falstaffs, each uniquely portrayed.

Under Michael Kahn’s direction, Pat Carroll turned the Falstaff of Merry Wives (1990) into a cross-dressing triumph, with Oscar nominee Paul Winfield taking over in the Free For All production that summer. Company member Ted van Griethuysen played Falstaff in Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 (2004), as did David Sabin, who played it in Kahn’s acclaimed single-evening adaptation (1994), as well as in Merry Wives (1998).

Director Stephen Rayne’s current production offers a new Falstaff, but another familiar face. David Schramm is known to TV audiences for his long run in Wings, and he studied the classics at The Juilliard School under Kahn’s tutelage.

“Even at a very young age, we were being prepared for roles that our instructors thought we were destined to play,” Schramm explains during a break in rehearsals.

“I was at Juilliard from 1967 to 1972, but I was already hearing that I
The production is set in the years following World War One. “Think Downton Abbey,” Schramm says, referring to the production’s 1919 time period. “It’s that moment when women have taken jobs usually done by men. The soldiers come home and say, ‘get back in the kitchen’ and the women say, ‘I don’t think so but thanks for the invite.’ It’s perfect because Falstaff thinks he can manipulate the women in the play but—surprise, surprise—they turn around and manipulate him.”

The key for Schramm is finding the truth of the character, not just the comedy. “In parts like this, you have to find a way to be as real as possible, and to be truly hurt by what happens. Humor and pain are part of the same equation. This horribly complex and painful situation is also incredibly amusing.”

Carroll took a similar approach, making sure that her Falstaff was more than a comic buffoon, or an actor’s gimmick. “Frank Rich [of the New York Times] really got what I was trying to do with the role,” she recalls. “He saw that in the last scene a tragic character appears. That thrilled me. I don’t keep reviews but I kept that one.”

Rich wrote of Carroll’s Falstaff, “Here is a weary, cynical clown, out of resources and near death... When this Falstaff receives his final comeuppance, in the act 5 forest masquerade that requires him to don a deer’s head and be ‘made an ass,’ the ridicule he suffers carries an unusually cruel aftertaste.”

Van Griethuysen, a member of the Company since its first season, states a clear preference for the Falstaff of Henry IV. “I sometimes think that Falstaff and Hamlet are Shakespeare’s greatest creations,” he says. “In a way, they complete each other, comment on each other and, at some point are very alike: in depth, diversity and humanity. We are all human but they just take it more seriously.”

Sabin, who can speak from the perspective of both plays, goes even further, identifying Henry IV as a forerunner to the psychological complexity of Chekhov. He finds particular power in the moment when Prince Hal chooses royal duty over personal affection, casting his beloved Falstaff aside.

Sabin explains, “That moment is the confirmation of what Falstaff has always known but refused to face. Some nights it brought gasps from the audience, often followed by a brief silence and then sustained applause. Some nights I could barely go on with the rest of the scene, and often it would take me one or two more scenes to collect myself.”

Sabin’s portrayal was equally moving to his fellow actors. Van Griethuysen, who played King Henry in that production, recalls, “One night, as I was walking to the stage during one of Falstaff’s scenes, I stopped short, in amazement, listening. I thought, ‘Where did that come from?’ He is like a blaze of light and energy.”

In Merry Wives, four years later, Sabin uncovered a very different Falstaff, playing him as a 1950s lounge singer in a gold lamé jacket and tilting toupee. Washington Post critic Lloyd Rose wrote that he was “preceded by a belly so immense it’s practically a second character.” Sabin noted at the time, “My goal in this production is to see to it that the audience has at least as much fun as I do. That’s the object of farce: to make people laugh as hard as they can.”

Schramm seems pleased to join a lineage that stretches back four centuries, and includes such actors as Anthony Quayle, Ralph Richardson and Orson Welles. “Such a diversity of great classic comedians have played the part,” he says. “For a character actor of a certain age and girth, it’s one of the great Shakespeare roles of all time.”

That greatness, Schramm says, lies in the audience’s ability to recognize elements of Falstaff in themselves. “We all go around with beliefs that are delusional,” he points out. “We all think it’s going to work out the way we want it to. The frailty of this man is so large that it encompasses all of humanity.”

