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Theater: The RSC Comes To BAM With The Epic Presentation "King And Country"

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KING AND COUNTRY: SHAKESPEARE'S GREAT CYCLE OF KINGS *** out of ****
BAM

David Tennant (that's Doctor Who, to the groundlings) as Richard III! The great Antony Sher tackling Falstaff! The young upstart Alex Hassell as Henry VI! Yes, it's the Henriad or perhaps half a Henriad depending on your point of view. The Royal Shakespeare Company tackles four of Shakespeare's History Plays with one sprawling company. I could happily dissect each individual play -- my complaints about *Richard II*, my pleasure in much of *Henry IV Parts I and II*, my surprise at the ever-glorious punch of those famed rallying cries in *Henry V* and so on.

Yes, like any big messy affair such as this, the Henriad is a slow-moving target ripe for skewering. But it must be said that as an experience, seeing all four plays in the space of six days (one on Tuesday, the other three on Saturday and Sunday) was unique and pleasurable. You had the fun of seeing actors pop up in varied roles, such as Jane Lapotaire starting things off in black at the start of *Richard II*, mourning her husband Thomas of Woodstock in a grand style that announced perhaps these four plays were really about *her*. And there she was again at the end some 12 hours of drama later, in greyish-white as Queen Isabel of France, wryly suggesting that perhaps a woman's presence would bring sense to the proceedings.

It was a rare feast to see this story told all at once. Reading the plays in a gulp simply doesn't have the same power as immersing yourself in a darkened theater and watching actors bring it to life over a span of days.

Still, I had questions aplenty both large and small. Why suddenly do we get modern dress for the chorus in the last two plays? (A Rolling Stones t-shirt?) And why does the chorus change his outfit several times seemingly for no reason in *Henry V*? Why did Jasper Britton (a fine actor especially good as the feeble and sick with dread Henry IV) fumble a tad not just during *Richard II* but again in *Henry IV* four days later? Why isn't Oliver Ford Davies even more famous? Does Alex Hassell look more like Rufus Sewell or Jude Law, the bastard? And even if assassins dressed as ninjas, didn't someone realize they looked a little silly as a marauding gang in *Richard II*, growling and mumbling like peasants in a Monty Python skit?) Yet I'd do it all again in a heartbeat and only wish *Henry VI I and II* and *III* and *Richard III* were on tap this week. (Fans of the BBC's *Hollow Crown* take on the Henriad will be delighted to know they're doing the second clutch of plays this fall.)



You're left with a host of impressions, marveling how seamlessly these plays work together and on their own. The echoes of human frailty and ego, the lingering effects of evil deeds poisoning future deeds however good-intentioned, the relentless march of history both shaped by and somehow indifferent to the desires of people both large and small -- it's all here. Rather hilariously, the History Plays are the works of Shakespeare that are somehow less beloved than both the comedies and the tragedies. I suppose something had to come in third (or fourth, if you include the sonnets). After a lifetime of theater-going, I've never even seen *Henry VI* even once for lack of opportunity, while I've seen *Hamlet* a good X times (on stage) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* eight or so times. And I've ignored plenty of *Hamlets* and *Bottoms* over the years while I would jump at a decent *Henry VI* just to get it under my belt. Like Falstaff, my appetite for drama is prodigious.

Of course individual History Plays are popular. But these cycles of four or eight of them done in repertory seem to be lifting the status of the work as a whole higher and higher. As a singular accomplishment in his remarkable body of drama, the eight parts (plus the spin-off *Merry Wives*, another one I've never seen) loom larger and larger. They're getting more attention, more academic study and most importantly they're being performed more.

If you can, see them all before they're gone come May 1st because how often does one even get the chance? If you can only see one, well *Richard II* boasts an excellent star turn by David Tennant. *Henry IV* is dominated not by Falstaff (thanks to a more nuanced and real Sher in that usually too boisterous role) but by the ensemble as a whole, with the tavern scene where Prince Hal plays his stern father and Falstaff plays the wayward youth an especially vivid success. And *Henry V* is a slap-dash crowd pleaser, as usual.

