

DON'T BLAME THE CAST

The Shakespeare Theatre production of {Henry V} by William Shakespeare, directed by Michael Kahn.

by Stanley Ezrol

When Shakespeare first presented **Henry V** in 1599, England's Queen Elizabeth was entangled in a mercenary war against Spain. Her ally, France's republican King Henry IV, had just made his own peace with Spain and with and amongst the rival confessional factions of his own nation. Shakespeare used his **Life of Henry V**, whom the English still acclaim as their greatest military hero, to engage his English audience in a dialogue, using Henry V's story to reflect on the profound questions confronting his England of 1599. England's great opportunity then was to operate in concert with Henry IV's France to develop a European system of modern nation states. Unfortunately, her leaders were squabbling over their status in an Imperial court, which was rapidly becoming the host site for Venice's rapacious oligarchy.

Shakespeare's heavy ideas here confronted an open threat of insurrection and regicide. The partisans of Robert Devereaux, the Earl of Essex, had turned a book dedicated to him, John Hayward's **The First Part of the Life and Reign of King Henry IV**, into a best seller. Its point was to use the precedent of the murder of King Richard II by Henry V's father, Bolingbroke, to justify a *coup* against Elizabeth.

The swashbuckling populist, Essex, whose party included the evil Francis and Anthony Bacon, took pride in the Roman military virtues and code of honor, which Shakespeare savaged in this play, as he also did in his **Julius Caesar**, first performed that same year. In case anyone missed the point, **Henry V's** 'Chorus,' ridiculed Essex, virtually by name as, "the general of our gracious empress, in Ireland, much less worthy of acclaim, were he victorious, than Henry." (In fact, Essex later deserted his Irish post and returned to London in disgrace.)

- Some Delights -

Many in Kahn's company put the British style "Shakespearean" mumblers to shame. Ted Van Griethuysen gives real (low) life to the Archbishop of Canterbury's legalistic oration promoting Henry's adventure against France, which, though apparently victorious, and still celebrated, ultimately, Chorus explained, "made his England bleed."

Otherwise, Jarlath Conroy's Captain Fluellen, whom Shakespeare uses to ridicule the "Roman disciplines of the wars," and the other secondary characters who engage in battlefield *symposia* on such issues as just war, nationhood, and the relationship of a sovereign to his subjects, do a remarkably good job. The portrayal of Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol, whose main concern is loot is also delightful, if, at times, overdone.

- A Travesty -

However, Michael Kahn's treatment of this **History** is a travesty. His casting of a wooden television actor as Henry is a relatively minor fault, as is the use of beatnik bongo and modern dance routines. His cutting of key lines, including much of Henry's famous, "We Happy Few," pep talk, is insulting to Shakespeare and his audience, but, unfortunately, standard.

Kahn's first fatal "innovation," is his destruction of Shakespeare's 'Chorus.' Unique to this play, Shakespeare used a single voice 'chorus' to directly and personally engage the audience from

his opening admonition, “For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,” to the foreboding epilogue. Rather than Shakespeare's “Chorus” who engaged the audience personally, Kahn, uses a hodge podge of different actors in different combinations of costume and modern street dress, who each skip across the stage and utter a few words in the midst of a variety of mime and dance routines.

However, to paraphrase Henry, we were not so angry since we came to the theater until we saw Kahn's portrayal of the French court. They effately prance on foot high platform shoes, lisping in French, while actors in trench coats, holding microphones, recite Shakespeare's words, in newscaster monotone, from the sidelines. Ironically, although keen to be nasty to the French, Kahn cut one of Shakespeare's actually sharpest attacks on French ideology: the prating of the Dauphin about his marvelous horse and armor, because the dialogue wouldn't function in this form.

- Only if you know it -

If you know this play, you'll find some delight here, but, like most high profile productions of Shakespeare, this one is in the tradition of the burning down of the Globe theater, which ended Shakespeare's career, but not his great gift to us.

End

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