Norman Allen’s work has been commissioned and produced by the Shakespeare Theatre Company, the Kennedy Center, the Karlin Music Theatre in Prague and the Olney Theatre Center. As former playwright-in-residence at Signature Theatre he premiered Nijinsky’s Last Dance (Helen Hayes Award, Outstanding Play) and In the Garden (Charles MacArthur Award) with subsequent productions throughout the United States, Europe and South Africa. He has written on the arts and culture for WAMU-FM, The Washington Post, Smithsonian magazine and other national publications. His work for the theatre is published by Playscripts, Inc.
In the fall of 1919, a cheeky American divorcée became the unlikely emblem of the volatile atmosphere in postwar Britain. Lady Nancy Astor, the second wife of Lord Waldorf Astor of Plymouth, decided that she would run for her new husband’s seat in Parliament. Just a few years earlier the idea of a woman in Parliament would have been ludicrous, but she had the support and admiration of the newly enfranchised female electorate and a society that was rapidly transforming before her eyes.

Directly confronting her critics with a “merry mixing” attitude, Lady Astor appealed to men and women alike, campaigning with dogged charm, dauntless energy and “unlimited effrontery.” She marched unabashed into the poorest parts of the district wearing gloves and pearls, kissing anyone who scowled at her and then declaring that she was “going back to one of my beautiful palaces to sit down in my tiara and do nothing and when I roll out in my car I will splash you all with mud and look the other way.” Her confidence and forthright manner proved indomitable. By winning the election, Lady Astor not only represented the changing times; she showed women that even a merry wife of Plymouth could forge a new place in the world, using the very qualities that made her female.

It’s no secret that World War I rocked the most basic foundations of Europe, decimating the physical terrain and the mental landscape of a generation. The year 1919 was strange: a caesura between the dull horror of WWI and the chaos of the Jazz Age. The older generation struggled to pick up the pieces, while the young yearned to forget and move on.

The world was on the brink of modernity. Soon radio and film would transform society; modernism would transform art and literature; electricity and manufacturing would transform daily life. The middle class was gaining power as the aristocracy’s authority collapsed. Men who fought the horrific war were deeply changed; but women, too, confronted new challenges that sparked a change in perspective, enabling them to imagine a different life for themselves and their children.

Throughout Britain, major changes in family life led to new opportunities for wives and mothers. Lower infant mortality rates, combined with a wider understanding of birth control, led to smaller families and less demand on mothers. Having control over their fertility literally gave years of life back to women. Family life also became more democratic. Freed from constant childcare, mothers were able to find opportunities to work in many professions.

Unmarried women of a younger generation also began to question the limits that had been imposed on them before the war. Those who had gone to work at munitions factories and on the docks struggled with the mandate to return to pre-war life as domestic laborers. Other women who had gained experience in skilled trades as engineers or in white-collar professions were forced back to unskilled industries. War work had given women new skill sets and the novelty of financial independence—and with that, a new sense of confidence and self-determination. Expectations had changed. When the Sex Disqualification Act of 1919 finally allowed women access to many professions, thousands chose a life of independence that would have been impossible before the war.

World War I’s effect on British women was complex, but the sum of all parts was a gradual but sweeping social change. Soon, Britain would hurtle headlong into the Jazz Age. The upheaval of the 20th century would accelerate transformations on all sides of society. But Lady Astor and the women of her day had found a new confidence, simply by realizing that they had the ability to ask for more out of life. “We are not asking for superiority, for we’ve always had that,” Lady Astor quipped. “All we ask is equality.”
Building Bonny Britain:
Merry Wives’ Set Designer shares his inspiration for the production’s scenic design.

by Daniel Lee Conway

The images shown here represent just a few of the hundreds of photos, illustrations and paintings that my team assembled as inspiration for the scenic design of our production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The ‘look’ of the world of Windsor in 1919 was a mixture of more than a few design styles and influences. In several of the images, you can see the lingering Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic as well as the geometric style of the emerging Art Deco movement. We looked at covers of *Vogue* magazine, late Edwardian wallpapers and British military recruitment posters to find motifs that we incorporated into the design of the overall and individual settings.

