

Cultural Daily

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Shakespeare's Human Kings at BAM

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 4th, 2016

Shakespeare's majestic cycle of Richard and Henry plays (*Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts I and II*, *Henry V*) gets a rousing marathon treatment from the Royal Shakespeare Company in a stunning four-evening repertory touring presentation at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater. Gregory Doran's lively staging is short on the usual pomp and long on pathos. The quartet also emphasizes an element usually missing from stodgy productions—humor. Yes, there is always the madcap Falstaff, the recreant mentor in mischief to young Prince Hal. This rotund, lovable rascal always gets his yucks and Anthony Sher earns them by the boatload here. But the entire galaxy of the contentious court has its moments of levity balanced out with bitterness and sorrow. In other words, there are no stuffy saints done up in purple robes, but real sweating, laughing, and crying three-dimensional people who happen to be vying for the English crown.



Anthony Sher as Falstaff in *King and Country*

Credit: Richard Termine

In addition to Sher's life-embracing Falstaff, there are more marvelous characterizations than one can enumerate in a short space. David Tenant, best known as the tenth Doctor Who on the long-running BBC sci-fi series, mines the tragic depths of Richard II. His monarch is a mincing egomaniac whose downfall seems justified but the actor makes him so tenderly human that we feel for him anyway. Jasper Britton's Bolingbroke, Richard's nemesis, is refreshingly down to earth rather than the usual tin hero. Alex Hassell does the heaviest lifting as the fiery Prince Hal, the son of Bolingbroke, later Henry IV. Hassell brilliantly chronicles the prince's twisting journey from rebellious reprobate to warrior king. You can read the conflict on his handsome face as he rejects Falstaff after ascending the throne and sense the rage in his heart as he marches across the fields of France in the battle-scarred final play. As a rollicking conclusion to the whole cycle, he engages in an edgy and witty war of words with Jennifer Kirby as a feisty princess Katherine for a memorable wooing scene. (Leigh Quinn is a wise and knowing Alice, Katherine's lady in waiting who acts as translator for her French mistress.)

Even the smaller supporting roles are solidly enacted. The subtly dry Oliver Ford Davies contributes a lovably befuddled Duke of York, a delightfully senile Justice Shallow and a cozy Chorus leading the audience through *Henry V* with a wink and a smile. There are several priceless moments with Shallow where Davies draws howls with just a raised eyebrow. Jane LaPotaire makes a devastating impression in two cameos as the grieving Duchess of Gloucester and an imploring Queen Isobel. I also loved Joshua Richards' bumbling Bardolph and pompous Fluellen, Sarah Parks' gravel-voiced Duchess of York and Mistress Quickley, and Sam Marks' smooth-faced but duplicitous Aurmerle, Poins and Constable of France.

April 1—May 1. Royal Shakespeare Company at BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn, NY. Repertory schedule. Running time for each production: 3 hours. \$35—\$200. (718) 636-4100 or www.bam.org.

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