



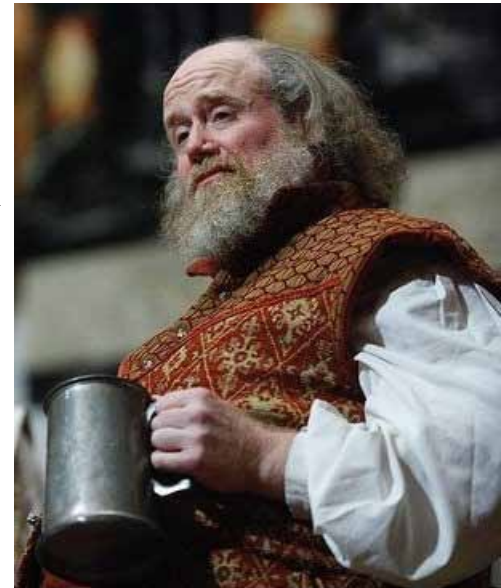
An interview with a Falstaff

Love of Life, Love of a Life: Love for the Fat Knight

By Eric Minton

Having witnessed what he considered some outstanding portrayals of Falstaff before playing the part himself, James Keegan was more influenced by characters from his own life, growing up the son of a man who owned an Irish bar in Queens, New York.

“The people who inhabit the Cheapside tavern are like the guys who came into my dad’s bar,” said Keegan, who played Falstaff in productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV, Part 1*, in 2009, and *Henry IV, Part 2* in 2010 at the American Shakespeare Center’s Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Va. “There’s a love of life but a dangerous edge of dissipation that reside in the neighborhood bar. So the characters who came into my dad’s bar have pieces of Falstaff for me, especially the Irishmen because they were very quick-witted.” He even saw Falstaff in his own somewhat-rotund father, who had a knack for offering the clever response to any and every comment or circumstance. “So, there was something about my father’s burliness and life that I felt very strongly in Falstaff, more so than other stage Falstaffs.”



This is fitting in that critics see Falstaff as a father figure to Prince Hal, an opinion shared by Keegan who has now played Hal’s two fathers—“There’s the father of our body and then there are the fathers that we choose,” he said—in two different Blackfriars productions. This may also go some way in explaining how Keegan became so invested in Falstaff that he successfully played the fat knight’s three distinct incarnations.

The most famous Falstaff is that of *Henry IV, Part 1*, where Shakespeare introduced this iconic character, first named John Oldcastle. For Keegan, acting in the production directed by ASC co-founder and Director of Mission Ralph Alan Cohen, everything he needed was in the text: in the rich relationship with Prince Hal (played by Luke Eddy); in the counterpoise with King Henry (who Keegan previously had played at the Blackfriars in a condensed production of the two parts called *The Most Lamentable Comedy of Sir John Falstaff*); and in the question-and-answer-format soliloquies. In *Merry Wives*, which was mounted first that season under the direction of ASC co-founder and Artistic Director Jim Warren, Keegan understood that Falstaff had

been lifted from the mostly serious, male-dominated world stage of England's government and placed into the slapstick, female-dominated domestic sitcom-setting of Elizabethan suburbia. After the passing of a year, Keegan revised his Falstaff in yet another completely different context with *Henry IV, Part 2*, a context in which his character is shoved to the side by other portrayals, in which his soliloquies are sermon-like, and in which he had a different actor (Patrick Midgley) playing Hal (Cohen directed this installment). For this, the most difficult of the three Falstaffs, Keegan found his strength in the fat knight as he himself had come to know him.

"The love of Falstaff that I had in *Part 1* sustained me in those moments in *Part 2* where I felt I wasn't as connected to the audiences as I would have liked to have been," Keegan said. "I still felt like, 'I'm Jack, and Jack can talk to anybody, anywhere at any time.'"

The Blackfriars Theatre itself also is a major shaper of performances. In the only replica of the indoor theater used by Shakespeare's own company, The King's Men, the American Shakespeare Center stages plays in the same conditions that those early Jacobean actors worked with, namely, universal lighting, no electronic effects, and an audience all around, including on the stage (the "gallant's stools") and in the gallery above. It's an atmosphere in which Keegan's Falstaff could not just talk to the audience but engage with the audience and even use the audience. For example, he made the audience in the stalls stand up to present as his army to Prince Hal at Coventry. He could ad lib if he felt a moment merited (Blasphemy! the Shakespeare purists would say—Did it all the time! Will Kemp, the original Falstaff, would say), jumping at opportunities like the night a nun in habit was part of this army of scarecrows. Keegan also took Falstaff into the "in-between space" of theater, not only using as a prop the bar cart rolled onto the stage for the intermission but robbing from the tip jar, something Old Jack would naturally be inclined to do.



ASC is a repertoire theater, with two resident troupes (summer/fall and winter) and a touring company that takes up residence at the Blackfriars in the spring. Many of the actors have remained with the company for more than a half dozen years, and this not only makes for a tight performing outfit, it can even become a psychological subtext for the plays themselves, as Keegan discovered when the actor playing Ford in *Merry Wives*, John Harrell, was cast as the Lord Chief Justice in *Henry IV, Part 2*.

Keegan reached the end of his journey as Falstaff with the epilogue that closes *Part 2*, an epilogue printed in both the Quarto of 1600 and the Folio in two separate parts, which scholars believe indicates that the first epilogue was spoken by Kemp in the public theaters, and the second epilogue was spoken by Shakespeare at a court performance. Keegan spoke a combination of the two, and he emerged on stage as himself wearing a Blackfriars T-shirt and jeans, carrying the Falstaff fat suit he had used the previous year in *Merry Wives* (he had two different fat suits for the 2009 season "because it made more sense with the shows being in rep and considering how much I perspired in the fat suit," he said). As the Falstaff fat suit knelt on the stage, Keegan delivered the epilogue that, in this context, became as much the actor's and audience's parting with this great character as it did a closing apology for the play. Keegan then danced a waltz with his Falstaff costume, took his bows, and exited.

In addition to the unusual circumstance of having played Falstaff not just in the three different plays but three different productions over the course of two years, Keegan has a scholar's knowledge of Shakespeare. But it is the Falstaff he came to know intimately on the Blackfriars' stage interacting with 21st century audiences that we discussed in our dialogue in the lobby of the Stonewall Jackson Hotel next door to the Blackfriars, and then over coffee and tea down the street at the Corner Coffee Shop on the morning of March 19, 2011.

*Eric Minton
September 14, 2011*

Had you ever played Falstaff before?

I had not. I had understudied the role before but never played it.

Which mounted first?

Merry Wives mounted first.

When you did that one, did you know you were going to be doing all three?

I knew that I was going to be doing *Part 1*, and I suspected that I would be doing *Part 2*, as well. That was a different season, so I couldn't be absolutely certain that I would be offered a contract for that season, but I was relatively certain that they had me in mind for both plays.

Did you go into *Merry Wives*, then, looking at the other plays?

I was already looking at *Part 1*. I taught *Part 1*. I've never taught *Part 2* in the classroom. So I was familiar with *Part 1*, very familiar with it. And then I'm in something of a clique of fellows here in the company who are great fans of Falstaff. Rick Blunt and Ben Curns are both great Falstaff enthusiasts, and Ben has played Falstaff a number of times. I saw him play Falstaff in *Part 1* in my first season here. He was in the touring company and I thought he had the real flavor of Falstaff. For a young man to have that much of a flavor of Falstaff was sort of shocking to me at the time. I was very impressed at how much of the flavor of the older knight a man in his 20s could have.

So how old were you when you played it?

I am now 49. I was 47 when I played Falstaff in *Merry Wives* and *Part 1*, and 48 when I played it in *Part 2*.

Did you have any performances that informed you, because there's not a lot of filmed Falstaffs out there?

Well there's *Chimes at Midnight*, which resonates for anyone because it's just fabulous, and I think [Orson] Welles captures so much in that film of how I see Falstaff on the page. Were there other Falstaffs that informed me? I don't think that there were. Even Welles, I sort of had him in the back of my head; I was aware of it, but I didn't think about Welles' interpretation when thinking about mine. I like to go back to the text. Not that I'm above stealing from other performances, because I certainly am not; if I think people have done good things and it makes sense then I do it. For instance, in playing Lear I was much more conscious of previous Lears and I had seen Lear on stage many more times than I'd seen *Part 1*.

The fact for me is that my father owned an Irish bar in Queens, and that informed me every bit as much with Falstaff.

Really? In what way?

