



# The Other History Earns its Due HOT

Eric Minton October 04, 2012

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## King John

by William Shakespeare

**American Shakespeare Center**

September 4 - November 25, 2012

- Acting
- Costumes
- Sets
- Directing
- Overall



Photos: Michael Bailey



Sometimes you read a play by William Shakespeare, and sometimes you see that play, and you ask, "Why?" Why do some plays, like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar*, get so much play and garner so much respect while others, *King John*, for example, are relegated to afterthought status and plugged into the curiosity slot on festival schedules? *King John*, in many respects, is a great play. Read it and notice how often you laugh and nod. And when you see a company like the American Shakespeare Center present it without layering on any conceptual trappings, you will discover that *King John* is much more than a Shakespearean also-ran. It is as good a time, if not more so, as many a *Hamlet* with material as interesting as *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare wrote *King John* in the 1590s; scholars weigh in on just about every year in that decade

before 1598 when Francis Meres mentioned it among Shakespeare's plays. It is the lone history lying outside the chronology of his two tetralogies, *Richard II* through *Henry V* (which Shakespeare wrote in mid-career) and the *Henry Sixes* through *Richard III* (written early in his career). *Henry VIII*, an end-of-career collaboration, appends to that second group in the historical chronology. *King John*, on the other hand, sits off alone, almost 200 years in history before the events in *Richard II*. In style, Shakespeare with *King John* seems to be transitioning from the rough and tumble bravura and simple verse structure of the *Henry VI* plays to the more formal *Richard II* and its crafted imagery (after which he would slide into the slice-of-life tenor of the *Henry IV* and *V* pieces). The result is that *King John*, even with its many long speeches and set pieces, is a surprisingly accessible text with heart-racing verse.

OK, *King John* has its faults. The story rambles from episode to episode with little unifying plotline, and then it just ends—no climactic moment to pin your tensions to. King John simply passes away on stage while others are talking. Shakespeare never was careful with his timelines and locales in his histories, but he's at his worst here, carelessly conflating several completely different historical episodes into one scene or another. Furthermore, Shakespeare makes much of certain episodes (like the second of John's three coronations) but gives us no context for why or how such episodes took place. Characters shift incomprehensibly in purpose and tone as the play transpires, while one character, James Gurney, stands idly by for a dozen lines, speaks four words upon dismissal, and we never see him again, his purpose to set up the Bastard for a one-line joke having been accomplished.

The play's strengths, however, more than make up for its shortcomings. I've already mentioned the charged nature of the verse, and though the history is convoluted, the story somehow moves along logically on stage. When Arthur climbs his prison's walls after Hubert has spared his life, people in the audience audibly exclaim, "Oh, no!" Furthermore, while *King John* may not have much of a dramatic plot, it has a brilliant thematic storyline of political factions shifting allegiances. Right and conviction are easily set aside for personal gain. Commodity, says the Bastard, is the one true god.

It's fascinating to watch France's King Philip II (the royal Rene Thornton Jr.) so fervently champion the claim of young Prince Arthur, John's nephew, to the English throne, but oh so swiftly give in to the marriage of his son, Lewis the Dauphin, to John's niece, Blanche. Not so swiftly he gives in to Cardinal Pandulph, representing the Pope, who excommunicates John for his abuses of priests and church coffers. Pandulph demands that France fight England, but having just won via dowry the lands he had been fighting for, Philip presciently is loathe to undertake such a charge. It's fascinating to see Pandulph (a slick Gregory Jon Phelps) urge first Philip and then the Dauphin to war against England, then behind their backs negotiate with John to settle accounts with the church. In return, Pandulph is to dissuade the Dauphin. But, of course, the Dauphin (Grant Davis displaying the intensity of hot-blooded youth), who so enthusiastically took Blanche to wife and then so vehemently urged his father to then break with John, and who so morally took up further arms to invade England at Pandulph's suggestion, now so confidently tells Pandulph forget you, I'm in this for myself. The English lords revolt against John and (horrors) join with the French until John's forces win a key battle, and then

revert against John and (honors) join with the French, until John's forces win a key battle, and then they jump back to John's side.

While these political leaders exhibit such supple backbones, two characters in two different ways show incredible moral courage. Hubert (James Keegan), the lord of Angiers, becomes the keeper of the imprisoned Arthur (Ronald Peet) and boldly volunteers to murder him for King John. But his conscience and his sense of loyalty to the young prince who has shown nothing but trust and love gets the better of him. Hubert's act of conscience turns out to be the right course of action for everybody, except that Arthur's subsequent fatal failure to escape sets off the play's last arc of conflict.

