

HENRY V

DOWNSTAGE CENTER



This is a production which juxtaposes confrontation and collaboration. The British and French soldiers with common cause on the First World War battlefields put their allegiances to one side for the duration of their performance, which is played out on a long and narrow stage between opposing rows of pews, amid the 12th century splendour of London's Temple Church.

Immediacy: The immediacy of the settings put enormous pressure on the cast but they never waver, giving their all in complex performances of the characters within characters. Freddie Stewart's King Henry stands out amid an excellent ensemble: his young sovereign is wise beyond his years and shows great leadership of his men, yet is also impatient and impetuous.

Meanwhile, Floriane Andersen absolutely shines as Princess Katherine, moving like a dancer and flashing a smile which would light up even the darkest battlefield.

Antic Disposition's re-imagining doesn't shy away from delivering the play's two big speeches with all the requisite emotional heft ("Once more unto the breach" and "God for Harry", for the uninitiated).

But the use of music is arguably the most emotive element here. Musical director Christopher Peake has reworked poems from AE Housman's 1896 collection 'A Shropshire Lad' to great dramatic effect (the directors were in turn inspired by a song cycle based on six of Housman's poems by George Butterworth, who himself met his end at the Somme in 1916).

Tom Boucher's elegant lighting design evokes the action of the Shakespeare text and the WWI setting with equal finesse. The staging is faithful to the earliest productions, with minimal set and props, giving the actors' room to move and for their performances to fill the space.

Thoughtful: In such an imaginative, thoughtful production it seems harsh to find fault but in terms of the pacing of the original Shakespearean text, directors Ben Horslen and John Riseboro might have been more judicious in their use of the comic scenes – which, frankly, aren't as funny as they might have been 500 years ago – and the ending of the Bard's tale felt a little flat in comparison with what preceded it (although that is as much a criticism of the great playwright himself as anything else).

But this is a deeply moving and compelling production, a reinvigoration of Shakespeare worthy of the talented performers, evocative songs and historic venue. As with the original, one leaves the performance in no doubt that the cost of warfare is most heavily borne by the common man.

STAGE REVIEW



There's a sense of nationalistic pride when you hear some of the gung-ho speeches in Shakespeare's Henry V, their words a rousing send-off whether to the millions heading for the front line trenches during the Great War or for those about to die for their country on the field of Agincourt 600 years ago.

Antic Disposition's moving and atmospheric production of Henry V, which opened in London's Temple Church last night, was not only a play within a play, but a battle within a battle, with the cast of French and English soldiers performing the Bard's work while recovering in a WWI field hospital.

And directors Ben Hoslan and John Risebero threw in some shocking and deeply disturbing bombshell moments of their own, lest we forget exactly what was happening in the world outside of the makeshift stage.

The play, about a decisive victory by England over France, was chosen to mark Antic's 10th anniversary, and the anniversaries of the First World War and Battle of Agincourt. Bravely they took it to France earlier this month, with an Anglo-French cast, and Antic emerged unscathed with the nations still at peace (well, almost) thanks to its staging.

Instead of a straight-forward conflict war drama we have a story of peace and entente cordiale. What emerges from the production is a profound sense of loss. Generations of ordinary young men, separated by 500 years, answering the war cry and being sent off to almost certain death.

Set in WWI we meet a group of war wounded and a young Tommy gives a copy of "Henri Cinq" to a French soldier who had helped him. The patients, aided by their two French nurses, stage the play with infantryman Freddie Stewart, donning the British crown, roughly made of beaten-out tin cans, cast as the jingoistic young hothead, the former Prince Hal.

Here's a boy in a man's uniform, easily influenced by his court that the right thing to do was to snatch back possession of France and he will stop at nothing to regain the country.

But the soldiers are brought startlingly back to reality in a powerfully played scene that genuinely upset some audience members. James Murfitt's comic role as the cowardly drunk, Bardolph, sees him captured for looting and being threatened with execution. The shell-shocked soldier's reaction to the arrest is explosive and harrowing with Stewart, looking visibly distressed, calling out the actor's real name to ask if he's all right. I found the wholly realistic performance profoundly upsetting.

Later the entire cast of “amateur players” are reminded of where they are by the sound of gunfire and explosions out in the field and all too soon they are recalled to their units.

Stewart’s performance is commanding. As a leader of men he stirs them into battle (“Once more unto the breach”) and with the famous lines from the Crispin’s Day speech. Gosh, I almost felt like jumping up and volunteering myself.

