

# 'Henry V' wraps up Shakespeare tetralogy

Sep. 29, 2011

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Written by  
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footlights and spotlights

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**Take a reckless, hell-raising** youth and put him at the head of a nation that is restive and torn by civil war. The outcome could go any number of ways.

The outcome imagined by William Shakespeare is now being presented at the Blackfriars Playhouse in "Henry V," the final work in a foursome of Shakespeare's so-called "history" plays that began with "Richard II" and continued through the two parts of "Henry IV."

It has been a long and entertaining ride since 2008, with the American Shakespeare Center's Ralph Alan Cohen directing the tetralogy that deals with the rise of the House of Lancaster. I didn't review "Richard II," so I can't speak to its artistic merits, but I have enjoyed every chapter in the saga since then.

While they are some of the most prosaically titled of Shakespeare's plays, they are also some of the most fascinating. Cohen cast them to near perfection and infused them with the vast knowledge and keen insight he has gained from his many years as a scholar of Shakespeare. The result — a string of theatrical gemstones in the ASC crown.

"Henry V" may not be the most effervescent of the four installments, but it is easily one of the most interesting, largely because of the development of the title character. As Prince Hal, he was more interested in carousing than in governing, but once he became King Henry V, his priorities changed significantly. He not only turned his back on his roistering past and his former friends, like Sir John Falstaff, he devoted himself to achieving ambitious national goals that only a driven, supercharged person could accomplish.

Once again, Cohen has assembled just the right people for just the right roles. Chief among these is Gregory Jon Phelps as Henry V. Always focused and charismatic in whatever role he assumes, Phelps as Henry captures both the calculating intelligence and engaging appeal of the king who advances his power and that of his nation with unswerving zeal.

The audience doesn't really know whether Henry is a hero or simply

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an intense and brilliant man who isn't terribly hindered by relationships, scruples or criticisms. Phelps doesn't seem to try to sway the audience's collective viewpoint, either, but instead skillfully interprets the character in such a way that each audience member can interpret him in his or her own way.

The cast also features John Harrell, John Basiulis, Rene Thornton Jr., Zachary Brown, Natasha Solomon, Daniel Burrows, James Keegan, Patrick Midgley, Allison Glenzer, Benjamin Curns, Chris Johnston, Miriam Donald and Blythe Coons.

The character I most yearned to see, however, never made it onstage. Falstaff, the boozy rakehell of earlier chapters, dies in this play, but entirely in the wings. I have always wondered why Shakespeare didn't actually give him a scene or two, since he (and his public) obviously adored the character.

Although it is helpful to have seen the three plays running up to "Henry V," it is not necessary in order to enjoy it. It's a worthy ASC effort that both complements the components that have gone before it and stands alone as its own artistic achievement.

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