

PERFORM

If you go

The Merry Wives of Windsor: 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday. Through May 26. \$10-\$35. Buriel Clay Theater at the African American Art & Culture Complex, 762 Fulton St., S.F. (800) 838-3006. www.African-AmericanShakes.org.

'The Merry Wives of Windsor': Shakespeare comedy set in the 1950s brings a sitcom sensibility to adventures of 2 housewives and a con man

By Chad Jones

When two lively housewives are nearly duped by a portly con man, they catch on to his schemes and hatch their own plan to teach him a lesson. This plot summary could be describing Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor" or an episode of "I Love Lucy."

That similarity is one of the reasons director Becky Kemper is setting her production of "Merry Wives" for the African-American Shakespeare Company in the 1950s.

"The 1950s work because the time period is modern but with enough distance to lend a sense of fable," Kemper says. "The '50s are pre-integration, so it makes sense that we're in an insular African American community with its own doctor and businesses and everyone was everyone else's neighbor. We're also pre-women's lib, so gender roles are strictly defined, and the comedy feels like something out of a '50s sitcom like 'Lucy' or 'The Honeymooners.' In that era, it feels perfectly natural for witty wives to be getting into capers."

Kemper, a recent Bay Area transplant from the Maryland Shakespeare Festival, which she founded in 1999, also sees parallels between "Merry Wives" and shows that ran on what became known as the "chitlin' circuit," theaters around the country that presented African American actors, singers and performers. It's that same circuit that evolved into what is now called the urban circuit, which gave rise to Tyler Perry and his brand of audience-pleasing comedy and moralistic drama.

"The styles of plays are so



Lance Huntley

Leontyne Mbele Mblong (left), Belinda Sullivan and Safiya Fredericks star in the African-American Shakespeare Company's production of "The Merry Wives of Windsor."

much the same," Kemper says. "In 'Merry Wives,' there's a lot of direct address to the audience, and it's set in a community full of recognizable archetypes like the preacher, the gossiping maid, the con man, the good wife, the jealous husband. The plot is about a good woman tempted by a con man who then wreaks revenge through a series of high jinks. It's very ribald, with a lot of wink-wink, nudge-nudge to the audience."

The final comparison, at least in this production, is cross-dressing. Shakespeare had men playing women and



Sydney Angel

Director Becky Kemper says the 1950s setting is modern but has a sense of fable.

Perry himself dons a housecoat to play Madea. In Kemper's production, she has a woman, Belinda Sullivan, playing con man Sir John Falstaff, a much-loved character who also appears in Shakespeare's "King Henry IV" plays.

"We call this our San Francisco twist on Shakespeare," Kemper says. "Cross-dressing creates a kind of hyper-theatricality that is broad but not cartoon-y, and is just right for this comedy."

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DON'T MISS

Continua in Light:

Against a video installation backdrop created by Cheryl Calleri and Thekla Hammond, a capella music, dance and audience participation explore the ways in which things become their opposites: darkness giving way to light, movement becoming stasis, one becoming many. 9 p.m. Saturday. \$15. Performance Art Institute, 435 23rd St., S.F. www.theperformanceartinstitute.org.

— Mary Eisenhart

Last Love: In a last-ditch effort to save his marriage, one man takes up arms to destroy it. Peter Papadopoulos directs the Mojo Theatre multimedia premiere of his play about love's struggle for survival in a world of perpetual warfare, in which chairs get thrown through walls and sex is a competitive sport. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays. Through May 19. \$25-\$30. Mojo Theatre, 2940 16th St., S.F. www.mojotheatre.com.

Chronicle Staff Report

San Francisco Girls Chorus: Soprano Jessica Rivera and mezzo-soprano Rachel Calloway join the chorus for the world premiere of "Santos," an oratorio by composer Gabriela Lena Frank and librettist Nilo Cruz. Joanna Carneiro conducts a performance featuring members of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra. 8 p.m. Friday. \$30-\$42. Mission Dolores Basilica, 3321 16th St., S.F. (415) 863-1752. www.sfgirlschorus.org.

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