"Wives may be merry and yet honest too": A Performative Pedagogical Experiment with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

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Abstract

This paper will recall, review and cogitate on a student performance of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* directed by me in 1991 at my place of work, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. It will enumerate the challenges of staging a full production of a Shakespeare play in the original language, without adapting it, in the limited facilities available in colleges thirty-four years ago; the successes and what we learnt, both as teachers and students, through this experiment. It will also discuss the theorisation of 'performance' as a pedagogic practice, in an attempt to draw out students' responses and prioritise students as co-creators of meaning, questioning the universalisation of Shakespeare and leading to a de-authorisation of any fixed meaning.

Keywords: Student performance, Shakespeare's comedies, *Merry Wives of Windsor,* performative mode of teaching

On 6 February 1991 the students of English Honours at Indraprastha College (IP), University of Delhi, performed William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* largely for an inhouse collegiate audience. It was a significant event as a full-length Shakespearean play was performed for the very first time by the students of this college in the original language. Like many University of Delhi colleges, IP had a tradition of an annual college play by its Dramatic Society, but unlike the St. Stephen's Shakespeare Society, which has now an over hundred-year

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record of performing Shakespeare, staging the Bard had somehow eluded IP till, of course, the *Merry Wives*.

The BA Honours English syllabus at that time prescribed three rather serious Shakespeare plays in the second year—*Macbeth*, *As You Like It* and *Richard II*. *Merry Wives* was chosen for performance specifically to demonstrate to students who almost always are wary of and often resist Shakespeare's language, that Shakespeare could be fun, and that performing a play, getting into and in-between its words and lines, letting it breathe within one, to animating its personae, is a sure-fire, alternative way of making the over four hundred-year-old texts come alive. The 1990s saw the development of the theorisation of 'performance' as pedagogic practice. Criticism and research were increasingly foregrounding the analysis of plays as play-texts, to be understood in their performative contexts like the staging conditions, the structure and space of the theatres, the nature and organisation of the acting companies, the socio-economic conditions and the composition of the audiences, which not only influenced the modes of performance but also the very scripting of the plays.

I had just returned to Delhi after completing a PhD at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, which was one of the pioneering centres of the trend to promote performance as a means of study. The Institute had in fact devised a 'Stratford week' as an essential component of its courses wherein students would see Shakespeare's plays being performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company, at Stratford-upon-Avon; discuss and analyse them with the actors, directors, stage designers, costumers etc to experience and understand how meaning and interpretation is crafted through performance. So naturalised and popular did this mode of approaching the plays become that the Institute was impelled to extend it and soon afterwards it established a full campus in Stratford-upon-Avon, just a few blocks away from the theatre. Needless to add, I fully imbibed this promotion of performance as a pedagogic method and even though I did not utilise it much in my dissertation, I attempted to put it into practice when I returned to teaching Shakespeare at IP College. Hence, the production of *Merry Wives* directed by me.

The *Merry Wives of Windsor* is an unusual Shakespearean comedy. Not only does it have no known source but it also subverts many hallowed comic conventions, like men, not women having to cross-dress. It is

said to have been written at the express command of Elizabeth I who wanted to see Falstaff in love! Instead of the usual court and country opposition, it presents a vivid portrait of a provincial middle-class community. It presents the lover, not the husband, being cuckolded and forced to dress as a woman to save his skin. It has the jealous husband brought down to his knees to beg pardon from his wife in public. And all this happening not as a turn of Fortune but through the initiative and enterprise of the women. The play is a triumph of women's wit and cunning. "Wives may be merry and yet honest too" (4.4.96.) may easily be considered the motto of the play. We chose it for its feminist drive and modern relevance: performed in modern dress and contemporary stage setting, it easily transcended time and culture to present women as both protagonists and victors, validating female action with mirth. While jokes about cuckoldry and horns could seem dated, the problem of jealousy and fidelity continues to remain part of the politics between the sexes.

A lesser-known play, *Merry Wives* merits a longer description: the story revolves round two love plots. In the first, Sir John Falstaff, impoverished knight, plans to restore his fortunes by attempting to seduce the wives of two wealthy citizens of Windsor. Unfortunately for him, he chooses Meg Page and Alice Ford, close friends, who soon discover his double dealing. To punish him, they arrange three separate encounters at which Sir John's reception is not quite as loving as he expects. Meanwhile Alice Ford's husband Frank, informed by Falstaff's vengeful henchmen, is consumed with jealousy. He goes to Falstaff pretending to be a rejected lover of Mrs Ford and becomes a party to Sir John's plans. Twice he nearly catches his wife and Sir John together.