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There's a blue-collar sensibility. There's a love of life but a dangerous edge of dissipation that resides in the neighborhood bar. So, I think the characters who came into my dad's bar, the guys who came in there, have pieces of Falstaff for me. Especially the Irishmen, because they were very quick-witted. My dad was very quick-witted. He never suffered from what I think the French call *l'esprit de l'escalier*, where you're going up the stairs later on wishing you had said something. My father never suffered from that. He always said the thing in the moment; it was the clever thing to say, and he never regretted later having not said something. He may regret having said something, but not having not said something. My father was a little on the rotund side, too, later in life. So there was something about my father's burliness and life that I felt very strongly in Falstaff, moreso than I think other stage Falstaffs.

I find it interesting that you guys put *Merry Wives* up first because, though it was written after *Henry IV, Part 1*, I sometimes see it as sort of a prequel to the *Henry* plays. Do you see Falstaff as younger in *Merry Wives* than in *Henry IV*?

It wasn't an age factor so much as a genre factor. It's like he's in a different world more than that he's a different age. So, I didn't see any kind of sharp disparity between *Henry IV, Part 1*, and *Merry Wives* as far as Falstaff's age goes. Seems to me he could be the same age; I have no problem with that. If I had been doing *Part 2* with *Merry Wives*, I probably would have seen him as being older in *Part 2*. Even though the action of *Part 2* comes pretty much on the heels

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of *Part 1*, there's a profound feeling in the play that his age is much more of a factor. Even though in *Part 1* he says things like, "Do I not bate? Do I not dwindle? Why my skin hangs about me like an old lady's loose gown," and that kind of stuff, that's more pose with Bardolph. I don't see that as being as much about age or anything like that, that he's dwindling away. But age is his great hang-up he comes back to over and over again in *Part 2*. So if I had been doing *Part 2* and *Merry Wives* in concert with one another, I might have been more aware of age, but it never really entered my mind much as a disparity for *Merry Wives* and *Part 1*.

For me, it was much more a question of genre. I started out thinking that the Falstaff of *Merry Wives* was cartoonish, that it was a cartoon of the other man. And part of it is that I have such great love for *Part 1* as a play and particularly for the relationship between Hal and Falstaff. There's something really beautiful about that relationship to me, and that's why what happens in *Part 2* is so horrendous and horrifying, because the relationship in *Part 1* is sort of lovely. There's nothing like that in *Merry Wives*. I felt that the thing that makes Falstaff really Falstaff for me is his capacity for love and his capacity for connection in spite of the fact that he's a parasite. But he's also large of soul, he's not just a parasite. He's the very image of life, indeed, as he says of himself. I feel there's a life about him and a sense of the nonsense of life, the BS of life and how people kowtow to that and are suckered in—the whole honor speech. I think he's aware, too, of the other side of life, of the id, the appetite, the eating and jesting life, and taking it in. He's aware of the debauchery involved in that, too, but he's also aware that something at the center of that is really great, really marvelous. But I softened a great deal toward the Falstaff in *Merry Wives*. The play showed me something of the fact that the same Falstaff is present, moreso than I thought initially.

In what way?

Well, in his desire to be loved [laughs]. In his desire for some kind of reassurance that he is not old; that's there, too. But otherwise he's plunked down into a silly little plot, really, and he's not the center of the play in a lot of ways. I think Ford is—they share the center of the play, which is great fun to do with John Harrell because he's so gifted as a comedian. We rarely in the past have gotten to have scenes together, we're usually in different parts of the play. We had a couple of scenes there together as Master Ford and Falstaff, and they were great fun to do.

I watched a recent episode of *House* that really put me in mind of the difference between these things. You have the House of the normal world of the show, and he's acerbic and intelligent and obnoxious and fantastic and gifted and tender at times. He's this full, remarkable character and Hugh Laurie certainly does the job of making him that character, and I feel like that's the actor's obligation to find all those things. And if you're Falstaff of *Henry IV, Part 1*, all that's there. There's richness and depth and different colors in the pallet. They did a recent episode on *House* where his love interest, Dr. Cuddy, may be terminally ill and he's having all these dreams and there are several dream sequences in which he dreams a zombie movie and they

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dream a musical, they dream the end of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which is terrific if you love that movie as I do, but they also dream a sitcom, like a *Two and A Half Men*-type of sitcom where she envisions her daughter being raised by House and Wilson. And it's a different genre, it's a different world, and you get to see Hugh Laurie as House in that genre. There are different tropes for that structure, and he's still House but here he is a different character, and you see if that were a sitcom with House, this is how it would look. So I feel like *Merry Wives* is like that compared to *Henry IV, Part 1*.

I feel somebody said to Shakespeare, whether it was Elizabeth or not, "I want to see the fat knight in love." And Shakespeare said, "Yeah, you know, let's take Fat Jack and plunk him down in this genre over here." He cannot be the same person in that world. It's not possible for him to

be the same person in that world. His concerns are not the same, the world's not the same. It's suburbia he put him in. It's a smaller world with different concerns. He's not on the great big canvas of who's going to rule England, who's going to be in charge and whether or not that person is going to be worthy of doing that. Even when he's in Cheapside, that concern is still there. The tour de force of that tavern scene where Falstaff performs both Hal and Henry IV, and then you get the scene where Henry IV confronts Hal, and Falstaff has been right about a lot of it, even to the point where the father's going to cry over this, and Henry IV comes to tears. Who would have seen this guy coming to tears ever? He's such a politician, he's such a performer. He even talks about his performance all the time because he's always on. He's such a bombast. I played that role before, so I sort of know. But it's remarkable to have that scene because it has all this rich performance in it, but it's aware of all the vital concerns of the situation. There are no vital concerns in *Merry Wives*. There's just trying to answer the urges of

masculinity and retaining that in the face of encroaching age. I'm dressing up as a woman, and all that stuff, and getting stuck in those situations. Certainly, with Gads Hill and otherwise, Falstaff is made an ass a number of times in the other plays, but not in that way. There's something very low and ridiculous about that, but it suits the genre that it's in. It suits that kind of comedy but would be profoundly out of place in the *Henry* plays, it seems to me. But they're more male, too, male worlds and the concerns are more male relationships, not male-female relationships, so that's a big difference, too.

But you still feel that it is Falstaff...

I do feel that it's Falstaff.

...and some of the Falstaff from *Henry IV* then informed what you were doing in *Merry Wives*?

I would never suggest for a second that Shakespeare hadn't written both those plays. And if somebody were to tell me that there was new evidence that *Merry Wives* was written before *Henry IV, Part 1*, I'd say I can't see how that's possible. Because it feels to me like he took a character that he already had and plunked him down in another form and said, "He can live here for a little space and he can be this," but linguistically in that play, in the text, in how he says what he says, in his interactions, in his id-driven self-concern, he seems like the same guy to me. He seems the same guy to me.

We know that with the Oldcastle and then the Brook joke, *Wives* obviously came after *Part 1*. As an actor, do you think it came after *Part 2*?

Oh, that's a great question. I would guess no, as an actor. I would think that, in fact, it might be a kind of interesting segue. Because his concern is about age. There's a concern about age running in *Merry Wives* that I don't feel in *Part 1*, but I feel very strongly in *Part 2*. Part of the reason he's so desperate to get it on with these younger women is to convince himself that he's still got it. That's an interesting question. I hadn't really considered that before but, yeah, seems like it falls between the two in development. To me, anyway, from the inside of having played the character.

I'm intrigued by the fact that you played *Henry IV*, and scholarship has it that Falstaff is a father figure, he's a substitute father to Hal. Having played both parts, what do you see?

Yeah, I think that's really true. There's the father of our body and then there's the fathers that we choose, and I think that that's true for everyone. If you're fortunate enough that the father of your body is also to some degree the father that you choose, then you are a fortunate person. Whether they be teachers or comrades or colleagues that you have later in life, there's a sense that people are fathers, parents to our desires. I think Hal has got to feel the pressure of being the son of this guy who is an almost purely political animal. It's even hard to like Henry. It's such a challenging role because he is such a politico that it's difficult to like him. Even Claudius in *Hamlet* is warm sometimes in his love for Gertrude and his desire for her. There's something humanizing about that in him. *Henry IV* doesn't seem human until he breaks to tears over Hal, because then it seems to me it's not just about who's ruling next, it's about I love you and I don't understand you and you frustrate me, that kind of thing. A lot of fathers feel that with sons.

But going back to your question, I think that ... well, my son just stopped by and my relationship with him is really important to me, so in playing Henry IV, I remember thinking a lot about my pride as a father and what I hope to impart as a father and what I hoped my son would struggle with and would not have to struggle with. If there were mistakes that I've made, I hope that he will not make them, that kind of thing.