I worked to match design styles with particular characters. The look of The Garter Inn, the headquarters of Falstaff, is in keeping with the Victorian/Edwardian love of the Tudor revival style. Wallpapers for the Ford and Page homes were influenced by late Edwardian and early Art Deco graphics. Any designer will tell you that mixing styles in a single set design can be a dangerous route, but my hope is that this visual potpourri, united by a single color palette will lend an air of excitement to our production of *Merry Wives*.
Play in Process

Veanne Cox (Margaret Page).

Director Stephen Rayne.

David Schramm (Falstaff).

Kurt Rhoads (Page) and Jarlath Conroy (Shallow).

Michael Mastro (Ford), James Kocinek (Pistol), Kurt Rhoads (Page) and Hugh Nees (Nym).

Veanne Cox (Margaret Page) and Caralyn Kozlowski (Alice Ford).

Tom Story (Doctor Caius).

Costume renderings of Alice Ford, Falstaff and Margaret Page by Wade Laboisonniere.
Growing up with Shakespeare

STC’s Audience Enrichment Manager Hannah J. Hessel reflects on coming of age at STC

At this season’s star-studded 25th Anniversary Gala, Chelsea Clinton spoke eloquently about the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s role in her coming of age.

“Michael and the Shakespeare Theatre Company provided me the opportunity to think about what it meant to be good and bad, to be noble and ignoble, to be great and ugly—to think about what I would do in different situations, how I might think and feel and act. It enabled me, in a very strange way, to have a normal upbringing.”

Her words hit close to home. I also grew up within the walls of the Lansburgh Theatre. I saw productions (including the 1991 Free For All production of The Merry Wives of Windsor), attended Camp Shakespeare (taught at the time by Ethan McSweeny) and took acting classes that culminated in a performance on the set where Patrick Stewart played Othello. I feel privileged to have had these opportunities but I know now I am one of hundreds, from a variety of backgrounds, who have been animated and educated by STC over the past 25 years.

Theatre, and especially Shakespeare in performance, opens up new worlds for its audiences. As a kid, I took my relationship with the theatre for granted. STC was never a “special occasion” place to me; it was my place. Even if it is not easy to articulate, there is a feeling of ownership that makes students want to keep returning.

Under Michael Kahn’s leadership, providing opportunities for young audiences has always been a priority. Many of our current programs, and those I participated in years ago, were created by the late Stephen Welch, who guided STC’s Education programs until 1995. From the moment that STC began, Stephen joined Michael in the desire to reach the area’s young audiences and fill them with excitement for classical theatre. It worked.

Now I am an employee of STC. When I sit in the theatre with SHAKESPEARIENCE students or watch a Text Alive! production, I remember myself at that age. I’m grateful that there is a new generation of theatregoers feeling the same sense of wonder, excitement and comfort within the walls of STC. My first STC production was The Tempest in 1989, and some lucky audience members are having their first Shakespeare experience. It’s the work being done today, from educational programming, to the annual Free For All, to every single production on STC’s stages, that adds in numerous ways to the lives of an ever-growing audience—of all ages!
The idea that wealth had become both the measure of personal worth and a societal lynchpin seems central in *Merry Wives*, a play in which economic imperatives are never far from the surface. Falstaff dissolves his retinue and pursues the titular wives because he is penniless; Ford throws money at Falstaff to test his wife’s fidelity, and Anne Page’s matrimonial fate is governed by the wealth she represents and the capital she attracts. The inclination of some to view *Merry Wives* as Shakespeare’s foray into Citizen or City Comedy seems apt, given that genre’s preoccupation with economic motivations and the trickery required to accumulate wealth. In both the main and subplot of *Merry Wives*, subterfuge driven by greed appears to be a societal norm. Yet the cynicism we expect from City Comedy seems mitigated to a degree by the resolution of the play’s main plot in which lessons appear to be learned and the forces of avarice are seemingly turned back.

The main plot of *Merry Wives* may indicate that mirth, wit, common sense and an amiable sociability trumps man’s mercenary tendencies, but everything beyond its surface suggests the opposite. Windsorites may be easily able to ward off Falstaff, but, in their egocentricity, they seem unaware of the extent to which they embody his values. For example, Ford’s dedication to the economic matrix is evident in his first encounter with Sir John; he is well aware that the prospect of cash is enough to enlist Falstaff’s help, but he goes further and provides a supremely jaded philosophic slant on the way of the world, stating baldly that “if money goes before, all ways do lie open” (act 2, scene 2). While Sir John’s reply, “Money is a good soldier, and will on,” bestows a somewhat questionable dignity upon cash values by invoking military valor, this trade-off of mercenary catchphrases effectively renders the two men equal. Even near the play’s end, instead of taking part in the happy resolution and rejoicing at the happy resolution and rejoicing at the confirmation of his wife’s virtue, Ford insists on bringing economics to the fore with his demand that Falstaff repay him the funds he had advanced.

