







Above: Boritt's streetscape is inspired by Harlem's Little Senegal. Opposite: The hair-braiding salon is a neighborhood hangout where many of the play's intrigues unfold.

# HARLEM ON MY MIND

A new take on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* spreads laughter in Central Park

By: David Barbour

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he New York Shakespeare Festival has returned to Central Park this summer, having been shut down (like everything else) by the COVID-19 pandemic. Correctly guessing that audiences were ready for laughter, the com-

pany is presenting *Merry Wives*, a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It's a well-received crowd-pleaser, providing solid evidence that New York's theatre is, at last, coming back in a big way.





Falstaff's pad is dominated by pink zebra-striped walls. The four-part self-portrait was inspired by an image of the late rapper Biggie Smalls.

As adapted by Jocelyn Bioh—author of the Off Broadway hit *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*—*Merry Wives* resets Shakespeare's comedy among Harlem's African-immigrant community. The dialogue merges the rhythms of Elizabethan speech with 21st-century slang, but the action is the same. Falstaff, the would-be rake—here an aging boy-man, addicted to snack foods and video games—makes simultaneous plays for the Madams Ford and Page. The ladies, best friends, decide it's time to teach a Falstaff a lesson, putting him through a relentless series of comic humiliations. Meanwhile, Mister Ford, thinking his wife unfaithful, keeps trying to catch her and Falstaff in the act. In a subplot, the young Anne Page is the center of various marriage plots—her mother and father want to her to wed different suitors—but her heart belongs to Fenton, in this version, her female lover.

The key to the production is its strong sense of community, vividly realized in its design. Director Saheem Ali and his team, including scenic designer Beowulf Boritt, lighting designer Jiyoun Chang, and sound designers Kai Harada and Palmer Hefferan, have created a stage environment

that celebrates one of New York City's most vibrant neighborhoods. (Dede Ayite's costumes are spectacular creations, providing each character with a sharply defined profile.) Their collective contribution goes a long way toward making Bioh's concept come to life.

### Scenery

Boritt was the logical choice to design *Merry Wives*, having done both productions of the Delacorte's 2019 summer season: a sumptuous *Much Ado About Nothing*, set among Atlanta's Black bourgeoisie, and a stark, industrial staging of *Coriolanus*. Like everyone else on the team, he was raring to go after months away from the theatre. The pressure was on, however, since the decision to have a Shakespeare season this summer was not taken until February, leaving him little time to design the first major production to be seen in the city in a year and half. Boritt adds that artistic director Oskar Eustis had two clear directions: "He wanted to come back with a bang. And he wanted something that glorified New York."

These were clarifying ideas for a production that was





Chang provides a number of time-of-day looks that capture the set's gritty appeal.

still very much up for grabs. The script was still being written and Ali had toyed with setting the action in Nigeria. After Eustis weighed in, however, Boritt, who spent part of the pandemic living at 113th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, had an inspiration: "I said, 'Let's set it in Little Senegal [a stretch of African restaurants and stores on 116th Street] and jump to Central Park for the last act'." He's referring to the fact that a sylvan setting is required for the final scene, which sends Falstaff into a forest for what he thinks is a confrontation with the fairy kingdom.

Boritt's ingeniously conceived set presents a gritty, colorful, highly detailed Harlem streetscape. At stage right is a community health center run by Dr. Caius, one of Anne Page's many suitors. At stage left is a hair-braiding salon where the Madams Ford and Page meet to hatch some of their plots. Both units have detachable facades that, when turned around, represent their respective interiors. At center stage is the laundromat, owned by Madam Page, which spins in two directions, one way to reveal the laundromat interior and the other way to show Falstaff's apartment.

Boritt has a keen sense of what makes Harlem one of

New York's most distinctive neighborhoods: "The buildings built around the turn of the century, which are falling apart a little bit. The intense colors mixed with the dirty masonry. It's beautiful and there's an amazing energy up there." He adds that he received crucial advice from several members of the creative team. "Saheem and Dede are African-born, and Jocelyn is first-generation; they knew all the details of this very specific community. For example, the laundry is done in green and white because Dede said that Nigerians are very proud of their flag [which has two vertical green stripes separated by one in white]. I really relied on the African members of the team."

