



Henry IV, Part 1

The Prince Has the Key to This Kingdom

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.
Sunday, November 15, 2009 (seats A-5&6, middle stalls)
Directed by Ralph Alan Cohen

This play has so many great characters: Hotspur, Glendower, Douglas, Worcester, Lady Percy, even Lady Mortimer, and, of course, Falstaff. The title character has his moments, too. With such characters and so many great lines and scenes, this is one of our favorite plays. Over the years we've seen our share of great Hotspurs and Glendowers and Ladies, and Henrys and, of course, Falstaffs. But we've never seen a truly memorable production of *Henry IV, Part 1*.

The answer to that riddle we found in Luke Eddy. It's a duh! thing to say, but the most important character in this play is Prince Hal. Yet until Eddy's turn in this production, we had never seen a memorable Hal. Eddy may have benefited from the fact he had just come off of playing Hamlet in the spring, and it is said that Hal is the flip side of the Hamlet coin. Like Hamlet, Hal is something of an enigma—a cutpurse or just a prankster? a roustabout or merely playacting? an everyman or royal? Eddy played him in all these shades, delivering his lines so that we see the boon companion, the proud prince, and the practical politician. In Eddy's hands—or, more to the point, in his facial expressions, movements, and handling of lines—this Hal was wholly human, and not just a succession of lines and forced laughter as we've seen in the past.

It helps, of course, that he's surrounded by such a superior company as that of ASC, with two particularly key players: Chris Johnston as Poins (who also turned in a memorable Douglas), and James Keegan as Falstaff. This is the same Falstaff we saw earlier this summer in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the quick-with-his-wit-and-on-his-feet knight. There was real chemistry between Keegan and Eddy, so that not only was the great centerpiece tavern scene a treat, their first scene together and the scene before they head off to war were rich in humor and poignancy, too. Here was the kind of palpable relationship of two like minds as you see in Lennon and McCartney, Boreanez and Bones, Bruce and The Big Man, and it manifested in a line that, unusually, inspired one of the biggest laughs of the night: after Hal said to the death-feigning Falstaff "Embowelled will I see thee by and by" and exited, seconds passed before the fat knight, still prone, roared "Embowelled?!" It's all about timing and character relationships, and it is such subtleties of text that ASC is always bringing to light, resulting in new laughs or ah-ha! nods among the knowing members of the audience.

The audience itself played a key part in another of the night's biggest laughs. Falstaff made us in the stalls his army of "scarecrows," having us stand as he described his abuse of the draft. When Hal came on stage, the prince paused and looked at us with such a frown: "I did never see such pitiful rascals," he said right to us. Perfect.

This production also brought out Shakespeare's rich drawing of Worcester, thanks to yet another fine performance from John Harrell. Surprisingly, Christopher Seiler downplayed his usual antic acting in portraying Glendower (too bad). Meanwhile, the one sour note in this production was Hotspur. That was not necessarily the fault of Tobias Shaw, who played him as a manic, hyperactive, vainglorious young man. Rather, it was this production's interpretation of Hotspur as charmless and, indeed, mean and violent to his wife. Clearly, Lady Percy loves this man (and that was obvious in Denice Burbach's performance), and we the audience must not only appreciate his cockiness, but admire him for it even if we shake our heads at his impetuosity (kind of like baseball fans did with

WILL POWER ON STAGE

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Pete Rose before they saw his true colors). But because this Hotspur wasn't very likeable as a person, many of the play's funniest moments—the popinjay speech, the letter and argument with Lady Percy, and the Glendower scene—didn't register as well as the more obtuse Falstaff scenes did. The audience needs to be on Hotspur's side through four acts for Hal's redemption in act five to carry proper weight, juxtaposed as it is against our sense of loss with Hotspur's death. But instead of mourning for Hotspur, we waited with relish for Falstaff to rise again, leave off being "embowelled," and reunite with Hal.

Eric Minton
November 16, 2009

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