Which is some of what Henry IV says.

That's exactly what he says, and it was great for me when I played Henry IV to have that kind of underpinning. The production was called *Falstaff*, a conflation of *Parts 1* and *2* that Ralph Cohen constructed himself, and I think Ralph would admit this: that it demonstrated that Shakespeare was very wise in separating Falstaff into two plays and not making him the center of either one because [*Falstaff*] didn't work ultimately, I think. So when I say that I played Henry IV, I did and I didn't because the cuts were heavy and we were trying to communicate a lot with less time to develop it, so that made it challenging.

But I still had that very strong awareness of Henry IV going in to playing Falstaff and the parallels are so sharp in the play that I don't think you can miss the fact that Falstaff is a kind of father to Hal. And what I was saying before is that Hal is under such pressure by his biological father and this political father that it makes sense that he would seek out a father of release, a father who says it's all right to be libidinous, it's all right to test that side of yourself, it's all right to find out about that. In fact, you should go find out about that; that's the better part of life because there are two messages, and Hal tells us from the outset which one he's going to choose. He knows what his responsibility is. But it's interesting that he has such difficulty releasing the other one. He only finally fully releases it after his father's death.

It's interesting how little time Shakespeare gives [Hal and Falstaff] together in *Part 2*. They don't have a ton of time together in *Part 1*, but they have two really rich scenes. *Part 2*, it's one scene, a partial scene even. Act 2, Scene 4, is very different in *Part 2* than it is in *Part 1*. It doesn't have the size and richness and hilarity—even the joke is lame. And Shakespeare is so willing to let it be less than; he actually compares it, parallels it. He puts in Act 2, Scene 4, the same gag, and yet it's not as good a gag as in *Part 1*. And then there's Doll Tearsheet and she wasn't there before and that's another conversation.

Pistol.

And there's Pistol. Pistol comes in and he does the energy of the old Falstaff, and Falstaff gets to sort of sit back and watch it. One of the things I asked Ralph in that scene was "am I doing too little? Should I be doing more? Should I be moving more because I'm not doing anything?" The answer is no, you shouldn't. That guy is doing all the moving; you just sort of take pleasure in what he's doing. But he's sort of doing you, the big, boisterous room filler, the performer. It's really interesting that Shakespeare does that, that he's willing to say, "Let's let Falstaff watch, keep Falstaff quieter." And then you get that moment of "I am old, I am old." I think that's more powerful as a result of that. He's been sequestered over there to the side and had to make room. But he does take Pistol on when it comes down to it. And he's victorious over Pistol, who's basically a stage soldier [laughs].

When I wrote about you in *Merry Wives*, I described your Falstaff as very nimble. And he should be because he's a cutpurse, he's a knight, he's a soldier, he's quick with his wit, so he can't be too drunk, he can't be too slovenly, he has to be nimble, and I thought you had that.

Oh, thanks. It's also the genre that he's in. He's in a comedy of that sort, and if you're in a comedy of that sort, you are supposed to be this sort of character.

But you maintained that through all the plays. He has a reputation for being a coward; he's called a coward, and the whole Gads Hill plot is to show how much of a coward he supposedly is, although Hal says something along the lines of "those guys will run and the other one won't put up too much of a fight, and if he does I'll stop," which I take it he means Falstaff.

Yeah, I take it the same way.

He does stand up to the knight there in *Part 2*.

Yep.

They don't get a chance to fight because of his reputation as a brave guy now.

Yeah.

And he fights off Pistol. Now, maybe anybody could, maybe I could fight off Pistol, I'm not sure.

I would think so. I would think so. Pistol has seen a lot of Marlowe on the stage, basically. He's seen *Tamburlaine*, and he knows how to do the stage version of heroism.

Did you have to do a balance on Falstaff between the reputed coward and the guy who became a knight?

I'm not a big one for back story. I sort of stay with the text that's there. But at the same time, some of the things that are said in the text make you think about back story. Shallow—although everything that Shallow says is nostalgic, so you have to be wary of trusting anything that he says; it's got the glow of memory about it, and we all know about that, the glory days' glow; his fisticuffs with Samson Stockfish behind Grey's Inn, a fruiterer [laughs]—but he says what Falstaff was like as a young man and that he was a page to Thomas Mowbray. Falstaff has been somebody who was educated in the martial arts as a page and as a squire, and then he has been knighted, so he's been to battle and one would assume that, put to it, he can fight, he can defend himself. Now, he has also married himself to licentiousness and debauchery and he's a big fat fellow and not the nimble, quick individual that he may have been in his youth. When he talks about Shallow's lies, he does say, "Lord, Lord, we old men are given to lying." So he acknowledges the fact that he too is capable of this. Yet at the same time, he is Sir John Falstaff, he has served as a page, he has served as a squire; he has served in wars, so this is somebody who probably would know how to

fight. He does fight Pistol off in that scene, regardless of how you stage it with the comedy and the like, but he's still capable of that. So he's a coward now, perhaps, but I think it's also partially because he's become disillusioned by his experiences with war. You know, it's like, "Why would you sacrifice yourself to this machine? Why would you give yourself over to this? When

you can have life? You risk your life by doing this, and it is it worth risking your life for any of this?"

I had an experience that might factor into this. We went out to L.A., and we went to this ranch, and we were driving on this curving, mountainside road and could only go 15 miles per hour coming down. And it was scary, I'm frightened to death. I was telling a friend about this and I said, "I don't know why I was so frightened," and she said we get more frightened as we get older. Falstaff is old.

I think he's old, but he's also committed to living and to enjoying life. I think he sees all this warring and I think he's just grown cynical about it, and it's like "I've heard a lot of dishonorable people talk about honor and I'm so fed up with that." It's just that he's smart, for one thing. "You can talk it all you want but it's like you can't handle the truth," you know what I mean? [Laughs] It sort of comes down to that: He's not Colonel Jessep in *A Few Good Men*, but he's the comic side of that same argument: you can't handle the truth: honor is a lie. Ben Curns told me a great story about doing that scene on the road at a military academy and a whole bunch of the kids got up and walked out on the honor speech. To them, honor is about something very different.

I think he's got a piece of "is not the truth the truth?" And that's what's there to love about Falstaff. Rick Blunt and I actually trade texts that are nothing but Falstaff lines as a way of getting back in touch with each other. If we haven't talked in a while, he'll send me a Falstaff line. That's it. And then I'll send him one back: I'll answer with a Falstaff. So we have this little antiphonal Falstaff talking to Falstaff. And he actually has "Is not the truth the truth?" tattooed on his leg. So we come back to that all the time, back to "Is not the truth the truth?" If you admire nothing else about Falstaff, it seems to me that that's the thing to admire: "The truth is the truth?" And this is from a liar, a guy who will lie in a moment to get what he wants, but at the same time the reason he will lie and know that it will work for him is because the truth is the truth. And even at the time he says, "Is not the truth the truth?" of course he's lying. That's one of the most beautiful parts of it. He's telling this big Gads Hill lie and he says "Is not the truth the truth?" And yet I think he knows that the truth is the truth and it's abused all the time, so why not abuse it to your advantage?

Did you find *Henry IV, Part 2*, particularly challenging compared to the other two, because Falstaff seems to stumble from one situation to another?

I felt I was very at home in *Part 1*. I felt like putting on *Part 1* was a hugely comfortable thing for me.

Was that because of your awareness of it?

I think it was because I love the play. I just think it's beautifully written, beautifully balanced. You have Hal and Hotspur balanced off against each other, you have Henry and Falstaff balanced off against each other, you've got that tour de force tavern scene where you get to do all this performing and Hal performs and Falstaff performs and there's balancing there, as well. You get the great opening scene between Hal and Falstaff, not that it opens the play but their opening scene, is a marvelous communication of a loving relationship. Ralph was great when we did that scene; he said to me and to Luke, "You can go 180 degrees, and you should. You

should say things that sound bitter, angry, and so hateful, and in the next minute, you're just completely loving." It was one of the most helpful pieces of direction he gave me because I don't think I was willing to push to that extreme all the time, I was trying to maintain the love under the anger. But, of course, when real love is there, you cease to worry about that. You know you're going to come back to love, so you can be as pissed as you like.

