

# Theater: Thin Falstaff, Solid Hal In 'Henry IV;' Gloria Estefan Congas Onto Broadway

## Theater: Thin Falstaff, Solid Hal In 'Henry IV;' Gloria Estefan Congas Onto Broadway

**HENRY IV** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**ON YOUR FEET!** \*\* out of \*\*\*\* (but first act \*\*\*)

**HENRY IV** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE**

When is a solid, entertaining production of Henry IV a mild disappointment? When it comes from director Phyllida Lloyd and the marvelous ensemble that brought us [Julius Caesar, at the top of my list for the best shows of 2013](#). Two elements hold it back. The framing device of having the production being performed by women in prison feels less germane (and certainly less surprising). And the choice to keep Falstaff a less swollen presence (when usually one thinks the show should be renamed for him) lessens the impact of the finale. Nonetheless, strong performances and clever touches abound, making it a worthy if not revelatory experience.

We begin in the lobby, with armed guards clearing a path. "Prisoners coming through!" they announce, as the manacled cast is led past us into the theater. Finally we troop in and it begins. Guards are always present and at two minor points, they intrude. The spell is broken once for comic effect and once for a serious purpose but neither felt telling. But by and large the play didn't feel informed by the danger and menace and looming despair of prison the way Julius Caesar did.

Happily, Lloyd has many other insights to offer. Battle scenes are rendered as pantomimes of boxing matches. Maps are spray painted on the floor. Deejays spin appropriate music at key moments or make the sounds of babies and animals in an openly theatrical, pleasing style. And much of the cast is excellent, led by the brilliant Harriet Walter, so good here that instead of retitling the play Falstaff (or Prince Hal) you think it fitting that it is dubbed after her character and only wish she had more stage time.

(Photo By Pavel Antonov)

Hal (Clare Dunn) of course is a wastrel, a princeling who has sunk into drink and bawdiness with disreputable friends like the braggart and thief Falstaff (a fine Sophie Stanton, but fine don't cut it with Falstaff). Hal's father the king (Walter) despairs of him and despairs of the kingdom when Hal comes to power. Sensing weakness, the upstart Hotspur (Jade Anouka) raises an army, hoping and expecting more to follow once things get underway.

But a genuine threat to the kingdom rouses Hal's princely blood. He astonishes his father and indeed everyone with purpose and modesty and a lion-like vigor to defend the kingdom and everything his father has built. Not because he will inherit it one day, but because it deserves defending and his father deserves better than layabout for a son. His former ways must be banished for good, as banished as the portly Falstaff who is denounced in one of the most pitiable scenes in all of Shakespeare.

The cast is strong throughout. But the dueling between Hotspur and Hal is electric thanks to the two actors who

embody them. Dane is wonderfully present from the start, alive to the foolishness of Falstaff and clearly a better person in waiting. This makes sense, but it does remove some of the drama from Hal's transformation and ultimate rejection of his (mostly) harmless drinking buddy.

Anouka's Hotspur is even more rounded, shading from confident to bragging to desperately trying to convince himself that the longer the odds, the greater the glory. He'd clearly take lesser glory and better odds -- no fool, he -- but those aren't the cards he's been dealt and he makes the best of them. It makes Hotspur a more convincing and sympathetic character, rather than the fool he often seems.

Women barely figure here, so padding a scene to target one of the few female characters and have it sting doesn't really make sense to me. It certainly doesn't illuminate this play. (Now Taming of The Shrew might benefit from an all-female cast....) Yet it's the finale that really falls flat. The less dramatic arc for Hal, the decision to make his rejection so regal and public (including, I think, echo on his voice as if Hal were addressing the world over a PA system), to having Falstaff/the prisoner react so dramatically all lessens this moment's wrenching possibilities.

Still, the ensemble! The inventive staging! And the King! Walter holds our attention with ease, the ache of this father and this king having many layers. When he is ill but still gives his son sound advice for managing the country (setting up Henry V in the bargain), we hang on every word. It's enough to make you head to the warden and ask to leave credit for all the cigarettes she can smoke on Walter's account.

**ON YOUR FEET!** \*\* out of \*\*\*\* (but first act \*\*\*)

## **MARQUIS THEATRE**

On Your Feet begins so confidently, you get excited. It's frothy, fun and as the songs pile up, you realize that you recognize a lot more of them than you thought. And even the ones you don't recognize are ones you'd like to hear again. Is this bio-musical about Gloria Estefan the new Mamma Mia? While hardly perfect, that sense of innocent pleasure continues for the entire first act, which ends inevitably with the cast performing her breakout hit "Conga" as they wind their way through the audience. Unfortunately, there's also an act two.