Director Gregory Doran keeps flourishes to a minimum. What you get here are clear, unfussy presentations of the plays, not any interfering vision overlaid on top of what Shakespeare already offers. As a result, none of the plays wow but there is a certain cumulative effect with vivid impressions remaining after all is said and done. Tennant is very good indeed, with his dawning realization of how poor a king he's been the real tragedy at hand since it comes too late. (Though I think the trendy habit of showing Richard's "special" friend the Duke

of Aumerle as his murderer cheapens the ending and that character's story.)

Sadly, Tennant is only in *Richard II*, whereas Sam Marks is allowed to shine in all three dramas. His scene of intimacy with the King as the Duke of Aumerle is a highpoint of that piece. And there Marks is again as Ned Poins, one of Prince Hal's ne'er do well pals, proving yet again an honest friend of sorts, though this time royalty will abandon him instead of the other way around. And finally he's on the side of the French in *Henry V*, frustrated by the foppish Dauphin (Robert Gilbert in a too-silly wig), making yet another strong impression in a smaller role. If Julian Glover and Oliver Ford Davies effortlessly show why they've had substantial careers, Marks shows why he by all rights should in the years to come. Also making a strong impression in a generally excellent cast is Matthew Needham in the usually one-note role of Hotspur. Yes, he's still fiery in temper but Needham makes this Harry a compelling, complex, endlessly interesting figure.

The other notable flourish in the first show was a score featuring three sopranos that was especially striking. (Charlotte Ashley, Helena Raeburn and Alexandra Saunders did the honors.) Boldly, the launch of the *Henriad* began with some five or ten minutes (or so it seemed) of their glorious singing. The sound and setting was so impressive it made me long for some programs of similar music at the BAM Harvey in the future. Sadly, this musical signature was not maintained. *Henry IV* had no vocals and *Henry V* mostly used music for martial effects (naturally) and as comic relief.

Henry IV was where the grand ensemble of the RSC came into its own, the broad canvas filled to bursting with strong performers. Falstaff is a fail-safe crowd pleaser and one could say Antony Sher was born to the play the role. But that would be redundant since Sher is born to play pretty much any role he fancies. Here Sher doesn't woo the audience and neither does he play the fool. Falstaff is more human, dirtier and less appealing without failing to let us see why Hal might tarry with him, for a while. A rascal? Yes, but not an inherently charming one. When his hand shakes with tremors while reaching for a drink, it's not played for easy laughs but sounds a more pathetic note. This Falstaff's days are numbered, one knows from the start. That makes his deluded joy over Hal ascending to the throne a little puzzling at the end since this Falstaff may boast and brag but he's always realistic. Sher moves you, but it's not an end that ties in with the man he's brought to life. It's a little disappointing since one expects the world from Sher, but this more human Falstaff allows the play to stay focused on Hal's journey. Alex Hassell is a dashing fellow and here we see Hal come into his own in a natural and convincing manner.

That unfortunately dims the pleasure of *Henry V* a tad. We've just seen Hal turn into the king and gain the authority of the crown. But when *Henry V* starts he has to do it all over again. Here, Henry V is seen as a tad tentative, finding his way as king again. It's perfectly justified by the text, but one day after seeing the character take a similar journey, it feels repetitive. Where's the man we saw ascend the throne with such certainty just 24 hours ago?

Perhaps to compensate, this *Henry V* leans on the humor over-much. That has one good effect: the famed speeches that pepper the show are set off to brilliant effect since so much of the rest is fairly low-brow in comparison. Hassell is thoroughly in command as a warrior, all doubt and uncertainty set aside in the heat of battle. He's also completely in his element with the dessert that comes at the end of these four plays: the wooing of Katherine (a charming Jennifer Kirby). Hassell is romantic and amusing and sexy and has the crowd on his side with ease.

And how remarkable, in a way, for Shakespeare to have witty and amusing speeches delivered in French

during a play about defeating them in battle. How he humanizes the enemy in ways large and small (from the admirable Mountjoy to Marks as the Constable of France). How he savors the glory of battle (the St. Crispin's Day speech) cheek by jowl with its horrors and the recognition that the common soldier doesn't know about all those grand desires but simply wants to stay alive and get home in one piece, thank you very much.

An audience that tackles this marathon will surely feel the same way at some point in their journey. But when it's over, like me they'll probably forget the muddy roads and hard campaigning and simply remember the moments that shone brightly.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Wishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

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