It's funny how I answer *Part 2* by going back to *Part 1*. *Part 2* was much more challenging for me in that I didn't know the play at the same depth that I knew *Part 1*, and also I think the age factor is more present, highlighted. It's funny because I had done *Lear* not long before, and I'd done *Titus Andronicus* in the same season, and *Titus* is an older character and his age is an issue, but he's Roman old, too, you know what I mean? So he may not be all that old and he's also a warrior and still a very capable individual. *Lear* is supposedly in his 80s; we didn't worry so much about that age. We conceived him as more in his 60s or something; we took out

He doesn't get it; he thinks it's just good night. But it's the big good night instead

the line "four score and upward" in our production, but I had thought about age a lot for that, and Jim Warren, who directed that production, said to me when we were talking about age, "What I want you to do is take away youth. I don't want you to try to play age, I want you to think about how do you remove youth." It was helpful, and this is why, when you work with a director year after year, they get good at talking with you. At least Jim is really good

at talking to actors, different actors in different ways. I think it's one of his real strengths as a director. I think of him as a real actor's director; he listens to you, he'll take your ideas. But he'll also learn who you are and learns how best to communicate with you as an actor. At least I feel that. And it was a great, helpful thing for him to say to me. So I think that informed Falstaff in *Part 2*; it's more like youth is being taken away from him, that he's feeling it slip away, so that was helpful.

But the play is challenging because of scenes like that Pistol scene. I'm not doing anything. I'm sitting here watching all this. What is that about? There's not the same connection with Hal throughout the play. And it was a new Hal, and Patrick and I are great, great friends, but I had gotten into a rhythm with Luke that worked real well for *Part 1*—I don't know how anybody else perceived it, but for me it worked. I liked having Luke in that position. But I really liked Patrick, too, so I thought this will be great. But then as we were talking about it, I realized, my God! we have almost no time on stage together before you reject me really. So how do we, with no *Part 1* for some of the audience—some of the audience will have seen *Part 1* and they're going to know *Part 1*, but some of them are not—how do we communicate all of that?

In the first part of the play, Luke and I had talked about "I do, I will," because that's the terrible moment in their performance where he basically tells Falstaff, "Here's how this play is going to end, the play that is the play between you and me," and he's telling him the end of *Part 2*. He's playing a king and he's saying, "I do, I understand my position, and when I am in this position, I will." Luke and I talked about it, he was asking me what I thought about the scene, and I said "This is the crux of the scene; we have to communicate a lot with these lines and my response to them is important. This 'I do, I will' has to drop the bottom out of things. And the 'I do' has to be different from the 'I will.' The 'I do' can be part of the play [within the play] and the joke, but the 'I will' is not funny.

[In *Part 2*], Patrick and I came down to “Falstaff, good night.” Hal comes into that one scene in 2.4; he’s there for a while and he plays a joke on Falstaff that’s not unlike the Gads Hill joke but not as good, he watches Falstaff with Doll, and then has this communication with Falstaff and then he’s called away. We thought about it the same way [as “I do, I will”], that “Falstaff” is one part, the “good night” is the other part. So, “Falstaff” is the look up, connect with each other, love—oh my God, I love you—and then “good night” is goodbye. Falstaff can’t hear it as that, but Hal has to understand it that way. Then Falstaff gets to say that great thing right after that: “Now comes in the sweetest morsel of the night, and we must hence and leave it unpicked.” He doesn’t get it; he thinks it’s just good night. But it’s the big good night instead. Hal says it with a consciousness that Falstaff can’t have. At least, theatrically, we thought of it that way; the audience has to read that Hal is saying good night in a profounder way and Falstaff doesn’t hear it at all. I just lifted my glass like, “See you later.”

I’ll tell you the part of *Part 2* that I had thought about and I knew a lot about going in and that’s the final scene. I had thought and thought and thought about what happens in this final scene with this confrontation. The only thing I knew was that Falstaff was not going to be able to believe this, that it had to be like he’s waiting for the joke, that

The way we did it was to really make apparent the separation of character and actor and by doing that to make apparent the joining of character and actor, that there are always characters and actors simultaneously, and that’s what we come for.

there’s a joke in this, that the guy is in a crown and he’s in a big cape, but the joke is coming. “I know, you’re having me on.” And when it doesn’t come, the only thing I knew was that it had to be signaled—Falstaff’s acceptance of it had to be signaled physically, so it had to be a moment where you see it hit his body. That was the only thing I knew going in.

Then I had the gift of the epilogue. I knew the epilogue was there; I’d always sort of known about it from reading the play. But we had the Blackfriars Conference in the year that we did *Part 1* and *Merry Wives*, and one of the scholars in the Blackfriars Conference did a piece on Will Kemp saying this epilogue, so he asked me to perform it in the fat suit. I said, “Sure, I’ll do it.” We’re sort of enlisted to help scholars, and I said sure because I was directed to say sure. But I was also eager to do it and interested in it. When I got finished doing it, Ralph and I looked at each other and

we’re like, “Well, we’ve definitely got to do this.” Then some other happy things happened with that in the course of rehearsal, so that it grew into something I think very special, and it has particular special elements for me.

But I will say I was not as comfortable in *Part 2* as in *Part 1*. I wasn’t as sure of myself going into the scenes, and I think part of it has to do with the fact that Falstaff is left of center in a lot of the scenes where in the past he would have been center. When he is in the tavern, Pistol’s in the center of a lot of that scene where Falstaff normally would be. When he’s getting his recruits and talking about his army, Shallow is in the center of the scene where normally Falstaff would be, and Shallow’s responsible for a lot of the energy, and Falstaff is responsible to watch, appreciate, and comment and respond to these individuals.

Then in the Gloucester banquet, it's first Shallow and then Pistol.

Yeah.

Interesting.

It is interesting. He's on the way out. It's like he's off center, he's off the center of things, and the energy of the play is almost carrying him out, away from the center of things.

But the juxtaposition to *Part 1*, where he's in a play that has Hotspur and Glendower, the title character, Prince Hal—he's one of many characters and he becomes the centerpiece for that play.

Because Hal is so important.

Then in *Part 2*, where Falstaff's popularity was established by that time, and it seems to be, "Here's Falstaff going from one adventure to another and, oh, by the way, Hal becomes king."

Yeah, even in his speeches. This was the thing where it was really apparent in the Blackfriars, because in the speeches in *Part 2* he is not talking to the audience the same way that he is talking to them in *Part 1*. In *Part 1*, his speeches have questions in them, and in *Part 2*, they have no questions. He just says, "Here's my ideas about sack. Let me just tell you about that," and he holds forth a while. "Here's my ideas about lying old men. I'll just hold forth for a while." They're great speeches, but it's not the same level, it's not the same type of engagement as "what is honor?"

But how did you make it engaging, because I'm going to go back to what I wrote, that what to me made that production so great was you, was your Falstaff?

Which production?

***Part 2*. At the end, I jumped to my feet. I come from the English standard...**

A-ha! so you don't stand.

I don't stand, unless everybody else does and I want to see.

People stand up in Blackfriars all the time. It's always funny to go to productions in other places and realize it doesn't happen all the time.

And there I jumped to my feet in the end, and also to *Henry VI, Part 2*, I did, too. Anyway, it was how engaging and endearing your Falstaff was that I thought made *Part 2* a very enjoyable play for me when I did not expect it to be as enjoyable. So you did something. You turned these holding forths into an endearing character. Could it have been the Blackfriars itself? Your sack speech utilized the vending cart and you robbed from the tip jar.

That was a decision based on *Part 1* when we had been talking about an interlude and there's a couplet that says—I can't remember the exact couplet—but it has to do with a guest and feast. And I said to Ralph, "Is it too much of a violation of the locus and plataea of the stage—normally we'd say fourth wall, but there's no fourth wall in the Blackfriars and there wouldn't have been for Shakespeare—for me to get the bar cart and sort of lead the audience into the interlude and use that as a way of punctuating this couplet but also get Falstaff into that gray area, of keeping him in that in-between space? And Ralph was like, yeah. I misremember these things a lot of times, but I do think that idea came from me in *Part 1*. I pulled the cart out, I took a bottle and threw it up in the air and caught it in the other hand and headed out.

So in the second part, Ralph said, “I’d like to bring back you bringing out the bar cart.” And I said, “Well, it works great with the sack speech.” The tip jar idea did not come from me. I don’t remember exactly who it came from, but it was gold.

Yeah, it was so Falstaff.