The fun forward momentum created by director Jerry Mitchell and choreographer Sergio Trujillo grinds to a halt as we deal with the famed accident and surgery on her spine that meant Gloria Estefan might never walk again. Unfortunately, very minor squabbles with her husband and a more meaningful conflict with her mother simply don't have the fun and excitement of watching the Miami Sound Machine discover its sound, find success and plug away until breaking out of the Latin market into worldwide fame. Sure, it's wonderful that the love of her fans inspired Estefan; we just don't need to see it acted out onstage. So the first act remains a tantalizing look at what might have been a far more satisfying musical.

That beginning is very strong. After a clever prologue, we see Little Gloria (a sweet, endearing Alexandria Suarez) doing her many chores, but always always singing. She can't help it! Her daddy savors audio cassettes of her singing while serving in Vietnam and cherishes her voice even more while suffering from MS later in life. But Little Gloria is always butting her heads with her mother (a very good Andréa Burns), who sees singing as a waste of time. All too soon, Little Gloria is replaced by teenage Gloria (Ana Villafaña).

They live in South Florida and Gloria's grandmother sees a young woman born to sing. A local band that is having success working the wedding/bar mitzvah/party circuit is making a name for itself and Consuelo (a winning Alma Cuervo) convinces Emilio Estefan (Josh Segarra) to come over, meet Gloria and maybe give her some advice about the music business. Emilio hears one song and knows he's just seen the future. Before you know it, Gloria is rehearsing with the band, working on dance moves, learning to not hate the spotlight and writing songs.

Becoming a hit in the Latin market is no easy task. But it's crossing over to the pop market that really fires up

Emilio. His record label doesn't want any songs in English, the radio stations don't want to play them (the Latin stations say they're too Anglo; the white stations say they're too Latin) but by God Emilio believes in Gloria's talent! It won't be long before they have the world doing the conga and the act one finale is a clever combination of seeing the band work their magic at every two-bit venue imaginable (from weddings to a Shriner convention) before finally setting the world on fire.

While none of this is revelatory, it's presented with genuine humor and a pleasingly innocent charm that's winning. Villafaña is a winning presence and an absolute dead-ringer for Estefan's voice. If you told me that she was actually lip-syncing to Estefan herself I'd believe you; it's that similar. Segarra has a sleepily sexual charm and the chemistry between the two leads is genuine. However, he is absolutely no singer.

The cast is pleasingly a rainbow of Latino shades (Segarra is of Puerto Rican descent, for example, not Cuban like Emilio) so while Hispanic and Latino audiences will note actors who don't "fit" their roles, it doesn't matter. And the fact that Segarra really can't sing doesn't matter in the first act. He only has one obligatory number and chimes in on another. Unfortunately, in the second act with Gloria incapacitated, Emilio is front and center vocally. Suddenly, casting the charming Segarra becomes indefensible when he takes the lead or sings a portion of three or four more songs. Dramatically, he's great. But this is a musical and it's a mortal blow to have one of the two leads not up to the demands of the role.

That's just one more reason the relatively boring and Lifetime movie of the week nature of act two is such a bad call. (Book writer Alexander Dinelaris is very nimble and strikes the right tone in the first act.) Quite simply, the entire show takes place in act one, which should have been expanded. The Little Gloria scenes are charming and frankly over too soon. Another scene or two where we saw her weighed down by responsibility and finding refuge in song would have been very welcome. A flashback to Cuba is very effective and another moment or two would bring the heartbreak of her mother's dreams being dashed even more into focus. The fun of breaking out in the Latin market and then wanting more (even though they risked it all by doing so) was plenty of drama to build on. "Conga" shouldn't have been the climax of act one. It should have been the climax of the show.

The scenic design by David Rockwell is fine but not his strongest visually, though very effective in incorporating many different locations and switches from front stage to back and the like. The costumes by ESosa are a slam-dunk and don't disappoint. Ditto the lighting of Kenneth Posner. Trujillo's choreography is appropriately working class in its idiom and delivered with panache by a very hard-working cast. Mitchell's direction is energetic, from the jolting opener with a live band onstage to the friendly, megamix finale where seemingly every member of the cast takes a turn on the mike just to prove they all have a better voice than Segarra (he actually raps at this moment, a wise choice). All they needed was a ruthless editor. Sometimes an album of 17 songs isn't nearly as good as an album with just ten. Leave after the first act and you'll recommend On Your Feet to undemanding theater-goers looking for some harmless fun. Stay for the whole show and you'll probably go home to buy Estefan's greatest hits (or stream them, I guess). But recommend the musical? Probably not.

## THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) \*\*

[The Woodsman](#) \*\*\*

[Constellations](#) \*\* 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) \*\* 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) \*\*

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) \*\* 1/2

[Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center](#) \*\* 1/2

[Hamilton at the Public](#) \*\*\*

[The World Of Extreme Happiness](#) \*\* 1/2