

BECOMING SIR JOHN:

Bryn Terfel on the Joys of Playing One of Verdi's Greatest Characters

World-renowned Welsh bass-baritone Bryn Terfel has triumphed as Falstaff in Sydney (where he made his role debut in 1999); Lyric Opera of Chicago; the Metropolitan Opera; Milan's La Scala; the Royal Opera, Covent Garden; and in Cardiff, Vienna, Munich, Hannover, and Monte Carlo. A few days before San Francisco Opera rehearsals began, Terfel spoke about this signature role...

How has your Falstaff changed over the past fourteen years?

I used to go more for the comedy, instead of what Falstaff really is—very melancholic, fallen on hard times. He's a cuckold for the Windsor ladies who make fun of him, but he has the last laugh at the end!

What qualities in the character attracted you initially?

His ability to pick himself up and dust himself off is undoubtedly a strength—and one glass of warm wine brings some light into his day! Verdi gave the bass-baritone voice a role we all want to be a part of. It's a role that puts a smile on *my* face and also on the *audience's* face. The scene where Falstaff jumps into the basket—he's always flirting. I can flirt to my heart's content when I'm rehearsing *Falstaff* and these ladies won't do *anything*, but when I drag them into my basket on stage, they're giggling away!

You stand in the "royal line" of Falstaffs, which includes several legendary Italians and a marvelous Welshman...

I know my compatriot Sir Geraint Evans [who sang Falstaff at San Francisco Opera three times] was one of the finest Falstaffs, even alongside Tito Gobbi. I knew I had a baton to carry forward.

Were you advised by Sir Geraint himself regarding this role?

I was a youngster wanting pearls of wisdom, and he gave them to me gladly. He said, "Take care of that first scene—it's the biggest hurdle you have in the piece." And he'd say, "Be careful of the monologue in the third act."

Roger Pines is dramaturg of Lyric Opera of Chicago, where Terfel sang the title role in the premiere of Olivier Tambosi's production of *Falstaff* in 1999.



On Falstaff:

*If I put one opera
on a pedestal,
it would be this one.*

Especially try to keep people's interest when you go to the forest, and do it *vocally*. People have an interest in your dynamics, your coloring of the words. Verdi gave us a vehicle, so don't take it for granted, even if you're singing it for the hundredth time in your career."

Those two monologues are hugely demanding...

[Laughs] Thank you for reminding me! *Falstaff* is such a fast-moving score, so transparent, so light, that the monologues melt into the action happening on the stage. A singer should particularly enjoy them, because Verdi wrote magnificent pieces for you to sing, to play around with, to be flexible with. You can't be the same in each performance—you have to give something different, a new color.

Is there much opportunity for beautiful legato singing?

Not much! Until the forest scene, when he counts [the hours] up to midnight. That's also one of the most *amazing* sequences of chords that Verdi ever wrote.

So much of a singer's effectiveness as Falstaff depends on projection of the text.

In my singing it's always been that I'd rather be heard through my diction rather than my singing prowess. Most probably you'll have remnants of my explosive consonants spitting over the orchestra into the audience!

Terfel in the title role of Falstaff at Houston Grand Opera



MARTY SOHL



KEN FRIEDMAN

Terfel's previous San Francisco Opera engagements include the title role of *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1997) and *Nick Shadow* in *The Rake's Progress* (2000).

What gives you the greatest musical joy in Falstaff, whether in your character or any other?

I think it's in Fenton and Nannetta's music. That's the *pulse* of the piece—the youth, the love, the absolute carefree attitude of two people besotted with each other.

When onstage in the role, dealing with the fat suit seems so easy for you.

You're never at ease with it. It's the bane of your life—a ball and chain! One good thing about it is that toward the end of a production, you might have left a stone [14 pounds] and a half in the fat suit, because of the amount you sweat. That's something the San Francisco public may not like to read, but it's hard work! At La Scala, he was a rather slim-looking Falstaff. I'm more for the traditional look, having him as fat as you can. He's been on those burgers, he's eaten quite a few pigs straight off those splints. His look, I think, is of a certain importance to an audience's enjoyment of him.

Clearly today your devotion to the opera itself is stronger than ever.

If I put one opera on a pedestal, it would be this one. Of course, gone are the choral tableaux, the monumental arias that bring an audience to their feet. This was a different Verdi with a different

cloak, but when you have that fugue, *everybody's* happy—on top of the fact that we're all counting like mad!

How do you feel at the end of a Falstaff performance?

A mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration, with a sense of joy and happiness. You see it in your colleagues' faces. Most of them are young colleagues as well—that's coming from a singer who has been around the block a couple of times, thirty years in the profession. I'm certainly enjoying the fact that I can come back to Falstaff, because I honestly want to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for the biggest number of performances of this role. And I'm eternally grateful to San Francisco Opera for inviting me back for a role that I particularly enjoy.

You were most recently at San Francisco Opera during the tenure of Lotfi Mansouri, who passed away in August.

I would look forward to going to San Francisco because I would always meet Lotfi there. I'm incredibly sad not to be seeing him there this autumn. Lotfi gave me wonderful opportunities to sing *Figaro* [1997] and *The Rake's Progress* [2000]. He was always very supportive not only of young singers cutting their teeth, but also of the stalwarts of our operatic profession—he liked to invite them back—and that's a great combination. Every good young golfer likes to play with an older golfer to watch and learn. It's the same in every profession, isn't it? 🌻