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### 'Henry IV, Part 2' overcomes slow start

*\*or a man who had more than his share of creative chops, William Shakespeare could come up with some pretty dull titles. The "Henry Whichever, Part Whatever" plays are chief examples, as their titles absolutely fail to reflect, or even hint at, the theatrical glory lurking behind them.*

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While all these prosaically titled plays are good, some are better than others. "Henry IV, Part 2," which is now onstage at the Blackfriars Playhouse, doesn't have quite the dramatic vibrancy as "Part 1," but it nevertheless comes off well thanks to the talents of director Ralph Alan Cohen and a strong, engaging troupe of actors.

The play picks up where "Part 1" left off, and while it is desirable to have seen the first part, it isn't necessary in order to enjoy this installment. It is set between the battle of Shrewsbury in 1403 and the death of Henry IV in 1413, and deals with the uprisings and threats of invasion faced by the king, particularly the 1405 revolt.

While it is admittedly difficult to keep track of the bloody, labyrinthine developments in Shakespeare's histories, Cohen does a fine job of giving us a play that is straightforward and clear. On the downside of the production, however, there is a goodly portion of static staging in the first act, with a lot of folks standing around, not moving much, but talking copiously.

And then, like a small aircraft reacting to a thermal on a warm day, the play suddenly shoots upward with the entrance of James Keegan as the boozing roisterer Sir John Falstaff.

If it is true that some actors were born to play certain roles, then Keegan might have been born to play Falstaff. He's done it before on the Blackfriars stage -- in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and "Henry IV, Part 1" -- and in each instance his interpretation of the fat, bawdy old knight helped elevate those plays to rarified heights.

Falstaff is a drinker, a brawler, a womanizer, a braggart and something of a coward, but you just can't help but like him, especially in this play, in which he grudgingly comes to grips with his own aging. Keegan is masterful in balancing "Fat Jack's" by-now-familiar foibles with his humanity and gives us some truly moving and memorable scenes. Keep your eyes peeled for the small, tender scene between Falstaff and the prostitute, Doll, and for Falstaff's eloquence over the virtues of sack.

But Keegan's characterization is only one of the elements that makes "Part 2" considerably more colorful than its title. Rene Thornton Jr. is haunting as the once-vital, but now ailing and guilt-stricken Henry IV; Ginna Hoben is both earthy and fetching as Doll; and Chris Johnston, who always slips into and out of multiple characters with ease, is delightful whether he's swashbuckling or clowning around.

The cast also includes Patrick Midgley, Paul Jannise, Jeremiah Davis, Sarah Fallon, Allison Glenzer, Benjamin Curns, Daniel Kennedy, Sara Keyes Chang, Bob Jones, Emily Gibson and John Harrell.

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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