The other story involves Anne Page, daughter of Meg and George Page, who is being pursued by three suitors. Her father favours Abraham Slender, slim in wit but solid in wealth and nephew of the Justice of Peace. Her mother's choice is Dr. Caius, the eccentric but socially significant court physician, while Anne herself is in love with Fenton, aristocratic but penniless. Mistress Quickly, housekeeper to the Doctor, promises to help all three suitors leading to much confusion.

Finally, in Windsor Park, on Hollowmas Eve, both the love plots reach their conclusion. Falstaff is crowned with the cuckold's horns—a symbol of a man fooled by women—and Anne manages to secure the man of her

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choice. Falstaff is contrite, the wives forgive him and all gather together for dinner and laughter.

Production

The IP College production, with 18-19-year-old female students, most of whom had never acted on stage before, especially not in a Shakespeare play, was a huge challenge. Enthusiasm, determination and departmental support helped to pull it through. Like all comedies, *Merry Wives* had a huge cast of twenty-five parts, but the casting of roles was worked out relatively smoothly through play reading auditions. Keeping the motivations going, coaching the students in their voice projection, pronunciation and acting protocols took time, but the liveliness of the play infected and energised them to give their best. Almost the full, lightly edited, text was performed: the somewhat esoteric Latin lesson was excised, along with the dialogues about Germans taking off with the inn-keepers' horses. Some of the longer speeches were edited and some archaic words and phrases substituted to make it accessible to a general audience. Apart from the contemporary costuming and setting, no other adaptive features were interpolated except a gestural action on the part of the wives: during their second rendezvous with Falstaff, after they have frightened him enough to make him agree to disguise himself as an old woman, to escape detection by the suspicious husband Ford, the two wives, Meg Page and Alice Ford, together repeat the motto and raise a toast at their line: "Wives may be merry and yet honest too"!

Costuming and makeup of the female actors was the other challenge —the play has eighteen male roles. Performed under the aegis of the Literary Society of IP College, the production had virtually no funding and as was remarked, "we did it out of nothing"! The great Indian 'jugad' mentality saved the day: family and friends' wardrobes were raided and young teenagers were transformed into adults, practising and performing masculinities and mature femininities quite ably. Seema Wahi, playing George Page, the calm peace-making husband, felt these qualities resonated with her and helped in adding authenticity to her performance. In an email she sent me in July 2025, she recalled that some female audience members joked that she made "marriageable material", a most attractive and convincing male on stage.

Falstaff, the central character, was envisaged not as an old knight but

as a middle-aged paunchy Lothario and the female actor (Madhavi Mallika), tall, fair with a strong voice and persona, was, with the help of some padding and bearding up, successfully able to live up to the part. The wives, (Ritu Bhatia and Ritu Saksena) vibed together very well, which cemented their plots to take revenge on the overreaching Falstaff. Mistress Quickly (Nandini Sen) was an appropriately garrulous busybody. Shakespeare's depiction of provincial Windsor included a French doctor and a Welsh parson. Luckily, we had a couple of Mauritian students in English Honours and their French-inflected accents provided just the right touch of foreign sounds. All the actors took up their parts enthusiastically, even crafting wings for the fairies in the final scenes.

The stage setting was sparse and symbolic given our shoe-string budget. Wooden screens with painted flats doubled up as both Tudor inn backdrops, curtained living room windows and even a doctor's clinic. The park was represented by hanging drapes painted over with leafy shapes along with some tall potted plants to stand in for Herne's oak. A large set of painted deer's horns was pinned centrally on the rear backdrop signifying the main theme of the play: cuckoldry. Falstaff's crown of horns was improvised with a set of broken branches. The most challenging prop to arrange, however, was the "buck" (laundry) basket, which needed to be big and strong enough to hide the fat knight in it. Luck again played a part and a large Kashmiri willow hamper was procured through a kind neighbour of one of the teachers.

Two sets of spotlights were hired and paid for through the ticket sales. The college auditorium, seating about four hundred, was almost packed, and the performance was widely acclaimed as a huge success. The audience, students and faculty, enjoyed the show, laughing at the jokes, the double entendres, the mischief and the revenges. It received a standing ovation at the end and the most repeated response from the audience was "Didn't know that Shakespeare wrote such fun plays too". So energising was the experience that English department faculty was heard remarking: "We should do a full-length play every year." The impact of the performance was immediate: within the same year a production of *Waiting for Godot*, another prescribed text, was successfully staged with several of the same actors. The following year St. Stephen's College Shakespeare Society chose to perform *Merry Wives of Windsor*, for the first time, for their annual production.