The romantic subplot of *Merry Wives* offers further strong evidence that, in Windsor, money makes the world go round. In the great comedies that precede this play, such as *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, economic considerations never rear their head in the love stories. In this play, however, the ultimate importance of our erstwhile heroine, Anne Page, lies in what she is, rather than who she is. This is decidedly no epilogue-delivering Rosalind; what Anne may or may not have to say is of little consequence as her attraction seems to lie in the 700 pounds she will inherit when she turns 17. The conversation in *Merry Wives*’ opening scene amongst Evans, Shallow and Slender pointedly configures Anne as a lucrative commodity on the marriage market. Meanwhile, our ostensible romantic hero, the bankrupt Fenton, admits that Anne’s wealth was the original reason he courted her and then tries to assure her that he doesn’t only have economic interests at heart; however, when he does so by affirming that her “value” is higher than “stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags” (act 3, scene 4, lines 15-16), one can be forgiven for thinking that money is never far from his mind. Upon examination, Fenton’s pursuit of the wealthy Anne seems remarkably similar to Falstaff’s designs on Mistresses Ford and Page. Far from offering up an idealized romance as a counterpoint to Falstaff’s mercenary courtship schemes, the Fenton-Anne subplot appears to reinforce ideas present in the main plot.

Even in their names, Falstaff and Fenton seem to echo each other. If Shakespeare intended the Windsor he created to reflect his contemporary England’s social mores, then it seems he thought that money was a central driving force for human behavior. Practically everyone in *Merry Wives* is motivated by economic considerations; and, in Shakespeare’s only “English” play, their value system seems to be sorely wanting. In this respect, the play seems more relevant than ever when we consider, how in the early years of the 21st century, we have seen the near-disastrous consequences of the relentless pursuit of monetary gain. While fortune-hunting knights and dowries may be a long way from Enron and sub-prime mortgages, Shakespeare, once again, provides us with valuable food for thought in our ongoing consideration of the human condition.

Dr. Peter Grav is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto.

The full text of this essay is available on Asides.ShakespeareTheatre.org
As Stephen Rayne observes in his director’s note, The Merry Wives of Windsor occupies a singular place in the Shakespearean canon. Set in Windsor among the middle classes, it is Shakespeare’s only play set in Elizabethan England, and it foregrounds its social themes with a surprising directness. Shakespeare could be political—even polemical—but his dominant method was sly suggestion, not political cartoon. It is somewhat shocking to see him working in the vein of his peers. And in fact, the play was written at a turning point in contemporary comedy. Ben Jonson’s comedies of humors, satires of the Elizabethan age, were on the wane, but not yet fully replaced by the Jacobean “city comedy,” a form popularized by Chapman, Heywood and Middleton. Merry Wives owes debts to both, but it exists as a unique genre unto itself.

Perhaps Shakespeare was just saying goodbye. Elizabeth had passed a law in 1597 outlawing the depiction of living or historical personages onstage. If the play was written between 1597 and 1602, after Shakespeare had abandoned the form of the history play, this was his way of giving a curtain call to his beloved historical personages. Falstaff, Mistress Quickly and the rest of the gang could trod the boards once more, but only through Shakespeare parachuting them into the modern world of Windsor.

Shakespeare’s strategy for Merry Wives is as unique as his mise-en-scène. Rather than depicting the world of Windsor with the high-blown romantic verse of Romeo and Juliet or A Midsummer Night’s Dream, he reveals this teeming little suburb on the bank of the Thames almost entirely through the English vernacular.