Inside and out, the set reflects Boritt's eye for the telling detail. The exteriors are convincingly distressed with grime in a way that any New Yorker will recognize. Other points of interest are the "Black Lives Matter" sign in the clinic's storefront and the laundromat's kicky soap-bubble logo. The walls of the hair salon are covered with photos of styles cut from magazines. The laundromat has piles of full laundry bags and handwritten signs urging the patrons to keep the place tidy and count their change. The downstage

area is an authentic representation of a New York street complete with a Citi Bike station. “I love doing that kind of thing,” he says. “I design a certain amount of it, but when I get it onstage, I double the amount of dressing to get the density of stuff needed to make it feel real. We spent ten days, adding another half-dozen bits of dressing.”

The showiest (and most laugh-getting) piece of the set design is Falstaff’s place, an amalgamation of bad taste from several decades, including pink zebra-striped walls, fluorescent tube lighting, a disco moonflower effect light, neon wall art, and a king-size bed. Dominating the scene is a four-part portrait of Falstaff wearing a crown, featuring the words “discretion” and “valor.” If it looks like a vintage LP record cover, that’s the idea. “Falstaff is supposed to be an aging celebrity of some kind,” Boritt says. “Maybe he was a semi-successful rapper in the ‘90s. Jacob [Ming-Trent, who plays Falstaff], brought up Biggie Smalls as a good reference. There’s a famous ‘King of New York’ photo of him with a crown on his head. The crown on Falstaff works as a double-entendre reference to *Henry IV*, which has a scene in which Falstaff pretends to be king.”

As always, the venue provided its own challenges. Boritt, the voice of experience in such matters, notes, “The Delacorte is enormous. The ‘proscenium’ is about 75’ wide and we knew we would have a smallish cast. So, we consciously made the playing space as small as possible. I forced everything downstage center as much as I could, in part because I wanted to do the huge revelation of the stage space in the last scene, when the main set goes away and we see the park.”

With so much detailed scenery to be disposed of, that climactic coup de théâtre is not easily achieved. Boritt notes, “Getting the center turntable offstage is hard, but Nick Moody, the tech director, said, ‘We’ll do it.’ We built the turntable into the stage; the floors of the interior sets are not attached to it. The pink shag carpet in Falstaff’s room covers the grass for the park scene. The linoleum floor in the laundromat gets pulled out, too.” The set was built by the Public’s scenic shop, with additional pieces provided by Tom Carroll Scenery, SFDS, and Empire Scenery. (Also used is the PRG Scenic Technologies Stage Command automation system.)

Boritt notes that he invested the design with a great deal of forced perspective, an approach calculated to give this broad comedy the right stylized profile. “But I didn’t realize how much harder it would be for everybody. The model took ten days longer to build. I said to Nick, ‘There’s not a right angle in it and it’ll be harder to build than it looks like it should be.’ Hugh Morris and Tracy Flaherty, who are great scenic charges, were painting bricks for months. It was a time-consuming process. Even our props team, headed by Alex Wylie and Sara Swanberg, had to make lots of forced perspective dressing to fit into the set. And, as always, I relied heavily on my

great associate Alexis Distler, and my assistant Romello Huins to help me with everything from the early designs to stapling the last bits of ivy onto the set!”

The tech period, always a trial at the Delacorte, was especially onerous, as it was accompanied by a spate of biblical bad weather. “The first three days, the temperature was over 100°, then we had ten days of frequent lightning storms,” Boritt says. “We went into previews with a third of the show not yet teched. It’s always a little rough at the Delacorte, but Oskar said this year was the worst.” Adding to the challenges, Ming-Trent sustained an injury early on and missed several performances, and then the production shut down for a few days when a member of the company tested positive for COVID-19.

Once it was up and running, however, the show’s comic highlights, and its loving embrace of the city, have won over audiences. Making a strong argument for the production’s concept—“My impulse with Shakespeare is to always set it in the here and now”—Boritt says, “My father was a Hungarian immigrant who came to the city in the 1950s, and, more than anything, I wanted to celebrate the immigrant experience in New York, from Chinatown to Brighton Beach to Harlem.”

## Lighting

Lighting designer Chang is especially skilled at combining a variety of looks (white light, saturated color, patterns, and other effects) into a unified design, an approach from which *Merry Wives* benefits. The early scenes blend warm and cold white light looks to reinforce the streetwise style of Boritt’s scenery. In a play teeming with plots and counterplots, the lighting also functions as a camera eye, directing the audience’s attention to the right characters on a sometimes-crowded stage. Then comes the final scene, when she bathes the now-open stage and surrounding greenery with luxurious saturated color. (Sadly, photos of this sequence were unavailable, as the theatre prefers to keep the effect under wraps to preserve a sense of surprise for the audience.)