I like it too because it’s such a violation of the separation of character and actor, because you’re in an actor’s space. If you’re stealing American dollars from a tip jar and you’re this English character 500 years ago, there’s something marvelous about that. And I think especially because of the epilogue in that play, it’s clear that the audience understood that Falstaff and Kemp were somehow one and the same, that Shakespeare’s audience saw them as inseparable. Because he talks about his dancing; that’s Kemp talking, not Falstaff talking, and he probably would have still been in the fat suit—and he did wear a fat suit, we know that—and he probably would have still been in it. Also, that epilogue is weird because it’s two epilogues slammed up together, and one of them is an author’s epilogue, so it would have been Shakespeare probably saying it at court, and then the other part is clearly Kemp. But we had a mash-up of the two of them and we had our own cuts in the version that we did—small cuts, not huge. But that epilogue is about that blur, too, and the way we did it was to really make apparent the separation of character and actor and by doing that to make apparent the joining of character and actor, that there are always characters and actors simultaneously, and that’s what we come for. So I like that moment with the bar cart because I thought, “Here is a little violation before the ultimate admission of what we already know.” [Laughs]

In Blackfriars, you’re able, in *Part 2*, all those holding forth speeches you can give to the gallants on the stools, you can give them to...

The gallants on the stools, you can give them out to the house, you can distribute them around, and it’s important to distribute them around the room. I will tell you that it did not feel the same as *Part 1*. I very often felt like the audience was not connected to me [in *Part 2*]. It’s an intangible, it’s hard to read. I think it might be a function of the seriousness of the play and about its concerns about age and that kind of thing.

Did you feel that generally or every night?

I felt it generally. Some days were better than others. I’m talking specifically about the speeches, not with the whole play. I think I felt that way [a compared to] *Part 1* where I’m asking people questions, where I was making the entire audience stand up at one point, and then riffing off of that when opportunities came up. I was allowed to ad lib and I was encouraged to ad lib when things went wrong or things were funny, and we had some great things go wrong and funny in those moments.

There was a nun in the audience one night and I focused on her. I just said at one point “For their poverty I know not where they got that,” and I said, “Well, except for the nun, she took a vow.” She’s sitting in the middle of the stalls in a habit, so it’s like everybody is very aware of this nun the entire production, so if you don’t do something with it, then you’re not showing up for your job, as far as I’m concerned

When I got all of them up one time, there was this one woman down in the corner, first row of the stalls, and she wouldn't stand up. Everybody else stood up; she wouldn't stand up. There was nothing I could do. I went over to her specifically; I'm like [he motions to stand] "Come on," and I just said something very clever like, "Women!" which was not good. It was like she won that battle. So, at the end of the play, I'm hoisting up Hotspur's body [played by Tobias Shaw], flung it over my shoulder, and Hal had left the glove on his face. So, every time I would throw Toby over my shoulder the glove would flop behind me and sometimes it would slide off the stage. I would go over and try to pick up the glove while I had all this weight on my back and Hal came in and talked with Westmoreland. I'm occupied, and this is why they hadn't seen me; I'm over here trying to get this thing, it's not too disruptive, they can still be talking. So I went over to get the glove, it was still on the edge of the stage, and this woman who wouldn't get up earlier, gets up and hands me the glove. And so I say, even though Luke is talking, I say, "Oh, now you get up," and the whole place fell out. It was just one of those moments, you couldn't ask for that, but you have to show up for that, you have to be there for that.

That's the problem with this theater, you've got to be at every performance.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's the thing. Any theater, but especially here.

What I call only-in-Blackfriars moments.

Yeah, yeah, that's really true. It's one of the reasons I love working here, because that's exactly the kind of thing that can happen.

This is the way I would put it to you. I was very thankful to have done *Part 1* while I was doing the speeches in *Part 2*, because I felt like *Part 1* made me feel like I was Falstaff, so no matter what would happen with the audience in *Part 2*, I understood that I could be comfortable as Falstaff. So what I like to think—I always worry about how egotistical I'm going to sound—but

When you can hear the silence behind you and around you and you know everybody is right with you in that moment, it's a pretty terrific feeling. Got to be the reason to do it.

what I like to think is that my comfort with Falstaff by the time I did *Part 2* came through in those speeches. I could really just have a conversation with the audiences. They didn't feel like performances; they felt like conversations. And yet, like the sack speech, was so orchestrated. Every move of it was so planned and orchestrated as to when do you take the next drink, you have to be able to drain the bottle, there has to be this much in the bottle, you have to go back to the cart at this point. All of that stuff was very precisely worked out, and we thought about it for a long time and adjusted with performance. But it still always felt spontaneous to me. Like the dance steps were set, but how they get danced was a function of the moment. I think that's probably true in all acting situations, but again in the

Blackfriars it's different because you're looking people in the face, and they're looking you back and you feel like some of them are with you and you feel like some of them aren't. I feel like they've glazed over sometimes.

With the honor speech, it's very hard to feel like they weren't really with you because you are asking them questions, and even if they don't speak aloud, they nod, they smile. There's something about being asked a question directly that makes people respond differently, facially and

everything. They understand that you asked them a question, and by asking a question, you're saying, "I'm inviting you in." But when you're up there giving a speech and there are no questions, it's "Here's what sack is and here's how it affects your body," this kind of thing—it's a great speech, he talks about the body as this little kingdom and I can still do the exact blocking, the sword's in my hand, I do this on the heart. But you have to trust that they are already with you, because you're just going, you're just riffing.

It's not like playing Iago, because Iago asks all these questions of the audience. It's not like playing Hamlet, though I haven't played Hamlet. It's not even like playing Claudius, because even Claudius, his soliloquy, is asking questions and it's really interesting to see Falstaff in Part 2 not asking questions. It's almost like Shakespeare is so confident that this is a loved guy that it was like, "Let's just give him some party pieces," and then he pulls the rug out at the end where he just shattered him into nothingness, where all his words have been taken from him. And maybe that's—and I hadn't really thought about it that way until now—but maybe that's what that's about. Here's this guy who can give this speech on old men and "every third word a lie" and then give the sack speech and then Hal tells him, "That's it, buddy," and he pulls the rug out and he's like "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds." I mean, it's an amazing thing to have said; he goes right to the heart of the thing. But then in the next minute he tries to deny it; he goes into denial mode.

Henry IV, Part 1, along with King Lear are my two favorite plays. I love all the characters. Hotspur is great. Yeah.

But I've never seen a good production of Henry IV, Part 1, until we saw the one here.

Wow, well that's high praise.

I think Luke Eddy might have been the key. If you have a really good Hal, it all comes together.

I really liked his Hal. I heard a couple of people who didn't, but I really liked it. I think he was charismatic and he's likeable. There's just something deeply likeable about him.

He also did it right after coming off of Hamlet. I wonder if that informed his Hal.

Maybe.

The key is the relationship with Falstaff. In my notes I compared you to Lennon–McCartney, Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons.

[Chuckles]

There's a connection on stage.

I'm glad.

So that when you're doing the tavern scene, and I even picked up on the emboweled joke at the end, that got a huge laugh. I've never heard a laugh like that from that line, and that can only happen after two hours of...

Connection, yeah. I'm happy to hear you say that because I met Luke in Texas, actually. He was working with my son; they were working together at the Texas Shakespeare Festival, and I was really happy when he came up to work with the touring company. And I think in part because he was close to my son, Tom, I got exposed to him in a hurry because they were friends, so I think that sort of made it easier for us, too. When we hit our rehearsal period, we already had a connection and liked each other.

So how important is that connection in making Falstaff work?

It was important to me. I've never had to experience it in another way, so I don't know what it would be like if it were somebody that I didn't like, that I didn't connect with. When Patrick came into the season, I remember thinking "I hope I really like this guy" because it makes a difference when you play *Henry IV, Part 2*. So when Patrick and I hit it off almost immediately—he's just an immensely likeable guy—that made it easier. But I was also—and this is nothing off Patrick's performance—I was sorry that Luke wasn't going to be there for *Part 2*. It would have been nice to carry through with the same Hal, for me, just because I felt a good connection in *Part 1* so I would like to have reproduced that in 2 or extend the performance, especially when you still have the same Henry IV and we had a lot of the same folks. And it was great to have John [Harrell] as the Chief Justice. I really liked that piece of casting. To me, it was nice to have that interaction with him in the early going as the Chief Justice.

Also in the rejection scene.

Also in the rejection scene, and also there's just a little, little, little relationship to Ford and Falstaff. It's the most tenuous relationship, but for me it's part of the joy of working in rep. Nobody else has to feel that echo, necessarily, but I feel that echo in me as an actor. I know that this is the same actor that was Ford to my Falstaff in *Merry Wives* and now here he is in a similar kind of highly serious role; there's just a parallel there. It's those reverberations that I love in rep. I don't know if any of the audience is aware of that, but I'm aware of it the whole time I'm acting. It makes my job better.

And it comes through in the acting.

It informs everything, all the interrelations are there to me, I think. I may not be cognizant of it all the time, but I do think about things like that; it does come into my mind, and I feel that if that comes into my mind, it must get into my body and my spirit and the moment.

