

Washington, Oct. 21 2009. We saw Verdi's Falstaff at the Washington National Opera. It was rollicking good fun, with wonderful music, out of Verdi's normal idiom, sometimes resembling Wagner in its brass flourishes, but with more varied phrasing (as compared to, say, the monotonous lack of emphasis of Tristan und Isolde). The production was very interesting, presenting "theater within theater" – the opening scene features a relatively slim Falstaff who, after the initial scene of accusation by an indignant injured party, is dressed by his factotums in a fat suit for the subsequent wooing of the Merrie Wives of Windsor. When the factotums stand on principle and refuse to deliver his letters urging adultery, Falstaff entrusts their delivery to a stage manager who appears in sport coat and slacks, wearing a radio headset.

Mistress Quickly, the wives' confidante, is first presented as a wardrobe mistress in modern dress who is then decked out by the wives in period costume and pulled into the drama to lure Falstaff into the trap. Several scenes are played amid wardrobe chests that are cleverly used to conceal entrances and exits of characters. The climactic scene under the haunted oak tree, where Falstaff wears the elk horns, is played mostly without time-warps, except that Falstaff is stripped of his fat suit at the end. The dance of the "fairies" is performed by male dancers in white gauzy dresses and veils, committing many deliberate "errors" of execution, as if danced by amateurs – it's a totally hilarious scene.

The major disappointment of this production is the singing. Most of the singers had small voices – sitting in the 7<sup>th</sup> row orchestra, we had the impression that most were singing mezza-voce. I hate to imagine what the third balcony heard. That was especially disappointing about the title role, sung by baritone Alan Opie, and the female lead, Mistress Ford, sung by soprano Tamara Wilson. There were two exceptions: Ford, tenor Timothy Mix, gave a good account of himself, with a voice that cleanly cut through the orchestral textures; and Annetta, Ford's daughter, soprano JiYoung Lee, a recent alumna of Domingo's young artist program at the WNO who is just starting out on her professional career. Hers was a wonderful voice, very strong and smooth in all registers, spot-on in intonation, avoiding vibrato but on occasion employing a wonderful tremolo-warble effect. I disagree with the Washington Post's assessment of her performance.

For the review, see

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/12/AR2009101201242.html>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/12/opera-room-to-grow-in-falstaff/>