



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## A Triumph of Wit and Women's Solidarity

Volksopera of Vienna, 14.03.2025 [ENA]

Otto Nicolai's *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* is a sparkling gem of the German comic opera repertoire, and this latest production, helmed by the visionary director Nina Spijkers, is nothing short of a triumph. A production that revels in its humor while emphasizing the strength of its female leads, this performance delivers an evening of sheer delight, brimming with exquisite music and sharp comedic timing.

From the outset, it is clear that Spijkers' direction places female solidarity at the heart of the narrative. The indomitable Frau Fluth and Frau Reich, played with electrifying charisma and impeccable comedic timing, dominate the stage with their mischievous schemes and unwavering confidence. Their camaraderie is palpable, reinforcing the core message of the production: women, when united, can outwit even the most cunning of adversaries. The visual spectacle of the opera is just as captivating. Rae Smith's set design, infused with grandeur and an air of whimsical charm, provides a dynamic backdrop for the antics unfolding on stage.

The monumental vision behind *War Horse* is evident here, as the stage morphs effortlessly from bustling domestic interiors to the mystical, moonlit forest of the final act. The transitions are seamless, mirroring the opera's fluid blend of realism and fantasy. Jorine van Beek's costumes further enrich the visual feast, effortlessly combining period authenticity with a playful sense of exaggeration. The sumptuous gowns and Falstaff's increasingly ridiculous disguises elicit both admiration and laughter, enhancing the production's overall joyfulness.

One of the opera's undeniable highlights is the brilliant portrayal of Sir John Falstaff. As the hapless, boastful knight, the baritone brings both vocal mastery and a natural flair for comedy. His powerful yet agile voice lends itself perfectly to Nicolai's effervescent score, while his expressive acting ensures that Falstaff is both the source of ridicule and, ultimately, a character deserving of some measure of sympathy. His gradual unraveling—tossed into a river, forced into humiliating disguises, and finally tormented in the eerie midnight woods—becomes an escalating symphony of comic brilliance.

Frau Fluth and Frau Reich, however, steal the show. Their effervescence, vocal dexterity, and razor-sharp comedic instincts make them the undeniable stars of the evening. Their carefully orchestrated schemes unfold with impeccable timing, drawing peals of laughter from the audience. Their voices intertwine in dazzling duets, their chemistry reminiscent of the great comedic duos in opera history. Their victory over

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Falstaff is not just a matter of personal amusement but a statement on their agency, their intelligence, and their refusal to be diminished by the arrogance of men.

The secondary plot involving Anna Reich and her three suitors adds another layer of delightful complication. Anna, played with vivacious charm and vocal brilliance, refuses to be a passive participant in the marriage plans concocted by her parents. Her love for Fenton—portrayed with ardent sincerity—provides the production with moments of genuine romantic beauty amidst the farce. Their duets soar with tenderness, a striking contrast to the raucous energy of the rest of the opera. The ultimate twist—wherein Anna orchestrates the wedding mix-up to ensure her own happiness—cements her as a heroine of both wit and will.

The orchestral performance under the baton of the conductor is another reason this production soars. Nicolai's music, brimming with energy, humor, and lyrical elegance, is given a vibrant, full-bodied reading. The overture, with its infectious melodies and exuberant pace, sets the tone for an evening of lighthearted brilliance. Throughout the performance, the orchestra effortlessly balances the lyrical beauty of the arias with the lively rhythmic drive of the ensembles. The woodwinds, in particular, deserve special praise for their playful interjections, mirroring the mischievous spirit of the plot.

Spijkers' feminist interpretation of the opera is both subtle and powerful. Rather than imposing a heavy-handed modern agenda, she lets the narrative's inherent themes of female solidarity and self-determination shine through. The final scene, in which the women's cleverness triumphs, is staged with a celebratory energy that underscores the opera's joyful message: intelligence, unity, and laughter are the ultimate tools of empowerment. Even Falstaff, thoroughly chastened, seems to accept his defeat with good humor, recognizing the strength of the women who outwitted him.

The audience response was one of sheer delight. Laughter rippled through the theater at every expertly delivered punchline, and the standing ovation at the final curtain was a testament to the production's overwhelming success. Few operas manage to balance humor, romance, and social commentary as deftly as *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*, and this staging achieves that balance with exceptional finesse.

This production is a must-see, not just for opera enthusiasts but for anyone who delights in intelligent, uplifting, and utterly joyous theatrical experiences. It reaffirms *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor* as a masterpiece of comic opera while giving it a fresh, contemporary resonance that makes it feel more relevant than ever.

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