In changing Hals, I guess the key is, does the rejection scene work? And it did, it seemed to come off. I'm feeling sorry for you but at the same time I'm going, well, yeah...

"You should have seen it coming," yeah.

And that's the thing, too, isn't it? That's the beautiful human moment of that play, I think. It's when we always stand outside other people's relationships and we say, "Oh, my God, how could he not have seen this coming? Everybody around you could see this coming, and you couldn't see this coming?" And it's like, "Well, you know what? I was in love. I couldn't see this coming, I thought we defined this relationship, I thought it went this way, and I was counting on it."

That's the thing about Falstaff, too. This is the only horse he's backed, and it hasn't come in. That's wow! It's sort of shocking to think you put all your money on that and to have it pull out at the last second. Must have been like working with Bernie Madoff, you know what I mean? Suddenly it's all gone. And the first thing he says is, "I owe you a thousand pounds. That can hardly be, Master Shallow." And where did he spend a thousand pounds in that time? He's

had no time to spend it. He hasn't bought any liveries. He goes back to see Shallow after the battle and he says, "I have to go." Shallow's like, "No, stay stay." So he stays. But you've got to figure he was leaving because he's already got the thousand pounds and wanted to get out of there. And something attracts him to stay. The scene was deeply cut, but we had a big conversation about why is he staying? What is it drawing him here? And part of it was he just wants the ease of this life at this point. He doesn't want to keep on with the next thing, on with the next thing. "You have here a goodly dwelling and a rich," he says to Shallow. He has just been admiring all this guy has, and then Pistol walks in and says, "You got what you wanted. It's all come in.

Right, and then he loses both.

He loses everything, yeah. I used to try to get that in the physical moment so that Patrick would reject me and I would just be sort of shocked. Patrick would then say, "My lord chief justice, you're going to be in charge of this." So then I'd look at John and I'd want to get all of our contact before into that moment, that now he'd won. And I never thought he would win. I was going to be the winner in this one. So it's this look of utter shock, that, "Oh my God, this guy! I was such a smart ass, too, and I got in his face, and now he's my boss, he's in charge of any possibility I may have? I'm so deeply screwed." So when Patrick would go out as Hal, I would do two steps upstage toward him and turn my back entirely to the audience as if I were going to try to make one more plea. My hands were up and, after he'd gone through the curtains [at the back of the stage], the first thing was to drop the hands. That's the resignation, that's what I wanted it to read, that the audience would see. And then two maybe three beats, "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds." Just growly and as low as you can get it. So it's defeat. It's great. The moment you live for as an actor, you know? When you can hear the silence behind you and around you and you know everybody is right with you in that moment, it's a pretty terrific feeling. Got to be the reason to do it.

Did you feel it most nights?

I felt it every performance with that show, regardless of how other scenes had gone. Everybody in that moment. What we got some nights, where he says "I know thee not, old man," somebody in the audience would go "Oh, no!" How great is that! They didn't believe it was coming either, even though they knew it was coming, and they would audibly say, "Oh, no"? Fantastic!

When you were talking about *Merry Wives of Windsor*, you mentioned that Falstaff seems to be somebody who wants connection. I noticed that in *Part 2*, the Doll Tearsheet [played by Ginna Hoben] relationship was done as a very loving relationship, which I'd not seen done before.

I think it's a mistake if you don't do it that way.

That's what I was going to ask you. Do you feel that that worked and do you feel Falstaff is somebody that the women, especially, and Hal genuinely love?

Ahhhh, you've got to listen to the women. I think it's important, I think it's really important. We know how silly Mistress Quickly is and how stupid she is about language at times,

but she's got the best of hearts, she's got the best of hearts. Just because somebody's a whore doesn't mean they don't feel deeply and they don't have connections. I think what Mistress Quickly says about him, "I've known you 30 years. I've never known a better-hearted man," that's fantastic praise to get, and I'm not on stage for that. It's the sincerest type of thing to have

Falstaff's women, you really rely on them to communicate to the audience that this is a worthy individual, this is a man full of goodness.

walked off and somebody said this about you. Somebody that the audience loves says this. So, yeah, Falstaff's women, you really rely on them to communicate to the audience that this is a worthy individual, this is a man full of goodness.

Ralph and I had this discussion about Doll Tearsheet, and Ralph feels very strongly about the tenderness in that scene, and I think he's right about it. He wanted it to be loving. And again it's a little like the flavor of the Hal relationship, that you can be loving and yet at each other and impatient with each other and joke each other in a harsh

way about your genuine foibles. She says, "When are you going to patch up your old body for heaven?" And he says [Keegan here takes on a Queens Borough inflection], "Don't speak to me like that, don't talk to me like that, why are you talking like that, what's the matter with you?" that kind of thing. But she's also the woman he can say to, "I am old. I am old."

I always love Shakespeare for his repetitions, his direct repetition of a line. It doesn't happen all the time, but it happens every now and then. My two favorites are "I am old. I am old." And "No cause. No cause." That's what Cordelia says in the reconciliation scene to Lear. And I always say to my students, "A lot of playwrights would have written 'No cause,' but very few playwrights would have trusted themselves enough to write it a second time.

Speaking of that, Falstaff has the most famous repetition line, "Banish not Jack Falstaff thy Harry's company, banish not Jack Falstaff thy Harry's company." How did you approach that because that's such a troublesome thing to read?

That is not at all troublesome. Actually, it is not at all troublesome in the moment because, remembering the context in 2.4, he's performing Hal to Hal's Henry IV. So my solution for it was that he's still playing Hal in the speech "most kind Falstaff, true Falstaff," but he's also right on the edge of going back to being Falstaff, "And therefore valiant Jack Falstaff, banish not him thy Harry's company," and the second one is "You know who I am" and it's really Falstaff as Falstaff. "Banish not him thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack and banish all the world." So, to me, it was end of performance between the two. The first one is, "If you were talking to your father this is what you should say about me, that I'm all these things and so don't banish him your Harry's company." The second one is, "You're going to be king and you've got to keep me close, banish not him thy Harry's company. Plump Jack is all the world." To me, I had no trouble with that one; it was a nice transition.

And I always loved the way Allysa Wilmoth (who next June will become my daughter-in-law, as it turns out) did the second "no cause" [in *King Lear*]. Because the first one, Lear can't hear, he's so racked with guilt over the way he's treated her. So she says, "No cause," and people say things like that as "You know, don't worry about it." But the second one, she has to get right

into his eyes and say, “No cause, I’m not kidding you, I love you so much I don’t care about anything that happened in the past.” It’s a shattering thing. If it doesn’t make you cry, why have you not been paying attention? [Laughs] Because that should make you cry. That should make you cry. And it’s astounding, it’s the most Christian moment in the play in many ways, that I’ve erased all sins, I’ve erased all offenses, I have utterly turned the other cheek. It’s an astounding thing to me.

So the “I am old, I am old,” was the same thing. The first was—you know, you have to sort of admit you get accustomed to saying it—“Yeah, I’m old. I’m middle-aged now, I’m old now,” whatever. “I’m old.” And then suddenly, it hits you like a ton of bricks: “I am old.” And that’s not for anybody, that’s me suddenly admitting it to myself. So that was the great moment of getting that: “This is the way Doll and I always play, ‘You love me the best, you love me better than any young guys, and I’m old I know, I know what your profession is, I know what’s what, I’m not a dope, you know, I’m old.’” But then it’s like, “I am old.” And then she says this beautiful thing: “I love you better than any of those youngsters.” And the next thing he says is, “What stuff wilt thou have a kirtle of?” He believes her immediately. Immediately. That’s why I think Ralph’s right about that, and I think the only way to play it is there’s genuine love between them.

And then we found the moment of the ruff in rehearsal, that Pistol had murdered her ruff, so it’s lying on the table there afterwards when I said, “Farewell, wenches” and I kissed Ginna as Doll Tearsheet. Then I would turn, and as I turned to go, I see the ruff on the table, so I would pick it up, hold it to her, it’s her favor, tuck it in my doublet. And every now and then we’d get a little vocal reaction sometimes from the audience, you’d get an “ahh” or somebody would register it and realize, that’s love, when you say I’m going to take a piece of you with me and that’s going to sustain me. So it was nice to find that in rehearsal, because it’s a little thing that only actors can find with each other. It’s not written in the text, you’re not told to do that, so those are the real special moments.

So only in Shakespeare would you have a very tender romantic moment between Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet.