Then there is Philip Faulconbridge, the illegitimate son of the late King Richard I, the Lionhearted. He is just "Bastard" in the speech headings. As should be obvious by now, *King John* has a great collection of characters, and I have always felt, from the first time I read this play 34 years ago through to watching Benjamin Curns' electric turn in this production, that the Bastard is Shakespeare's greatest creation. He is a forerunner to the blunt-but-true servants Kent in *King Lear* and Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but he also reads as if he might have been originally played by Will Kemp, Shakespeare's great stand-up comedian of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Lance) and *The Merchant of Venice* (Gobbo). In the role of observing and commenting on great men's follies, his comic addresses to the audience and witty asides make him the forerunner of Falstaff, but his bravura mode of living is pure Richard III and Hotspur. He delivers many of Shakespeare's funniest lines, the best of them directed at Austria (Chris Johnston) ridiculously wearing a lion's coat draped over his shoulder, and then aggressively defeats Austria in battle (whereupon Curns's Bastard decorates his own armor with just the lion's paw). Through it all, the Bastard displays the sturdiest backbone of anyone in the play, offering total loyalty to John even after the king's death. As the son of John's older brother he could cause much trouble for John's heirs (this Bastard would overcome the illegitimate label easily enough), but he poignantly is the first of the lords to display fealty to the young Prince Henry at play's end.

Meanwhile, Constance (Allison Glenzer) is one of Shakespeare's great female characters. She's a 12th century stage mom, pushing her reluctant son to the crown, bullying all the men, and getting into vicious verbal sniping with the other women. When Arthur is captured (and everybody knows he's therefore doomed), Constance gives an impassioned speech about a mother's grief. It could be seen as over-the-top; King Philip thinks so, anyway, when he complains to her "You are as fond of grief as of your child." Glenzer, however, plays the speech with searing sincerity, tearing out her hair on stage, tears smearing mascara down her cheeks. An annoyance before, Glenzer's Constance ends her time in the play with us in full sympathy.

King John (John Harrell) is more or less an idiot. He loves being king, but he's hardly mentally or morally capable of being king. He relies on his mother, the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine (Tracy Hostmyer) for his power, but even she can't stop him from going off script; she looks on

flabbergasted as he does something stupid like blaspheming God by dissing the Pope in public. Upon Eleanor's death, John relies on Hubert and the Bastard as his surrogate brains and bravery. The role allows Harrell yet another star turn on the Blackfriars stage. Harrell is expert at exhibiting foolish self-love, and yet the very details of his acting—a frown here, a twitch of his shoulders there, a disinterested cheek on hand then—clearly exhibit the character's self-doubt, too. Harrell mines the humor in John's exhorting Hubert to murder Arthur without saying so. Harrell's John appears silly with every start and stop, awkward repetition, and shifting tangent while Keegan's Hubert stands stoic before him.

Director Jim Warren takes a straight course with the play, avoiding excessive stage business. Off-stage business is another matter. The first battle between the French and English, occurring off stage, sounds like a playground riot among second graders, which is rather in keeping with the tone of the two kings' posturing beforehand. Warren resorts to gimmickry only in dealing with the stage direction of Arthur leaping off a wall to his death, all supposed to be done in full view of the audience as Arthur speaks a dying-breath couplet. In this production, Arthur leaps from the upper balustrade toward the back stage, and we see something brush the curtain below and hear the thud of body on floor. It's effective until Salisbury finds Arthur 25 lines later, and only then does Arthur speak his dying couplet. By displacing these lines it allows us to see Arthur's dying breath, but it subverts the impact of the lords finding, already dead, the body of the prince rumored to be dead. Finding him alive, even though he dies seconds later, doesn't readily implicate foul play at the hands of John and Hubert, even though both had already mistakenly reported to the lords that Arthur died of a disease.

Shakespeare's children can be irritating in a Tiny Tim kind of way, but Peet makes Arthur's sweetness genuine. As mighty kings and mothers fight over him, Peet's Arthur stands to the side trembling, and he has real fear driving his earnestness when he pleads for his life. We hang on every one of Peet's words and lean forward in our seats hoping he succeeds in getting Hubert to melt, which Keegan's Hubert can't help doing.

Shakespeare, in his histories, has a bunch of lords hanging about commenting on things or as devices to move a story's action along; they may as well be nameless (and by the time he gets to his late career plays, they are nameless, merely "first lord" and "second lord"). The Earl of Salisbury seems to be one such lord, though he becomes the instigator of the baron's revolt later in the play. Abbi Hawk backs up her portrayal from this fact and turns Salisbury into the play's moral core with her rich performance. Her grieving over the body of Arthur could easily be glanced over as just another of Shakespeare's "o woe" eulogies; but Hawk sheds real tears and makes this moment the heart of the play.

*King John* is a play about a bumbling monarch, wind-blown noblemen, a disingenuous cleric, a hilarious bastard, and sniping mothers on a landscape of political upheaval. Peet and Hawk, between them, make sure that the true victims of such shenanigans get felt, if not heard.