

***Falstaff* - Verdi**

By Jessica Moss

Giuseppe Verdi built his musical legacy upon tragic opera, having composed no fewer than twenty-four. After the immense success of his last opera, *Otello* in 1887, Verdi took on a task he swore he would never do after the early flop of *Un Giorno di Regno* (*King for a Day*): write a comic opera. After working for three years on his new opera, in February of 1893, *Falstaff*, from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, premiered in Milan.

Verdi did not come to choose the story of Falstaff on his own. He was encouraged and assisted by his longtime friend and librettist Arrigo Boito. Verdi's dramatically-inclined mind was drawn to the Shakespearean character of Sir John Falstaff, who made appearances in *Henry IV* (parts 1 and 2), *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Boito contributed by condensing the plot and tightening its structure. He also added in a few lines from Sir John Falstaff's cameos in the other Shakespearean plays. By doing this, Boito created a little more depth to Falstaff's character. All of Boito's work allowed Verdi's genius to shine.

When Verdi was given the libretto he saw that the linen basket scene in Act 2 was the dramatic high point of the piece, which could potentially render the remainder of the show a disappointment. He made certain that the music rose to ever more spectacular heights. The enchanting fairies' music and the verismo-like love music culminated in the great fugal finale. Verdi did something very interesting with the female characters' music, too. The women of this show, integral to the plot, rarely sing solo numbers. These women, who never take themselves too earnestly, nor feel the threat posed by badly-behaved men, often sing in ensembles, the most notable being the Act 1 quartet with Meg, Alice, Quickly, and Nanetta. The entirety of Verdi's composition involved intricate rhythm sequences and many soaring melodies to create what the ear can only describe as musical laughter. Not only was this piece an incredible success, but it far surpassed what Shakespeare had achieved with the escapades of his rascally knight, Sir John Falstaff.

Falstaff is a great comedic protagonist due to his opportunistic drive. Because of this unscrupulous motivation we see his shortcomings as a person. We see his greed when he realizes that he's grown increasingly poorer, and instead of finding dignified ways of rectifying this, he attempts to prey on not one, but two wealthy women. This also showcases his pride, thinking that he could send the exact same letter to two women and not be found out. He is presumptuous in thinking that they would accept his advances in his condition - poor, old, and fat. He is gluttonous - not only does he indulge in consuming food and alcohol at an unhealthy rate, but he wants more women and money than suits any man's needs. Despite being a character described as "a rogue, a scoundrel who seeks to make the most of life's pleasures with no concerns for the morality of his actions," we come to appreciate and cheer him on.

We come to support Falstaff because of his optimism, quirky self-confidence and his ability to fortify his own ego. At the dramatic high point of the opera, Falstaff is sent on an unexpected dip in the Thames by way of a laundry basket. Hilarious to all the female characters, and the audience, this was a blow to Falstaff's ego. In the following scene, we see light shed on his humanity. We find him cold, wet, and alone as he shows us his vulnerable side. He admits his shortcomings and the embarrassing situations he's gotten himself into. Immediately, the heart-strings of the audience are pulled, and we can't help but commiserate with Falstaff. Then he does the thing that truly causes the audience to rally behind him: he laughs at himself. As an onlooker, we marvel at his ability to maintain his positive attitude not only toward himself, but the rest of the characters and the world despite everything that happens to him during the opera.

Ultimately, this show is a success because we're all in on the same joke, the joke of life. No matter what we plan or how we desire things to go, life will knock you on your backside and you have a decision. Do I laugh or do I cry? Sir John Falstaff shows us it's okay to do both. Take a moment to lament your situation, then laugh and keep going.