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New 'Henry V' downplays war Theater review: Shakespeare Theatre production emphasizes the man instead of his war. Harry Hamlin projects the king's complicated character, but his sound lacks fury.

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December 19, 1995 | By J. Wynn Rousuck | J. Wynn Rousuck, SUN THEATER CRITIC

Shakespeare's "Henry V" is a politically malleable play. It can be staged as a pro-war paean to patriotism -- the 1944 Laurence Olivier film is the most famous example -- or as an anti-war testament, as was often the case with productions during the Vietnam War era.

Director Michael Kahn staged one of the better known anti-war interpretations in 1969. But his current production at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre occupies more neutral ground, focusing more on the nature of the king than on the philosophical and political issues of war.

Pulling this off demands a subtle, accomplished performer in the title role. In Harry Hamlin -- long associated with the late TV series "L.A. Law" -- director Kahn has found an actor who effectively conveys the character's complexity. But due primarily to a vocal quality lacking in resonance, he frequently falls short at the seemingly simpler task of delivering the resounding rhetoric associated with the Shakespearean monarch who rallied his motley British forces with the words: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends . . ."



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Perhaps for this reason, the overall approach Kahn has taken to the production is of as much interest as the depiction of the king. "Henry V" is an overtly theatrical play, typified by the character identified as "Chorus," who sets the scene by introducing each act. Kahn takes this as his cue to further exploit the script's theatricality -- in mostly successful ways.

For starters, he casts several actors in rotation as Chorus, beginning with Ted van Griethuysen (who later plays the opposing roles of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the French king, Charles VI). Van Griethuysen is a gracious, welcoming presence when he speaks Chorus' famed opening words, "O, for a Muse of fire." Extending this comfortable sense of welcome are the other cast members, all of whom wear costumes that look like rehearsal clothes, which they gradually augment with period touches.

Not all of the deliberately obvious stagecraft works this well. Set designer Loy Arcenas makes repeated use of a huge drop cloth-like piece of fabric. The cloth makes a convincing ship's sail during the British troops' voyage to France, and it is then neatly transformed into a banner for the French court. But when it's called into duty to serve as a battlefield -- with peaks representing tents and bulges concealing soldiers -- it seems more a physical impediment than an artistic asset.

A more serious difficulty is the depiction of Henry's royal French foes. Kahn has the actors playing the French court deliver all of their lines in French, while two actors dressed as TV reporters offer simultaneous English translation on the sidelines. Though this exemplifies the lack of understanding between the warring parties, a little of it goes a long way. And, the ludicrously high platform shoes that costume designer Tom Broeker has given the French royals make them totter about the raked stage like fools -- especially Matthew Rauch's Dauphin, who wears the highest platforms of all.

These Frenchmen are traditionally portrayed as fops, but here they're just plain ridiculous. They are even sillier than the British characters Shakespeare created for comic relief -- the cowardly trio of Pistol (William Francis McGuire), Nym (Wallace Acton) and Bardolph (Eric Hoffmann), and the Welsh Fluellen (Jarlath Conroy).

In turn, Kahn's approach to the French magnifies Hamlin's less-than-commanding presence in Henry's battle scenes. After all, even if the British are greatly out-numbered, how strong a leader does Henry have to be if his opponents are clowns?

Hamlin shines, however, in the more intimate scenes. In these he shows us Henry V's mature, responsible side in conflict with the boyish rake Shakespeare depicted the character as in the two parts of "Henry IV" (Kahn inserts a scene from Part Two near the beginning of this production). The director staged an insightful abridged version of "Henry IV" last season starring Derek Smith, and though it would have been interesting to see how Smith would have continued the role, Hamlin does a fine job portraying the king's complicated makeup.

Consider, for example, the early scene in which Henry V condemns to death the traitors Grey, Cambridge and Scroop. Though the monarch's resolve doesn't waver, Hamlin's Henry embraces his stunned boyhood friend, Scroop (Howard W. Overshown), in tearful sympathy. Then, as the traitors are led away and shot offstage, Hamlin quickly composes himself, replacing Henry's mask of friendship with the hardened mask of a national leader and soon-to-be war hero.

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'Henry V'

Where: Shakespeare Theatre, 450 7th St., N.W., Washington

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays; 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; matinees at 2 p.m. Sundays, and noon tomorrow and Jan. 10. No performances Dec. 24. Through Jan. 21

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