Later, the warrior king is wonderfully gauche and unsure of himself as he woos the French king’s daughter, Katherine (a delightful performance by an illuminating French actress, Floriane Andersen).

The production is very much an ensemble piece but Stewart stands out as an impressive king while Geoffrey Towers injects gravitas and solemnity into his role as the soldiers’ commanding officer and Henry’s chief adviser and uncle, the Duke of Exeter. It couldn’t be more different to a later, minor role, he plays as a Geordie foot-soldier. Dean Riley’s flamboyant and arrogant Dauphin is a treat, as is the turns by Andersen and Louise Templeton as both Mistress Quickly and Alice, Katherine’s lady-in-waiting.

But I was constantly drawn to Murfitt who attracted attention even when he wasn’t centre stage, as he quietly sat on army crates, consumed and trembling from the horrors of war. It was an absorbing performance at odds with the other servicemen who seemingly had escaped visible injury.

The Temple Church, home to the original “God’s soldiers,” the Knights Templar, is a fitting venue for such a war-like story, its splendid stained glass windows playing their part in the play. But the drawback is putting in a traverse stage running up the central aisle, and the acoustics of the very lovely and fascinating building. Sitting at one end, next to the “English” camp, I found it difficult to hear the dialogue from the “French” players at the other end (and, I guess, vice versa). Similarly a lot of lines are lost in the cavernous ceiling of the church.

But it is a beautifully crafted production that includes some wonderful songs which are richly sung by the whole cast. They started life as AE Houseman poems and have been skilfully put to music by composer, musical director and pianist (a man of many talents) Christopher Peake.

Summary: Once more unto the breach. Antic Disposition's anniversary production, Henry V, at London's Temple Church, is powerful, disturbing, shocking and deeply moving.

Anne Cox

BROADWAYWORLD

War in France. In a field hospital, the khaki of the British Tommy or the blue of the French Thomas is much less important than the red of the blood that marks their injuries. When, as so often happens when combatants are thrown together, mutual respect and shared interests blossom, and someone has the idea to put on Henry V, Shakespeare's history of the boy who became King, of Agincourt and of the reconciliation royal love brought to warring nations. Roll in some of AE Housman's elegiac poetry set to the beautiful music of Christopher Peake, and we have a Henry V that is true to its source, but given an extra layer of meaning, one hundred years on from Ypres.

Freddie Stewart is a young Henry, an earnest listener and man determined to do the right things by his God, his country and his conscience. Stewart's eyes sparkle in love and in the thrill of battle, but grow dull with worry when the burden of kingly responsibility weighs heavy. He's often within touching distance of the audience, so his fine, nuanced performance has no time for relaxation, for coasting. It's pleasing to see an actor cast in a Shakespearean role whose age suits the part so well.

There are the usual comic turns from Pistol (Mark Middleton), Bardolph (James Murfitt) and Nym (Alex Hooper), **but the other standout performance comes from Floriane Andersen, whose Katherine is haughty enough to exact her price and sexy enough for Henry to pay it. And, boy! (or should that be garcon!), can she speak French quickly!**

Though the venue, Temple Church, is extraordinary, the all-encompassing sense of history underlined by an exhibition of Templars at War displayed on its walls, the inevitably tricky acoustics and traverse stage make some of the words difficult to follow. Henry's famous "Once more unto the breach..." is staged with real brio by directors Ben Horslen and John Risebero, but, with Henry facing away from me, I struggled to pick up his rallying call in all its famous particulars.

A last word for the costumes and props - the best I have ever seen, fully convincing close-up, the cotton of the shirts a rough calico, the fatigues very... well, fatigued and the Lee-Enfield rifles impressive in their heft. If that attention to detail can be brought to ensuring that everyone can hear every word comfortably, this production will fully merit its place as one of my favourite Henrys.

Gary Naylor

BRITISH THEATRE



I imagine most theatregoers have clear memories of when they first witnessed a production of Henry V. Whenever I hear an actor launch into ‘O for a muse of fire!’ I am immediately taken back to that enraptured childhood moment when I first saw the Olivier film.. the panning shot across Tudor London, Walton’s sprightly music of chivalric pastiche, and the first sight of the ‘wooden O’. For others it may be Kenneth Branagh’s muddier but still heroic cinematic version, or the Hytner-Lester anti-war production from a decade or so ago. Few of us can come to this play without a whole set of pre-conceptions and brave is the director who sets out to find a way of saying something new about this play that we all think we know very well.