I don’t know about only in Shakespeare, but it’s part of the genius. And to do it the other way where she’s just a whore, she’s just playing him and she’s just driven by the basest of drives, that it’s all monetary and it all doesn’t have any depth to it—you can play it that way and I suppose people certainly live their lives that way, but he tells her to sit on his knee. There’s music playing for them in the background. I mean, this is the lady and the tramp, the scene is set up for this; he’s trying to be romantic with her and they speak truths to each other. They speak the deepest truths to each other. “You need to change your ways. Heaven’s coming, your death’s coming.” Only the people closest to you can get away with saying stuff like that to you. Nobody else has the right to it, but they’ve been intimate with each other.

But you mentioned where you could do it the other way, where she could be very cynical. You could also play it very slapstick, not that I’ve seen it that way; you said he’s trying to be romantic, you could do a very slapstick version of that.

I suppose so. Although he does say, “Sit on my knee, Doll.” Slapstick is hard to do from a

seated position, you know.

[Laughs] But you feel the tenderness is integral to the character, the play's emotions...

I think it's in the text. I think it's in the text. I don't see how you avoid it.

...And the theme of his feeling old.

It's interestingly assisted in some ways by casting, because Ginna Hoben is very pretty. So, if you cast a very pretty Doll Tearsheet, a pretty and young Doll Tearsheet, one then wonders what if you cast one just past her prime, and what if she's not as immediately, standardly attractive as the audience would normally read, she doesn't look like the stage version of Jennifer Anniston, which is who Ginna Hoben looks like. If you look at the BBC version [filmed in 1979]—to me you're not going to see a better Falstaff in some ways than Anthony Quayle; he's got a sense of that character.

He did it back in the 1950s, too.

Yeah, yeah, the guy knows what he's doing. And it's strange because it's TV, so he gets a lot of closeups, so it's hard to really assess what it would be like on the stage because he could go very quiet with his voice and he's got the great burst blood vessels on his nose.

And doing a soliloquy while he's peeing.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's great stuff, and I have great love for that performance—but in the *Part 2*, look at the Doll Tearsheet; she's a horsey kind of unattractive woman, and she's real sharp-voiced and harsh-voiced. Ginna has a voice that can have a real harsh edge, and she certainly may use it in that Pistol scene, but I think it's very different to see someone [like Ginna] who looks physically like a romantic lead as opposed to someone who looks more like a broken-down whore. And I do wonder about that, what would happen. Because those are features of it, too, some of the decisions get nudged for you or assisted in casting. I used to play up her leg on one line, and I'd lift her skirt because I thought there had to be physical intimacy in there; he has to take liberties because he's used to taking liberties with her and they would not be seen as liberties, so I want to communicate for the audience a sense of that; this is somebody he's very physically comfortable with, he can reach up under her dress in a second, no problem. Because that's what he does, that's fun. When you uncover Ginna Hoben's leg, it's a helluva nice leg. So those are features of the play. The whole stage picture communicates everything.

Falstaff seeking a sense of connection to other humans, would you put the audience in that as well? I'm thinking of comparing with Richard III and to a degree Iago. The only friend Richard III has, perhaps other than Buckingham, is the audience. We're the only ones he's taken into his confidence.

"Friend" is an interesting rendition of that. He makes them complicit, I think that's certainly true. He assumes their sympathy with his position. And Iago does the same thing; he assumes their sympathy with his position.

And Falstaff does the same thing...

He does the same thing. When I played Iago, I remember one performance saying, "How am I then a villain to counsel Cassio to this parallel course, directly to his good?" And this woman over on the stool said, out loud, "You are just so mean." [Laughs] And I turned to her and I said, "Divinity of hell!" You couldn't write it better than that. It was an answer to what she said. I'm like, Shakespeare's brilliant.

But, yeah, it's a friendship that's weird in that there's an assumption of sympathy and a creation of complicity, I think. But those two are villains. Falstaff may have his birth in the medieval Vice character, but the medieval Vice character is funny because in the medieval Christian plays Vice could only be defeated, it was always going to lose. So Toby Belch, Falstaff, they're Vice figures, they're all what we want to do some times, like just give over to our appetites. I don't know if we want to do what Iago and Richard do; they're angry, bitter individuals and there's a difference there. They're certainly attractive, and some part of us responds; we would like to take our cold revenge that would pay the world what it deserves, I suppose. It's odd to me to group Falstaff with them but, of course, Falstaff isn't them either; in that, in a bizarre way, he's not essential to the plays that he's in as they are to the plays they're in. The play's not called Falstaff. And I think there's something important about that. It is *Richard III*. It's not *Iago*, of course, but it's such a small play cast-wise and he's so directly Othello's nemesis.

He directs the plot.

He does direct the plot. He's Hamletesque in that respect, yeah. He builds the plot, and he does it on the fly, God bless him. But that's what you love about him, isn't it? He's playing on the fly the whole thing and it's a con man's game. Part of the attraction is playing that con on the fly and riffing with whatever comes up, and I think what I love about playing Iago is that sense that here's a guy playing it on the cuff. It's great. He says it all the time, like, "What do I do next? Here's an idea, let's go with this for a while and see what comes up." You've got to have a lot of self-trust to do that. And it's hard not to admire somebody who trusts himself that much.

Falstaff is not central...

He's not at the center. Somehow he's central. It's a mystery. [Laughs]

He's not at the center of the two *Henrys*, but he is at the center of *Merry Wives*, but he's not even the title character in *Merry Wives*, either.

Yeah, and he's not who the play is really about so much. Well, it's shared, Ford and Falstaff, their two different human imbalances are punished in the play. And you have the marriage plot. So we have the marriage of satire and romantic comedy, but the marriage plot is so boring. Ann and Fenton or whatever. God, so boring. Who cares about them?

And the subplot with the Host doesn't make any sense at all.

Yeah. Did you ever read Auden's lectures on Shakespeare?

No.

W.H. Auden, his lecture on *Merry Wives* is basically, "It produced Verdi's great opera, let's listen to it for a bit." He listens to a bit of the opera, then he moves on to the next play. That's it. That's all the credence he gives to *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

But going back into Shakespeare's time, *Henry IV, Part 1*, you have a play in which *Henry IV* is the title character, Prince Hal is the hero of England, the future *Henry V* everybody knows him, he's already George Washington or Abraham Lincoln out splitting rails.

Right. Until you read the real story and you go, whoa.

And you've got Hotspur and you've got Glendower and you've got all these great characters, and Falstaff emerges immediately—or Oldcastle—immediately as the most popular character out of that play. And to this day, Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's most famous creations. Why?

Yeah, Harold Bloom spent a whole lot of space talking about that.

Yeah, but I wanted to hear it from an actor.

[Long pause] To me it's just, I guess, two things, if I had to define it. It's a commitment to the force of life and a rejection of moralistic BS, and at the same time the deep irony of somebody who is willing to manipulate that to his advantage. To say that he is pure appetite and purely selfish is wrong. We're told over and over that he's not. And he has a generous disposition about him. I think a lot of it is accomplished in his desire to speak directly to the audience and

[Henry IV] is like the technical actor, the actor who is really technically good, but you feel like you can put your hand right through the performance, you don't feel any flesh to it. And Falstaff is flesh, you know? Whatever else may be said, he is great with flesh.

his ability to speak directly to the audience. How do you not like a guy who is willing to talk to you that directly? Certainly Henry IV is not going to talk to you that way.

In a sense, he straddles the worlds. I hadn't thought about this, but I suppose it doesn't make him—well maybe I shouldn't talk about it since I haven't really thought about it; it's my academic head that's coming in. He is kind of a trickster figure in that he walks between the two worlds; he walks between the world of the elevated aristocracy and the lower class, and he can find a place in both of those worlds but, in a way, he doesn't belong to either.

Or do you think it's just pure force of personality.

Well, there is that, isn't it. But what does that mean finally, when you say it, what is pure force of personality? What is it like compared to even Henry IV? Henry IV talks about his performance and how he got people to love him, and

it's all strategy for him, it's all empty. He's not saying people love me because I love them, he says, "Here's what you do, you don't let them see you too often. When they see you they've got to see you in this particular way. You don't go around like Richard showing yourself to them all the time until they're just fed up with you and they're not hungry for you, you've got to keep them hungry." I mean, that's very coldly strategic. It's like the technical actor, the actor who is really technically good, but you feel like you can put your hand right through the performance, you don't feel any flesh to it. And Falstaff is flesh, you know? [Laughs] Whatever else may be said, he is great with flesh.

