

Moments of power, eloquence in 'King John'

Sep. 30, 2012



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John Harrell as King John in 'King John.' / Submitted

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You've got to hand it to the American Shakespeare Center for staging plays that infrequently — or never — see the light of day. Where else could area audiences see the less-popular works in Shakespeare's canon, such as "King John," the latest play to open on the Blackfriars Playhouse stage? Probably nowhere.

While it's possible to argue that these works should be allowed to enjoy the repose of a well-deserved oblivion, it should be noted that plays such as "King John" represent creative mile markers in the career of the most influential playwright in Western literature, and as such perhaps deserve to be seen. Are they always good? No. Will the ASC work its peculiar magic on even the

dullest of them? Without a doubt.

Take "King John." Although popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, Shakespeare's not-entirely-factual history of one of England's worst kings has fallen out of favor as a rambling, unfocused epic with little of the effervescence of many of his other plays, despite a number of passionate and heart-rending passages. It's a perfect example of how even a master writer can misfire, and how a group of actors can be better than the play they're in.

Under the direction of Jim Warren, this season's performers lavish their many skills upon Shakespeare's story of political wrangling, war, excommunication and revolt. Among them: John Harrell as the dangerously quirky and self-absorbed King John, Tracy Hostmyer as John's dominating mother, Eleanor, Allison Glenzer as Constance, the widow of John's older brother, Ronald Peet as Constance's gentle and ill-fated son, Arthur, and Benjamin Curns as Philip, Richard the Lionheart's bastard son. Tracie Thomason, Abbi Hawk, Chris Johnston, Rene Thornton Jr., Gregory Jon Phelps, Grant Davis and James Keegan flesh out multiple roles with their accustomed energy and élan.

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Benjamin Curns as Philip Faulconbridge in 'King John.' / Submitted

There are moments of brilliance from the text, including King John's contracting with Hubert (marvelously played by Keegan) to murder young Arthur, Arthur's plea for his life and Constance's anguish over the death of her son. Curns gives a whopping good performance as Philip the Bastard. Audiences will also enjoy some impressive stage combat directed by Colleen Kelly.

But the play is what it is, and every now and then its tendency toward stasis simply overrides the best efforts of all concerned.

That doesn't make "King John" not worth seeing; far from it. The multiplicity of well-played scenes, the consistent appeal of this season's actors and the inherent historical importance of the play as a part of Shakespeare's canon combine to make it a performance worth a trip to the Blackfriars Playhouse.

It should also be noted that the last of the ASC's unproduced Shakespeare histories, "Henry VIII," is scheduled for airing during the 2013 Actors' Renaissance Season.

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