Yet that is what Antic Disposition and directors Ben Horslen and John Risebero have managed to bring off in one of the most impressive revivals of a Shakespeare play that I have seen in recent years. They do this above all by recognizing and accommodating to their vision the ambiguities that lie at the heart of the play so that it is neither a simplistic celebration nor repudiation of war, but a recognition that war is inextricably part of the human condition. It is crucial to Shakespeare’s generosity of mind that the play embraces the fascination and allure of high politics while also showing the consequences of those decisions for the common man and woman as much as the king – the pomp and the pity, the fine line of fear between failure and triumph, survival or death.

The setting in Temple Church could not be more conducive in its resonant layers of English history. Alongside the tombs of Templar knights and the barons who enforced Magna Carta the stage is set in traverse between the church pews. On a raised platform open at either end are placed a scatter of ammunition boxes and medical supplies. Two soldiers enter wearing uniforms from the First World War, one French and one English. Then a French nurse. Familiar struggles of communication follow, ending in the English soldier giving his French counterpart a copy of Shakespeare’s play. We are in an allied field hospital at Azincourt behind the lines, and both contingents agree to put on a performance to pass the time. But before we reach the prologue an accordion and piano introduce George Butterworth’s setting of A.E Housman’s ‘The lads in their hundreds’, and on top of Shakespeare’s inspired rhetoric we also have another resonant layer of chivalric regret, written just before the First World War. This was so apt in so many ways, both dramatic, aesthetic and historical, that it gave me the same jolt of mind-stretching experience that I remember from the Olivier film all those years ago. I can pay no higher compliment to the handling of the opening sequence.

And so then we were into the play itself, but before I discuss the qualities of the production it is worth stressing that the First World War scenario always remains as a point of reference. Further settings of Housman, using the musical style of the Edwardian era, break into the action to distill emotion at key points and the experience of recent conflict intrudes movingly and aptly into performance at significant moments – such as the moment when Bardolph is executed for looting and the actor playing the role collapses in a fit. It is very rare that a company integrates a new concept so thoroughly into a Shakespeare play –

too often it is merely gestural – but here the level of attention to detail is hugely impressive and imaginative while still sitting comfortably with the spirit of the original.

As is usual with this company there is a uniformly high standard of individual performance and company ensemble. The transitions between the scenes are very well managed and even though the space is limited the directors have used it very flexibly and with a minimal but imaginative use of props (eg a box of bandages for tennis balls, cake tins for crowns etc..). I wondered how they were going to manage the big battle scene itself but again the bracketing scenario gave the solution in the form of a sudden artillery barrage off-stage, another Housman song and a bugle call.. the moment was captured and registered without needing to be shown.

The constraints of a review prevent me from doing justice to the range of fine performances on offer here, with several actors taking multiple roles. Suffice to say that both the political and comedy scenes came off equally well, which is not always the case by any means in this play. Nor did the nationalistic jostling among the soldiery pall, as sometimes happens. The text was well projected and reinforced with plenty of fluid stage movement, especially in the scenes on the night before the battle when the male camaraderie and joshing nervousness of the original and the modern settings meshed particularly well.

It was a real pleasure to have genuine French speakers playing the French royal roles for a change: there was a genuine, plausible political counter-weight to the English forces, and the rivalry between the Dauphin and the Constable was projected in a way that does not normally happen.

Floriane Andersen's Katherine played delightfully with the linguistic games Shakespeare sets for her, and was more than a match for Freddie Stewart's Henry V in their courtship scene.

Stewart's performance possessed many of the qualities needed for success in this role. He was naturally authoritative in the political and public scenes, and in the courtship scene combined flirtatiousness, humour and awkwardness in equal and delightful measure – he has the 'sugar touch' to be sure. In the incognito quarrel with Williams (Alex Hooper), crucial to any production of this play, he controlled the tone assuredly and in front of the troops plausibly dispensed more than 'a little touch of Harry in the night.'

I do hope that they have the opportunity here or elsewhere to revive this fine recasting of one of Shakespeare's greatest achievements. As the cast marched off in formation into the dark recesses of the Temple Church towards the recumbent knights one could not separate them any more from the long tradition of chivalry stretching from Chaucer's Knight's Tale, through Shakespeare's history plays and down to Housman's doomed infantry:

'They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man. The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.'

Tim Hochstrasser