And maybe that's what it is, finally, It is the sense that he is deeply, profoundly human, flawed, aware of his flaws, still committed to himself and committed to life and skeptical of all the stuff he's told he ought to believe. "Who am I gonna serve? Why should I serve you? Why should I serve your ends? Why should I serve your needs?" On the other side, if you have an entire army of Falstaffs, you're in deep trouble.

I don't know, better than the army he put together.

Maybe.

I guess it's our sense that we always need that element that doesn't buy the program. The program says, "Here's what you ought to do, here's how you ought to be," that whole moralistic side of things. That's the paternal voice that says, "Here's what I need you to do, here's what

you must do, here's who you must be." How many people have rebelled against that? It's there to be rebelled against in some respects, and Falstaff is there to say the rebellion is worth it, that there's another way to live life. We all feel that at one time or another, you're going ahead and doing the thing that you taught yourself to do, and you're making the living you're supposed to make. How many people wake up and hear this voice and go, "What the hell am I doing? What is this about? I don't want this." And whether they actually mean that or not, it's probably just the encroachment of mortality, a reminder that you are a limited human being and all the things you hoped you had time to do, you will not have time to do. And now you must make choices. And there's a sweetness in that, too, because limitation makes a force; as you narrow the hose the pressure gets greater.

Priorities.

Yeah, the priorities. You start saying no to things.

50 is a magical number.

It sure is. It sure is. It's very clarifying.

And you think he's clarified?

I don't know. He seems to be, but at the same time he's not really relying on himself. He's relying on somebody else. He has positioned himself so that the power of his future still resides in someone else's decision. So he's caught in the illusion of a power that he doesn't have. He feels like he's won Hal over and that means he has one very measurable blind spot.

Your comment about illusion; You're referring specifically to the *Henry IV* plays but could also be true in *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Oh, yeah.

He's caught in an illusion of how he views himself. I always thought that we view ourselves as 20-year-olds. We think we're still 20 or 21.

I still do.

I do, too.

I worked out with my son this morning, and I viewed myself like that the whole way until, right in the middle of the workout, I realized that he was 25 and I was 49. But I still finished.

Falstaff is the same way, he still sees himself as a young man.

He sees himself as a young man, absolutely. As much as he is getting it on with these women, it's wanting to be loved, but he also talks about their money. He wants money. That's what it's about, he wants money so he can continue his lifestyle. That's what he needs. It's shallow and mercenary. He doesn't want to love, he wants to be loved.

But I think in the *Henry* plays, he loves Hal. And that's in there. Hal is not just a meal ticket, and the audience knows that because that moment of rejection wouldn't be so devastating if this were just a meal ticket he was using. That's why Patrick and I decided to embrace in 2.4 when he saw Hal. I said "I'm going to embrace you like you're my son because I need this in this moment. I need the audience to have this; they have to know that you and I love each other." And they'll know it in the torment of each other, the joking back and forth, but they need to know it physically; they need to see this. That's the way I feel about it. I don't think it's probably appropriate to the time. I don't know that Falstaff would have embraced the Prince of Wales or would have had the right to do that. I did wonder about that when we did this decision. I wondered if, historically, this would have been possible.

One last question...

Let me say something to you before you ask me this. My ability to answer any of these questions is in part an illusion. There are ways in which I know this character that I can't articulate. Doing it on stage, there's no way to describe what it is to me. That sounds kind of bland. I hate the way that sounds, but anything I articulate now a lot of times are realizations after the fact. I enjoy doing this interview because it makes me think about a thing intellectually that I thought about sort of physically. I don't know if that makes any sense. When you're acting the play, at least for me, I'm just in it. So I release a lot of the thinking about it at that time. I've written about a performance and I've found this to be strange. I mistrust myself as to what I'm saying now that I think about it and what I actually thought in the moment.

I understand that. But this is also a reflection of how it all worked.

Yes. I felt that it worked.

Or this may not have worked as well and we could have done this.

Yeah. Like the Gads Hill robbery. I never liked that. I just thought we never got it. Never got the blocking of it, never got it to be as funny as it should have been. Just didn't work for me.

I'd think it would be difficult on [the Blackfriars] stage.

Very difficult on that stage, but it was written for that kind of stage, so that makes me wonder, what the hell are we missing? The touring troupe's version of it in 2004 was brilliant, because it was in slow motion and it was hilarious to a *Chariots of Fire* kind of song behind it, ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch. To watch people slowly bounce off Falstaff's stomach, hilarious stuff, hilarious. But, of course, I don't think Shakespeare had the cinematic effect of slow motion, I don't think Shakespeare would have done that.

He wouldn't have even thought about it. Well, my last question, based on what you just said, is not as stupid as I thought it might be. I had written, based on your *Merry Wives* performance: "Keegan so believes in his Falstaff as Falstaff believes in himself." Is that an overstatement?

No, the greatest thing about doing that role is to be in love with the character you're playing and to believe in him. That's what I was trying to communicate to you about the speeches in *Part 2*: that the love of Falstaff that I had in *Part 1* sustained me in those moments in *Part 2*

where I felt I wasn't as connected to the audiences as I would have liked to have been; there wasn't the same interplay. I still felt like, "I'm Jack." And Jack can talk to anybody anywhere at any time.

I wrote this about *Merry Wives*, which means I saw it in you on your first Falstaff—when you were giving soliloquys about how you will do this and do that, this is somebody who believes he can.

Oh, yeah. He's heroic in that respect. He really does believe in himself. And he believes he's right. Honor, don't talk to me about honor.

But is that part of the key to playing Falstaff is to not ridicule him as an actor but to be...

Well, if you ridicule Falstaff as an actor, you've missed the whole point. You don't love him, for one thing. You can't ridicule the character you're playing, even if it's the deepest, ugliest kind of villain. People say "find the love," but there's a truth in it. There's a truth in that. I have to understand him, I have to believe in his motivation, whether it's Iago, whether it's Lear. I think Lear believes in his heart that when he divides that kingdom, he is doing the right thing. He's

The idea of waltzing with myself, waltzing with Falstaff—for the actor that's what it is: the role comes in, you waltz with it a bit, and you leave it, and pass on to the next thing.

an egotistical, foolish old man who is not able to admit his folly and his age; he only admits his age to the degree that it suits him. And Falstaff, he's sure he's figured it out, he knows where the BS lies, and all you've got to do is enjoy your life and align yourself with the right person and you're going to be OK. Because it's all a matter of who you know. It's not what you know, it's not how brave you are—you know, "There's honor for you: it's a dead body. You want honor, you want to look at honor, there it is: object lesson. Because that's what it will bring you to." He's not wrong about that; the hard pursuit of honor will bring you there. I mean, there's a lot of people who take pride in the fact that they are willing to make that sacrifice. Falstaff isn't

one of them. And you've got to respect that point of view, too. Some people would call it cowardly, some people would call it sensible [laughs]. It makes him very skeptical about heaven, too, I think. I suspect he is something of an atheist. This is the life. This is the life you've got and you need to be happy with it.

Our epilogue was the moment where—you know, what a gift to be able to express to the audience how much I loved Falstaff and how much I am connected to Falstaff. And to do a little bit of stage magic to get out of that fat suit and come out with it—of course, it wasn't the same fat suit, it was the *Merry Wives* fat suit—which was another beautiful part to it for me because I had all of my Falstaffs with me on stage in a sense, and then when we found it could kneel by itself on the stage, it was just like this wonderful discovery. I say, "I kneel for you" and I put him down and he kneels, so I am him, he is me, this has always been true the whole time, but now you see we're completely separate from each other and it's an illusion. You're in love with somebody who has never existed. He doesn't exist, and you're in love with him.

When we opened the show, my mom was dying that night in New York, so it was particularly poignant that night. She hung on until the next day so I got to say goodbye to her, but for all I

knew she was gone. In fact, I even went like that [crosses himself] at the end because I thought she took a sharp turn that day and there was no getting to New York on time, we thought, so I said: "I'll stay and do the show." I'd seen her a few weeks before. But it made all the age stuff and made it all so deeply poignant. And then Ben had come up with that song "The End of the Movie" that I sang at the interlude, and then we reprised the tune so I could dance with the costume at the end. The idea of waltzing with myself, waltzing with Falstaff—for the actor that's what it is: the role comes in, you waltz with it a bit, and you leave it, and pass on to the next thing. And I left it on the stage, took my bow, and left. Poetically, it was just terrific.

And part of that's the fact that you did all three Falstaffs.

That's what the sense of it was, yeah. I had done all three and if I ever get to do them again, I'd be delighted, but I've gotten to do all three and I could say goodbye to the role, for now anyway. It was so poignant in so many ways. It's just a gift; it will be one of my great memories for all time.

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