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Blackfriars hosts 'Henry VI, Part 2'

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One year ago, the American Shakespeare Center presented "Henry VI, Part One," the first of three plays Shakespeare wrote about the Wars of the Roses. This February, the second play in that trilogy -- "Henry VI, Part Two" -- hit the Blackfriars stage with several of the same actors from the first installment and all of that production's vitality and creativity.

Vitality and creativity have become hallmarks of the annual Actors' Renaissance Season, in which the actors direct and design the play themselves. Which is good, because sometimes, as in the case of Shakespeare's histories, the plays can be bleak and bloody and need all the artistic interpretation they can get.

To understand this second chapter, it is important to remember what happened in the first one. It began with the untimely death of King Henry V, covered the final battles of England's Hundred Years' War with France and touched on the beginning of the Wars of the Roses.

In "Part 2," the French wars are over and several pot-stirring nobles vie for positions of power.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of the play, from a dramatic or even a crowd-pleasing point of view, is a revolt spearheaded by peasant Jack Cade -- a real-life historical character who led a rebellion against Henry VI's weak reign, overarching taxes and pervading corruption. Daniel Kennedy as Cade provides an unforgettable portrait of the rebel, drenching him with populist vitriol and, as noted by Ralph Cohen in his program comments, elements of Malcolm McDowell's Alex in "A Clockwork Orange."

Although there was nothing funny about the real Jack Cade rebellion, Shakespeare wrote of it in a humorous vein -- much needed in a play filled with conspiracy, assassination, revenge and naked displays of aggression. In fact, that part of the play gives us one of the most cherished of Shakespeare's lines: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

Shakespeare also gave us a powerhouse character in the form of Margaret of Anjou, the king's wife and mistress to the Duke of Suffolk. Sarah Fallon portrays this ambitious, manipulative social- and power-climber to perfection. She takes a character who is, by turns, shrill, angry, cunning, licentious and always duplicitous, and transforms her from what could be an overdrawn caricature into a woman of substance who is even capable of genuine sorrow (at the death of her lover, Suffolk).

It is interesting to note that Henry VI is portrayed by a woman (Denise Burbach), as he was in the first installment a year ago by Alyssa Wilmoth. Burbach does absolutely nothing to masculinize the role -- instead, moving, talking, weeping and even fainting in unvarnished feminine fashion. And it works.

The able cast also includes Benjamin Curns, Allison Glenzer, John Harrell, Bob Jones, Gregory Jon Phelps, Chris Johnston, Rene Thornton Jr., Tyler Moss, Miriam Donald, **J. Colleen Kelly**, Sarah Keyes and Johnny Adkins.

E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at mail@stauntonhistory.com.

If You Go!

what: "Henry VI, Part 2"

when: Now through April 3

where: Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton

tickets: \$10 to \$40

info: 851-1733 or www.americanshakespearecenter.com

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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