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King and Country: Shakespeare's Great Cycle of Kings

Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM)

Brooklyn, New York

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Reviewed by ELIZABETH ZEMAN KOLKOVICH with JOEY BURLEY,
KAYLOR MONTGOMERY, WILL SLY, and ASHLEY VAN HESTEREN

The Royal Shakespeare Company's "King and Country: Shakespeare's Great Cycle of Kings," directed by Gregory Doran, performed full-length versions of *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V* in succession. These plays originated as individual performances at Stratford-upon-Avon in 2013-15 and then toured as a cycle to London, China, Hong Kong, and New York. We saw the New York version: a whirlwind tour through four plays in three days at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.¹ The production merged Shakespeare's time with our own in its costuming and effects. Played mostly in traditional dress with a minimal set, the production included two characters in modern costumes, pyrotechnics, and an acrylic floor lit from below. Projected images of the moon, barren trees, or building interiors were cast onto curtains upstage to set the scenes. Although the four parts sometimes lacked continuity, our experience watching them in sequence highlighted connections among the title characters. The production's first king—a Christ-like, homoerotic Richard II—haunted the entire tetralogy. It seemed as though little to no time passed between plays, so instead of watching young Bolingbroke turn into an aged king, we saw an increasingly anxious character swiftly decline. Likewise, Henry V was not a more mature version of Prince Hal, but a boy grappling with the responsibility of a new role thrust upon him.

Richard II and His Judas

David Tennant played Richard as an effeminate, overgrown child. He flamboyantly glided across the stage as he spoke with haughty boredom or petulance. During the first few acts, he donned elegant robes in gold and blue and carried an orb and scepter. As he lost power, he stripped down to simpler frocks and appeared increasingly Christ-like with long brown hair, plain white gown, cross necklace, slender frame, and bare feet. In the deposition scene, Richard lay prostrate at the feet of Bolingbroke (Jasper Britton) and extended his arms in a cross. By the prison scene, he wore nothing but a beaten, stained rag as he sat on a dark stage with his arms outstretched in shackles.

These visual analogies between Richard and Christ offered two compelling possibilities: either the production portrayed him as a misunderstood king whose memory haunted the next two monarchs as they tried to hold onto the power they stole from him, or the production dressed Richard like Christ to demonstrate his delusion. Tennant's Richard was indeed out of touch, and although he pleaded for sympathy and

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Figure 1: Sam Marks as Aumerle and David Tennant as Richard in *Richard II*. Photo by Richard Termine.

compassion, he rarely showed these qualities to others. In the opening scene, the Duchess of Gloucester sat at a coffin and silently mourned her husband while Richard banged his scepter on the coffin as he spoke. He showed his preference for Bolingbroke in 1.3 by kissing him on the lips, while he spoke of Mowbray with a patronizing tone and dismissive hand wave. When Richard met with the dying Gaunt in 2.1, he entered laughing and cheered when Gaunt died.

Although there was no indication of homoeroticism among Bushy, Bagot, and Green, the production chose to eroticize Richard's relationship with Aumerle, the Judas to his Christ. In 3.3, Aumerle (Sam Marks) sat with Richard on a metal walkway stretching above the stage (fig. 1), and Richard leaned in for a long, tender kiss before descending to the "base court" to give up his crown (3.3.180).² This kiss on the bridge paralleled Christ's prayers on the Mount of Olives just before he was betrayed, and Richard's betrayal came soon enough when masked men stormed in to his prison cell. He fought briefly until one murderer grabbed him from behind and stabbed him in the back. Richard pulled off the man's hood to reveal Aumerle. The two men stared at each other for a long moment, and Aumerle continue to embrace Richard as he died. As the production brought new meaning to York's description of Aumerle as "lost for being Richard's friend" (5.2.42), it raised an unanswered question about motive: did Aumerle kill Richard as an act of loving mercy or to prove loyalty to the new king?

In the final scene, Henry IV stood bewildered over Richard's corpse as Tennant re-entered as Richard's ghost on the elevated walkway. Wearing a now-clean white gown and gold crown, Richard reached out his arms in a cross again, as if he had been betrayed, sentenced, crucified, and resurrected. This moment seemed to show the audience Henry's anxiety about the morality of his actions: was he complicit in the usurping and execution of a rightful king? The production suggested visually that Henry feared divine retribution in part because Richard had drawn himself so close to Christ.

1-2 Henry IV: Youth and Age, Tavern and Court

1 Henry IV opened in a cathedral with monks singing in the balcony and images of Gothic arches projected upstage. A blanket-covered body laid at the same position center stage as Richard's corpse had rested previously. The body then rose to reveal itself as the living Henry IV, who stood from prayer to begin the play. A life-sized crucifix loomed over him in the same location as Richard's ghost had gazed silently outward (fig.

