

HENRY V': A PRODUCTION WORTHY OF A KING

By Lloyd Rose December 5, 1995

Harry Hamlin's heroic performance is the point from which Michael Kahn's "Henry V" circles outward in eddies of astonishment and power. In this production, which opened last night at the Shakespeare Theatre, Kahn pulls out all the non-naturalistic stops: Dance, slapstick, Kabuki and classical clowning all show their influence here, and the result is elevated, fantastical and stirring -- a postmodern theatrical fable about what it means to be a king.

With this approach, Kahn has accomplished something very difficult: making the play palatable for modern audiences. In the '40s, when Laurence Olivier made his film and played the heroics straight, England was at war and the movie was a patriotic rallying cry. More recently, Kenneth Branagh's so-called "post-Falklands" screen version depicted war as filthy, bloody and tragic -- which made all the rousing speeches and Henry's self-justifications sound very peculiar. If "Henry V" can be presented as both pro-war and anti-war, it isn't because Shakespeare was waffling but because his scope was so wide. War is hateful and yet men love it -- this is the paradox he was capable of encompassing.

But attitudes toward warfare go in and out of fashion, and love of war has been pretty much anathema since Vietnam (though the popularity of Colin Powell shows how even today an aura of leadership surrounds a victorious general). And the character of Shakespeare's king is something of a problem. As Kenneth Tynan put it, with typical pith, "Henry of Monmouth, butcher and sophist, is a hard man to like." Indeed. The play opens with Henry's allowing himself to be talked by his ministers into invading France, the excuse being a hairsplitting analysis of the laws of royal succession. If ever a war was based on pique, greed and unthinking imperialism, this one is it.

Henry isn't real strong in the friendship department either. Kahn opens this production with a scene from "Henry IV, Part 2": Henry spurning his old friend Falstaff (David Sabin), whereupon the fat knight slinks away and dies of a broken heart. Falstaff is only the first of Henry's old pals to go. The king also executes his boyhood friend Scroop (Howard W. Overshown) for treason and hangs his former drinking companion Bardolph (Eric Hoffmann, who makes you sorry to see the rascal go) for robbing a church. After each of these incidents, Hamlin chokes up but then lifts his chin and goes on -- a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.

Yet in Kahn's production, our ambivalences about war and kingship are no more relevant to our perception of the play than our opinions of the monarchy are to our appreciation of those fairy tales in which the poor girl becomes a princess. Handsome as a statue of a king, yet softened with human doubt, Hamlin's Henry is a fellow learning the hard difference between being a man and a boy. Around him, the settings of the play shift fluidly, mutating into now

a battlefield, now a snow-covered camp, now a throne room, as if the play were Henry's dream, his fears and hopes about being a ruler taking on images to haunt and challenge him.

Kahn's staging is audacious -- part of the pleasure of the production is watching him pull off, with a flourish, effects that come within an inch of not working. Techniques derived from Eastern theater have become commonplace on the American stage, but his use of them is so imaginatively personal that they surprise and delight us once again. When a group of actors comes out billowing an immense sheet, you may wince, remembering every lousy "Tempest" you've ever seen with its shaken-sheet waves -- but then the billows settle into a snowscape that calls to mind Valley Forge. In battle, the soldiers charge upstage toward a slit of ugly red light, and the huge banner of France that forms the ceiling of the set slowly collapses and smothers them in it -- they writhe as if trapped in mud and blood.

Kahn's most inspired images are those in which he presents the French court. These characters are usually played as effete idiots, a tradition Kahn doesn't tamper with. But the way he presents the courtiers is jaw-dropping -- they're dressed as formally and absurdly as playing card royalty, and they walk on enormous platform shoes that lift them at least a foot and a half off the floor. Swaying on this footwear, they are both ridiculous and oddly menacing -- there's something of the crushing power of a giant robot in those silly feet, and later, in battle, the platforms suggest the massive hooves of cavalry horses, trampling everything in their path.

Not all of Kahn's ideas work. When the actors come out in street clothes at the top of the play and divide up the chorus, the proceedings seem self-consciously untraditional, a little arty. But the production quickly finds its feet and proceeds with a sweep and grace that carry you away. In the end, Kahn even makes you accept the presence of the slain, in stylized masks, as mute witnesses to the peace that is made and the dynastic marriage that follows.

This is not the kind of production in which the acting is of primary importance, but nobody seems to have told the actors, who are in roaring good form: Ted van Griethuysen as the mincing, puppetlike King of France; Jack Ryland in his double role as Exeter and the French herald; Jarlath Conroy as the garrulous Fluellen; Matthew Rauch as the prissy yet dangerous Dauphin; David Sabin as the down-to-earth Gower; William Francis McGuire as the scoundrelly Pistol; Nance Williamson as Mistress Quickly, who movingly delivers the account of the death of Falstaff; and too many more to name.

Loy Arcenas, who designed last season's "Henry IV," is back with a metallic magic box of a set that transports actors and audience through time and space, and Howell Binkley, Kahn's usual lighting designer, gives the scenes drama, beauty and a floating quality that is not so much unreal as super-real. Adam Wernick's percussive score rolls and rumbles under the warlike proceedings. Tom Broecker's costumes make the English simple men of action and the French magical, possibly lethal, creatures. These designers are the dream weavers, and Hamlin moves through their creation on a moral quest, worrying with unresolvable questions of responsibility, of justice and mercy, of the balance between contemplation and action, of what exactly it means -- and what it costs -- to put away childish

things.

Henry V, by William Shakespeare. Directed by Michael Kahn. Also featuring Emery Battis, Wallace Acton, Antonio Pearly McQueen IV, Craig Wallace. At the Shakespeare Theatre, 202-393-2700, through Jan. 21. CAPTION: Harry Hamlin builds the foundation for the Shakespeare Theatre's powerful "Henry V." CAPTION: Jarlath Conroy and Harry Hamlin as Fluellen and Henry in the Shakespeare Theatre's "Henry V."