Eighty-eight percent of Merry Wives is in prose, making it the most prose-heavy of Shakespeare’s plays. And Shakespeare never wrote better prose than in this play, in which he pulls plain-spoken English apart by the seams, inspects each of its discrete elements and reassembles it into something miraculous. Each of the Windsorites in the play possesses a verbal tic that reveals something essential about their natures. Foreigners such as Sir Hugh Evans and Doctor Caius are immediately identifiable by their thick stage accents and their grammatical garblings. The play’s lower-class characters, such as Mistress Quickly, reveal their working-class origins through outlandish malapropisms. In Quickly’s case, her “alligant terms” often reveal surprisingly obscene truths, as in the famous “Latin lesson” of act 4, scene 1, when her glosses of Evans’ dead words resurrect them in surprisingly bawdy fashion.

But of all the play’s linguist souls, there is one who towers above them all. As David Crane notes, “Falstaff is just massively himself.” The utterly singular character of the fat old knight contains multitudes, perhaps in no play moreso than this one, where his language often animates others’ flights of fancy. Falstaff is also the only character in the play who possesses something of the tragic dimension, a quiet pathos amid the farce. Not to give anything away, but Falstaff’s experience at the end of the play is accompanied by a dignity as mysterious as any bottomless dream. After 400-plus years, he continues to fascinate critics, scholars and audiences, existing as a character almost outside of Shakespeare.

Falstaff could not love, but by ceasing to be Falstaff.
Samuel Johnson on Merry Wives (1765)

Falstaff’s wit is the wit of a man who knows that other men are waiting to hear what he will pretend, what he will become, or how he will get out of it.
Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare (1953)

Falstaff and his cohorts are, by any worldly standards, including those of the criminal classes, all of them failures. [...] The drunkard is unlovely to look at, intolerable to listen to, and his self-pity is contemptible. Nevertheless, as not merely a worldly failure but also a willful failure, he is a disturbing image for the sober citizen. His refusal to accept the realities of this world, babyish as it may be, compels us to take another look at this world and reflect upon our motives for accepting it. The drunkard’s suffering may be self-inflicted, but it is real suffering and reminds us of all the suffering in this world which we prefer not to think about because, from the moment we accepted the world, we acquired our share of responsibility for everything that happens in it.

Falstaff is the most unusual figure in fiction. He is almost entirely a good man, a glorious, life-affirming good man, and there is hardly a good man in dramatic literature. There has always been an England, an older England, which was sweeter, purer, where the hay smelled better and the weather was always springtime and the daffodils blew in the gentle warm breezes. You feel a nostalgia for it in Chaucer, and you feel it all throughout Shakespeare. Falstaff is a refugee from that world. He has to live by his wits, he has to be funny, he has no place to sleep if he doesn’t get a laugh out of his patron. It’s a rough modern world that he’s living in. You’ve got to be able to see that look in his eyes that comes out of the age that never existed, the one that exists in the heart of all English poetry.
Orson Welles (c. 1985)

The enormous power of [Falstaff’s] language, which is at the center of the inexhaustible linguistic vitality of The Merry Wives of Windsor, has no design to make him more than the fat old man he is, but only to establish a sense of the tremendous, usually unseen, energy which underpins the ordinary; and the various humiliating accidents that occur to him fail to make him less than the fat old man he is, and it is fat old Falstaff who survives to the end of the play, indestructible, untransformable [...] It may very well be that simple survival represents Shakespeare’s fundamental view of Falstaff, and that The Merry Wives is Shakespeare’s attempt to give the most unvarnished meaning to Falstaff’s words in Henry IV, Part I: ‘I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath. Give me life.’
David Crane (2010)
CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS

WINDOWS ON THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR
FREE
Sunday, June 17, at 5 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
Join STC’s Artistic staff and a guest scholar as they provide a “window” into this production. This hour-long pre-show conversation articulates the production process through an insightful, lively discussion.

POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION
FREE
Wednesday, June 20
After the performance
Sidney Harman Hall
Extend the experience by staying immediately following the evening’s production for a post-performance discussion with the cast led by STC’s Literary Associate Drew Lichtenberg.

TWITTER NIGHT
FREE
Wednesday, June 27
Before, after and at Intermission
Use the hashtag #STCnight to join the online conversation about The Merry Wives of Windsor, from the theatre or from home.

CLASSICS IN CONTEXT
FREE
Saturday, July 7, at 5 p.m.
The Forum in Sidney Harman Hall
Put the show in context with this lively roundtable conversation. The Classics in Context panel gives the audience the opportunity to discuss the production with a team of experts, led by Director of Education Samantha K. Wyer.