But, like Boritt, Chang keenly felt the ticking of the clock, especially since the bad weather during tech slowed her down considerably. “The first preview was to be the first time we had seen the show from beginning to end, but it rained and we had to cancel,” she recalls. “We couldn’t do a dry tech because it was never dry. We always had drizzling rain or thunderstorms.” To keep the show on schedule, she found herself working until 4am almost every night.

This was Chang’s first time working in the Delacorte but, she notes, “I had some muscle memory from working at California Shakespeare Theatre [another outdoor festival], where I designed three or four shows.” That previous experience, she notes, “really helped in terms of knowing how to use my time. Without it, it would have been much



harder.” She adds that she and director Ali “sat there at night, talking through the scenes, imagining what they could be. We were often on the same page. I painted broad sketches, adding in details during later previews.”

To meet the production’s unique demands, Chang relies heavily on the production’s moving light component, which consists of 36 Elation Professional Proteus Maximus units, some of them placed on lighting towers to illuminate the surrounding trees in the finale and another set located at the front of house for face light. “I have an army of them,” she says. “I have one on each tower, two in lower positions in voms, and ten on the upstage left and trusses plus on the goalposts.” Despite the unit’s considerable size,

she adds, “It’s a wonderful light.” As a sign of the Proteus Maximus’ versatility, she says the units worked well for both the conventional lighting looks of the early scenes and the more overtly theatrical style of the finale.

In addition, Chang has at her command a conventional rig that includes 450 ETC Source Fours, 100 Source Four PARs, 16 Source Four Minis, and 30 mini-tens, plus 29 Chauvet Professional COLORado 2 Quad Zooms, 42 Elation SixPar 200 IPs, 21 Elation Paladin panels, eight Astera Titan Tubes, and five Martin JEM ZR44 foggers.

The production also makes use of Robe’s BMFL followspots, the first time an automated system of this type has been used at the Delacorte. “It was great not to worry



The green-and-white look of the laundromat was inspired in part by the colors of the Nigerian flag.





The Black Lives Matter sign on the set is taken from a mural on 125th Street, executive-produced by Harlem Park to Park, Valinc PR, and Got To Stop; curated by LeRone Wilson, with mural art by Wilson, Guy Stanley Philoche, Dianne Smith, Omo Misha, Thomas Heath, Lesny JN Felix, Joyous Pierce, and Jason Wallace.

about having to put people up in the truss,” running the spots, Chang says, also praising the units’ accuracy and color. “They aren’t rain-friendly,” she adds, which resulted in certain technical challenges during previews. “Overall, it is a very good light,” she notes. Lighting gear was supplied by Christie Lites.

The lighting is controlled by an Eos Ti console, programmed by Kelley Shih. “She’s an MA master,” Chang says, referring to the grandMA line from MA Lighting. “She uses MA more now, but she did a really wonderful job with Eos. She’s a genius.” And, in a true sign of the times, the designer adds that, with associate lighting designer Marie Yokoyama and assistant lighting designer Itohan Edoloyi, her team consisted entirely of women of color.

After the stressful tech and early previews, followed by Ming-Trent’s absence and the COVID scare, Chang says, “It was exciting to be back. We have very supportive crews; it was moving to see everyone working together.”

## Sound

*Merry Wives* provided the first opportunity for sound designers Kai Harada and Palmer Hefferan to collaborate. Each brought distinct strengths to the project. Hefferan has done eight productions with Saheem Ali; Harada, none at all. Harada adds that there was a third key member of the sound design team in Jessica Paz, who has designed at least eight productions at the Delacorte in addition to working there as an associate. “Basically,” Harada says. “Jess designed the system, and I came in and tuned it. Palmer’s task was more about music and sound effects and my focus was on reinforcement.” Also intimately involved was Michael Thurber who composed the production’s incidental music.

“Normally,” says Hefferan, wryly, “you would think this is too many cooks in the kitchen. But sound technology [in the Delacorte] is complex. It’s straightforward in the sense that *Merry Wives* is a well-made play. But the Delacorte is



a massive outdoor space and there's another layer of technology and thought that goes into that. Jess has the historical experience. Kai and I rode out parallel tracks at the same tech table—which was massively big because of social distancing. But we were able to build intricate, elaborate designs and have it sync nicely.”

