

Account of Purley on Thames

Rain or Shine - The Merry Wives of Windsor

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The admirable Rain or Shine Theatre Company became the first professional set of actors to visit Purley on Thames when they performed Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor" in the Barn. And what a marvellous show they put on! The bawdy knockabout comedy, apparently written by the Bard in just fourteen days and at the express request of Queen Elizabeth I, is full of comic repartee, but the diction, timing and movement of the eight-strong cast was so precise and expressive that the sellout audience was able to enjoy every laugh from start to finish. Even the occasional soliloquies employed to hurry along the narrative kept everyone entertained.

The action centres on the amorous intentions of Sir John Falstaffe, a roguish knight "of good substance," played with incredible energy by Andrew Hodges. The scene in when he receives a realistic thrashing from the cuckolded Master Ford (played by David Middleton, a Rain or Shine veteran) was pure knockabout farce, verging on the pantomime, which had the audience in hoots of laughter. But a real scene-stealer, especially in the first half of the play, was the fiery Doctor Caius (Alistair Cope), who entertained everyone with an outrageous mock French accent and exaggerated facial expressions.

The Old Barn is not the easiest of venues for theatre. It has a high vaulted ceiling and limited stage area, but the Rain or Shine Company's skill lies in not just establishing an immediate rapport with the audience, but sustaining a fast pace till the end. All of the tight-knit group of actors did superbly well, but look out for Kate Izon, not yet out of drama school, who played Mistress Page with delectable humour. The cast fully deserved the lengthy applause they received at the curtain, and have promised to return with their next production.

David Downs