

## 'Henry IV, Part I' is Shakespeare center tour de force

Written by Charles Culbertson footlights and spotlights

Sep. 30, 2009 9:02 PM

newsleader.com

### If You Go!

- **what:** Henry IV Part I
- **where:** Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton
- **when:** 7:30 p.m., Thursday; 2 p.m., Sunday
- **info:** [www.american-shakespearecenter.com](http://www.american-shakespearecenter.com)

**Don't let the title fool you.** As prosaic as it sounds, "Henry IV, Part I," is one of Shakespeare's most imaginative and sophisticated plays. In the hands of the American Shakespeare Center and Director Ralph Alan Cohen, it gets off to a commanding start, builds quickly and then fires on every cylinder.

Throw in some derriere-kicking musical interludes, and you're probably as close to experiencing the excitement of a 16th century night at the theater as you can get.

The play itself is one of my favorites because it's easy to follow, contains some of Shakespeare's most memorable characters and is neither all serious nor all silly. Even Sir John Falstaff, the boozy knight, does not wallow completely in buffoonery, but manages to cloak himself with a goodly portion of wit, wisdom and worldly observation.

If you're new to the play, the plot is relatively straightforward. Henry IV, who has obtained his crown through treachery, wants to travel to the Holy Land to atone for the murder of his predecessor. But military action keeps him at home where he frets over rebellion and the profligate ways of his son, Prince Hal.

Shakespeare artfully wove into this tale the antics of Falstaff, a corpulent tavern and bawdy-house denizen who helps lead Prince Hal down the road to dissipation, but who never forgets Hal is heir to the throne. It is during Falstaff's scenes that "Henry IV, Part I" achieves immortality, for the character is figuratively and literally bigger than life, embodying with affable good nature almost every undesirable character trait known to man.

For much of the play we see Prince Hal as an unfit heir to the throne, but we can't help being fond of him. This is because of the stage presence and likeability of actor Luke Eddy.

James Keegan has already admirably portrayed Falstaff this season in "The Merry Wives of Windsor." But it is in "Henry IV, Part I," he really cranks up the old fat knight and turns him loose on the Blackfriars stage. Keegan, through Falstaff, absorbs every available puff of air and molecule of light when he is on the stage.

But the true testament of Keegan's skill in playing this old scoundrel lies in that he doesn't give us too much of it. There might be no other role so easy to overplay than that of Falstaff. Too much and he becomes a bright but poorly drawn cartoon, losing the worldly wit and questionable sagacity that has made him one of Shakespeare's most beloved characters.

Keegan's utter mastery of his craft is demonstrated in his great, sweeping, yet finely nuanced portraiture of "Fat Jack."

**E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at [mail@stauntonhistory.com](mailto:mail@stauntonhistory.com).**