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Performance Pedagogy

Performance pedagogy which began in the 1960s and 70s with 'stage-centred' criticism by J.L. Styan and John Barton became increasingly influential by the 80s and 90s in the teaching of Shakespeare. It promoted a range of methods, from reading out aloud in classrooms to staging, presenting concerted attempts to draw out students' responses. As Rex Gibson, one of the foremost advocates of performative pedagogy has said, "Shakespeare is not a museum exhibit with a large 'Do not touch' label, but a living force inviting active, imaginative creation" (1998, p. xii). He devised a method he named, 'active' Shakespeare, which involved a wide range of expressive, creative and physical exercises to elicit personal responses from students as opposed to the conventional desk-bound classroom teaching which was seen as passive. As the wave of 'performed' Shakespeare grew, many other modes of pedagogy evolved refining the methodology to suit their particular conditions. The Folger Library/Theatre in Washington DC, for example, created a practice called the 'Folger Method', the Globe Theatre, the 'Creative Shakespeare', the Royal Shakespeare Company, the 'Rehearsal Room Approach', still others the 'Playful Ensemble' approach. All these modes involved 'doing Shakespeare' to understand and get close to the text. By the 90s it became almost de rigueur for all courses in schools and the universities to incorporate the performative 'active' Shakespeare.

Some reservations and critiques of this performative pedagogy were voiced, most of all through concerns about the lack of rigorous textual analysis—the bedrock of Shakespearean exegesis. It was felt that this approach may make the plays accessible and enjoyable but often end up replaying accepted, not innovative, meanings. However, as performance pedagogues reiterate, in live performance, every word, every moment in every play, is subject to exacting literary analysis, close reading being the basis of interpretative decisions of 'how' to do it. The oppositions thus set up between the theatrical and the textual practice become untenable, for any sensitive reading or performance interacts with both.

The surge of literary theory in Shakespeare studies again seemed to drive a wedge between the theatrical and the theoretical, but performative practice evolved to accommodate post-modern and postcolonial views in classroom theatre practice. For example, taking cues from Brecht, methods to break the unified views of character were

evolved which prioritised students as co-creators of meaning, leading to a de-authorisation of any fixed meaning. Mixed-race classrooms evoked counter-cultural responses challenging the hallowed notion of Shakespeare's universalism promoted by colonialism. Intercultural performances, especially in the former colonies, infused meanings from their own languages and cultures into the plays extending their interpretative field. And now the globalisation of Shakespeare has largely been instrumented by performance in indigenous theatre forms.

My own teaching of Shakespeare for the BA Honours English class had always attempted to foreground the performative dimension of the text in an 'active' manner. I would very often read out aloud key passages of the text and encourage students to do the same. Hearing the sounds of the words, the rhythms of the verse and the changing intonations was, I always felt, a means of unlocking the meanings in a play-text which functions at many levels. Sound, mood and meaning are always integrated in a play-text. Another, 'creative' mode of performative pedagogy which I deployed was to persuade students, singly or in groups, to enact roles of the diverse play-goers of Elizabethan theatre in the weekly seminar class in which they normally read out short papers on an assigned topic. With 'creative' Shakespeare, they were required to dress up, script a few lines and perform as the penny standers of the yard, become a female audience member, the 'orange wives' or a gallant seated on the stage. Many students were able to recreate the spirit of the playhouse and perform memorable sketches which I still recall after so many years. Later, when projection facilities became available in college, we would screen videos and films of the prescribed plays which would lead to animated discussions on the give and take between the stage and the page. In the set systems of curricula and testing of the University of Delhi, which afforded little leeway for individual intervention in teaching, these exercises provided learners an educative and enjoyable respite from the conventional top-down lecturing mode of communicating with students. Still later, when the Shakespeare Society of India started its 'Scenes from Shakespeare' drama competition, I directed a couple of prize-winning adaptations of *Othello* and *King Lear*.

Owning Shakespeare

The performative experiment of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* reaped success both in intellectual and personal terms. Fortunately, I have been

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able to reconnect and establish contact in July 2025, after almost thirty-five years, with several of the students—Madhavi, Nandini, Shai, Bela, Ritu Bhatia, Ritu Saksena and Seema—who played the main parts in the play, and conducted telephonic and in-person conversations with them to authenticate and augment my own impressions. Incidentally, most of these female students, then 18-19 year olds, now hold high-powered jobs and are successfully managing both home and professional roles. The major consensus among them was that the performance helped them to get over their fear of Shakespeare. Many embarked on the performance with trepidation, intimidated by the fact of doing Shakespeare. They all agreed that embodying the language was difficult in the beginning, but with practice and patience they were able to slowly grasp the meanings and get into the roles. "As we understood the language, we enjoyed doing the play and pulled it together" (Shai). "Performing a play makes it stick in your memory" (Bela). "We don't fully interact with the play through only reading it; performance makes you feel the emotions," said Ritu Saksena, commenting on the process of making a play come alive, echoing what James N. Loehlin calls "a sense of chewing on and tasting the words" (2008, p. 634) to embed the language in the body.