Paz says that the *Merry Wives* sound rig reflects changes made during the summer 2019 season. “We moved to d&b audiotechnik speakers; we decided it was time to buy them because renting them year after year was costly. We went with the V-Series, with V12s for the arrays and E12Ds for the web, which is the arrangement of speakers hanging overhead on aircraft cable. The E12Ds are lightweight; also, we were looking for some weather-proof units. We also have some Meyer UPM-1Ps and UPA-1Ps hung lower to the ground, onstage, in the wings, and in the voms for effects.” Harada adds, “For the first time, they’re flying the line arrays off the lighting towers, which makes for much more even coverage.” To deal with the sometime-punishing weather, Paz says, “We put acoustically transparent covers over the speakers. Also, Meyer makes a rain hood for its gear.”

Hefferan’s work included effects—buzzers, phones, etc.—plus a host of music cues, including entrance music for many of the characters. (In one of the funniest bits, Falstaff, displaying his ardor, slips into “And I Am Telling You I’m Not Going” from the musical *Dreamgirls*.) She notes that Thurber, another regulator collaborator of Ali’s, mixed and matched musical styles: “There’s a lot of Afropop and Fela Kuti-inspired music as well as American hip-hop and some Wu-Tang vibes as well.”

Like Boritt, Hefferan also went to Harlem for inspiration. “I sat on the corner of Adam Clayton Powell and West 116th for a couple of hours, and then went up there two more times to do field recording. It sounds a little bit like a Manhattan neighborhood, but there’s more traffic since the streets have extra lanes. You pick up a lot of languages as well. I used all of that; not having designed at the Delacorte before, I wasn’t sure how much the ambient noise of the park would take over. It ended up being successful; you felt like you were listening to things happening in Central Park. We had sirens from the field recordings and sirens from the street. There are other sounds of the city—motorized dryers in the laundromat, bike bells.” Sound effects are delivered by QLab.

The production console is a DiGiCo SD7T. “It was Jess’ choice and the right choice for the park,” Harada says. “It was great to have the remote software; to be able to connect to a computer and see faders moving on the screen allowed the second mixer to learn the show. Because of COVID, there was a mandate that I wouldn’t be allowed next to Liz Coleman at the console. That was anathema, because I’m very hands-on, and so we specified the DiGiCo extension frame. As we got into tech, those regula-



tions got a little more relaxed, but we were prepared for a lot of eventualities. We had a second A1 learn the show so, in case something happened to Liz, Heather Motz could stand in.” Paz adds, “We use Apple MainStage on a Mac mini for reverbs, delays, and other effects.”

Of course, mixing in the park is a challenge unlike any other in New York. “One of the notes I had to give was to mix over the noise,” Harada says. “We have traffic, helicopters, and sometimes rowdy people in the park. It’s all part of the experience.” He notes that he adds a touch of reverb on the cast members in the final scene for an extra bit of atmosphere. Also, because of the cast members’ many accents, subtle adjustments are made from the console to make sure that all the key plot points are intelligible. The actors wear DPA 4066 mics with 6061s as back-ups and Sennheiser SK 5212 transmitters and EM 3532 receivers. Gear was supplied by Masque Sound.

Perhaps more than the other members of the design team, Harada and Hefferan were affected by the production’s COVID protocols. “It was a well-oiled machine,” Harada says, “designed to limit the amount of time the backstage crew would be face-to-face with the actors.” Initially, Hefferan adds, “We had rapid testing three times a week and pool testing once a week. There were also multiple zones, based on proximity to the actors. During pre-production, New York lifted its restrictions, and we went to pool testing twice a week. It was a saliva test; the only time you would get a nasal swab was if you missed pool testing days. Our tech tables were spread out with everyone in their own quadrants. My assistant and I were 6’ apart but then from Kai to me was 12’. We were outdoors and masked all the time, which gave us a little flexibility to have distanced conversations.”

And there was the difficult period of late tech and early previews, which Hefferan describes as “a Bermuda triangle of weather torture,” an assessment that her colleagues heartily second. Still, audiences are standing and cheering a production that holds the promise of a return to theatrical normality. *Merry Wives* runs through September 18. 🎭