



Henry IV, Part 2

Good Night, Great Knight

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.
Saturday, October 9, 2010 (seats L-5&6, Lords Seats left of stage)
Directed by Ralph Alan Cohen

This is the lesser third of Shakespeare's Prince Hal trilogy, and the more obscure third of Shakespeare's Falstaff trilogy. Yet, at play's end, when you feel you've just watched one of the greatest plays of all time, that is the mark of a great, great Falstaff.

I usually avoid using the term "definitive" to describe a role's performance, but James Keegan merits that label for his portrayal of the fat knight, first in *Merry Wives of Windsor* and then *Henry IV, Part 1*, both in 2009, and capping it off with his tour de force performance in this *Henry* sequel. In the 2009 productions, he shared the stage with other memorable performances, particularly that of Luke Eddy as Hal (for this season Patrick Midgley took over the part of Hal, who has more scenes sans Falstaff than with him). This *Part 2* certainly benefited from fine performances turned in by Allison Glenzer as Mistress Quickly (her "swaggerers" speech got the laughs merited in the lines that, for some reason, never seem to generate so much as a twitter in other productions), Daniel Kennedy as Shallow, Chris Johnston as Silence (a Silence whose drunken singing and dancing and sleeping hijacked the orchard scene), and especially René Thornton Jr. as the titular king (whose deathbed speech inspired applause from the audience).

This play, however, centers on Falstaff. Ironically, that is what makes it the lesser of the Hal trilogy and most obscure of the Falstaff trilogy. For, in this play, Hal's transition is overshadowed by Falstaff's shenanigans and ultimate rejection. And, whereas *Part 1* has Falstaff speaking so many memorable lines and *Merry Wives* puts Falstaff in great slapstick situations, *Part 2* has Falstaff stumble from plot to plot to plot to plot to plot to plot to plot as he foils the Lord Chief Justice (John Harrell), milks Mistress Quickly, fights with Pistol (Benjamin Curns), falls into a trap by Hal and Poins (Johnston), recruits an army, captures a rebel, and scams Shallow before finally engaging in the play's main plot of Hal's redemption.

Keegan, though, has so fully fleshed out his Falstaff that we happily join him in his strange journeys. Through his thorough understanding of the script and superb timing, Keegan not only made the *Part 2* Falstaff accessible to the audience, he forced the audience to fall under his spell, just as Hal and Quickly have. Sure, his Falstaff is a scoundrel, but he's not a coward, as his fight with Pistol and Coleville shows. He may be a great seducer, but his scene with Doll Tearsheet (Ginna Hoben) is one of genuine tenderness, and the abused Quickly ultimately loves him. It's only in his reaction to Henry IV's death and his bragging about the power he will hold under the new regime that we truly begin to feel uncomfortable with Falstaff. Thus, we are fully on Hal's side at the point of rejection. And yet, and yet, we feel some sympathy for Keegan's Falstaff even then.

Just how special this portrayal is can be summed up in two only-at-Blackfriars moments. When Falstaff gave his speech about the merits of sack, Keegan pulled the intermission bar cart onto the stage, used the real bottles of wine as a prop, and snatched some bills out of the tip jar on his exit. Then, when the interval ended with a general song and dance by the whole company, Falstaff was left on stage with a handful of musicians to sing a song about "staying to the end of the movie." A funny song, at first, but by the time he sang the chorus one last time, no one was laughing. Keegan had subtly shifted the mood, forecasting his own impending change in fortunes.

Keegan also spoke the epilogue, and he spoke it as Keegan himself, dressed in an ASC T-

WILL POWER ON STAGE

For those of us who have watched Keegan's Falstaff journey from Windsor through Eastcheap and Gads Hill and Shrewsbury to Gloucestershire these past two ASC seasons, the epilogue was a poignant conclusion to the actor's own journey.

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shirt and sweatpants, carrying his Falstaff costume on a hanger. For those of us who have watched Keegan's Falstaff journey from Windsor through Eastcheap and Gads Hill and Shrewsbury to Gloucestershire these past two ASC seasons, the epilogue was a poignant conclusion to the actor's own journey. But the mechanism also played up the conclusion to the character's journey. In the epilogue Shakespeare promised his audience that the story of Hal would continue "with Sir John in it." But Sir John is not in Henry V. It seems Shakespeare himself realized he would ultimately have to reject Falstaff.

Eric Minton
October 11, 2010

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