The most substantial take-home learning for the performing students was concerning Shakespearean comedy. Shai observed that for her this enactment "changed the way I looked at comedies". She had grown up imbibing opinions from her father, who had also studied English Literature, about the intellectual depth of the tragedies; but now she discovered how the comedies, unlike the tragedies, were "interactive", "that they were about patriarchy and gender and how they connected with the issues of today". She was inspired to read more Shakespearean comedies and now does not miss a chance to view performances and films based on them. Others too, like Bela, said that for her the several comedies tended to get mixed up but after the performative learning, she found that she could relate to them better. Nandini revealed that when the idea of performing Shakespeare was first initiated, a group from the hostel got together, searched the college library and looked up many plays to choose which one may be the best to perform. The tragedies were of course the traditional favourites, but when I selected *Merry Wives*, after the first play reading everyone wanted to act as Falstaff!

Seema emailed that this experience ignited her appreciation of theatre,

she began to attend plays more regularly, and understood Shakespeare afresh. It made her more curious about English literature and drama, enriching her perspective both as a learner and later as an educator. Ritu Bhatia said that seeing adaptations and appropriations in translation has sensitised her to the "versatility" of Shakespeare's story-telling.

Another striking gain for the female actors was the experience of slipping into male roles—there were eighteen in the play. They had been advised to closely observe the males around them, study their stance, gestures and mannerisms and many rehearsals were needed to enable embodying their roles. Seema recalls: "it was the greatest challenge for me, understanding the psychology and body-language of a middle-aged man. I had not only to look the part but also feel the weight of his life-experiences, especially one whose daughter will elope. I even imagined stepping into my father's shoes to feel the emotions and empathise with the role". Madhavi, who played the central role of Falstaff with aplomb, said that she relied on her "gut instincts" to get into the part. The directorial decision to cast Falstaff not as old but middle-aged helped her to imagine him, she emailed, "as over the top, bombastic, vain, buffoonish but mostly comic and harmless with the suggestion of a tragic vulnerability underlying the jolliness". Understandably, she had not met a character like him at her age of nineteen, but said that "Falstaffian traits are a commonality. I did not attempt method acting—drawing inspiration from a real-life personality—but simply drew upon my imagination". Her apprehension of the complexities of Falstaff's character and speech were crucial to carry the play through.

Bela remarked that the transformation into male roles was finally made smooth and easy, with no disabling self-consciousness of the opposite gender, in the safe and empowering space of a women's college. It was also facilitated with the openness of the times in 1991 when role-playing and creativity was not overtly politicised and audiences were not hypersensitive as in today's woke culture.

Likewise, the staging of *Merry Wives* in modern dress and setting not only aligned with the burgeoning feminism of the time, but also specially enabled the female actors, who took to it like fish to water. Here was a Shakespeare play that spoke to them, modelling for the young an empowering depiction of female bonding, rectitude and honour along with a celebration of women's initiative and action. Of course, no

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Shakespeare play is without its ambiguities and shadows, and *Merry Wives* was not devoid of them, but the students, and the audience, were not disturbed by them. "It never crossed our minds that the play was unsuitable with its the sexual innuendoes, the suggestions of possible female promiscuity, the disobeying daughter, the irreverence" recalled Nandini, "those were kinder times."

The most valuable and lasting memorable gain for all was, however, the close bonding that was generated between the players which translated into their learning to act as a team. An energising vibe was created in the performance process: "we were a diverse class, but all came together as a group" (Shai), "there was a whole-hearted involvement of all the three years of the English honours" (Madhavi), "our team worked like a well-knit family" (Seema) which contributed in no small measure to the final success. "The experience brought immense satisfaction—overcoming stage fright, creating deep bonds, and the applause—these gave not just joy but also a sense of personal growth" (Seema). The production "changed us as a group, created different bonds because performance leaves a different kind of memory of the group and the text" recalled Ritu Saksena. Without exception, for all "doing Shakespeare" was an extraordinary experience, educative and fun: "most enjoyable" (Bela), "very significant, a landmark event of my life as I was later chosen to perform Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*" (Madhavi), "a thrill to act in a large production" (Ritu Bhatia), "it cemented memories—we do remember it after all these years!" (Ritu Saksena). It was about "owning Shakespeare," observes Nandini. So, the pedagogic experiment can be said to have succeeded.

The *Merry Wives of Windsor* has been a neglected, even denigrated, play in the Shakespearean canon mainly due to critics decrying the portrayal of Falstaff as a fatuous old man who is easily gulled. The role of the quick-witted wives who helm the action was completely ignored and it was not till the late twentieth century that the play and its women received a critical revaluation as a different kind of comedy: realistic, of middle class provincial lives, valorising the role of women. On the other hand, the play had early popularity on stage. It has had ten major operatic versions, and has a confirmed place in the repertoires of Shakespeare theatre companies. The Indraprastha College production of 1991 too can claim a place in this long line.

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