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2). It appeared as though Henry was asking the late Richard for forgiveness, but because the new king spent most of the next two plays either weeping or screaming, the production implied that he remained haunted by Richard's memory.

The tone changed quickly from somber to lively with a telling juxtaposition: immediately after we saw the troubled Henry IV at church, a bed slid down stage with someone having vigorous sex under the covers. Out emerged two prostitutes and Prince Hal (Alex Hassell), followed by a fully clothed Falstaff (Antony Sher). Something similar happened later when Hotspur (Matthew Needham) stood stoically on stage a few extra minutes while the scene changed from a wartime sendoff to a raucous



Figure 2: Jasper Britton as Henry IV (center) in 1 Henry IV. Photo by Richard Termine.

tavern. The production drew a parallel between Henry IV and Hotspur, both serious-minded characters juxtaposed with the tavern crowd, but Hotspur's immaturity made him appear unready to lead. Needham's boyish Hotspur had a hot temper that suited his name, and his anger surfaced in amusing ways: he punched a letter, wadded it up, and threw it at the audience. He jumped up and down excitedly like a child, and at one point his father brought him physically to his knees.

At the same time, the two parts of *Henry IV* increasingly emphasized the contrast between youth and age. Antony Sher's Falstaff, uniformly praised by British and American reviewers, was a vulnerable "old geezer" who lamented his age alongside a crew of similarly aged men: Bardolph, Shallow, and Silence.³ But for us, the most memorable characters were the wild youths: Hotspur, Hal, and Poins. Hal often spoke directly to the audience. He toasted us when Falstaff invited him to "spit in my face, call me horse" (2.4.176-7) if he lied. He glanced at us in hesitation when considering whether to participate in the Gadshill robbery, and when the Sheriff arrived at the tavern to investigate it, he hid the stolen money box in an audience member's lap and told us to keep "a true face" (2.4.456). When he took things too far and slapped the Sheriff, he promised us regretfully, "The money shall be paid back again, with advantage" (2.4.497-8). Hal made us his conspirators when he reveled in mischief, and he sought our sympathy when he worried about the consequences of his actions. Sam Marks played Poins as a clean-cut, high-ranking younger son who earnestly claimed to be "well spoke on" (2 *Henry IV* 2.2.56). He was Hal's best friend and primary enabler, nudging him forward in the robbery of Falstaff, and the production suggested an erotic component to their relationship when they entered from tennis in 2 *Henry IV* shirtless, sweaty, and grabbing each other playfully. The doubling of Aumerle and Poins made Hal's silent renunciation of Poins at the end of 2 *Henry IV* seem smart indeed.

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2 Henry IV was fragmented and chaotic. It opened not with live music in a church, as the previous plays had, but with a man in a Rolling Stones T-shirt who took a selfie with the audience. He announced himself as Rumor (Antony Byrne) and delivered the prologue with the word “rumor” in different languages projected on the wall behind him. He momentarily snapped the audience out of Shakespeare’s history and into our own moment, but then he slipped into the first scene, spoke a minor character’s lines, and walked offstage not to return. The production cut the epilogue and instead had Falstaff’s boy walk downstage to stand silently alone. This incongruent frame bookended a sometimes baffling play. The tavern scenes happened on a small block center stage, and this intimate space heightened the feeling of chaos within as characters chased each other drunkenly. An especially crazed Pistol (Antony Byrne)—whose long beard, gelled-up hair, and tattered leather jacket made him resemble a deranged biker—mooned the audience. The set design represented the tavern as its own enclosed world, near the court but apart from it. As Hal tried to navigate these two worlds, two moments at the play’s end demonstrated his attempt to transition from prince to king. He renounced Falstaff quickly with little emotion, as if he had rehearsed his speech and felt eager to get it out. By contrast, his last conversation with his dying father was earnest and emotional. His father advised him to “busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels” (4.3.342-3), and that advice became his primary motivation in the next play, which suggested repeatedly that war was not his choice.

Henry V and His Troubles

The opening of *Henry V* offered another break in the action. Oliver Ford Davies played a grandfatherly Chorus in modern dress: corduroy pants, a cardigan, and a scarf. As he spoke, other characters entered and lingered in the background. The Chorus’ series of appearances aligned him with us in a more sustained, successful way than the previous play did with Rumor; at the same time, the production invited us to mock playfully his verbosity. When he paused, the other actors began to start the scene, but he continued his speech until the others lost patience and yelled, “Sod off!”

The title character spoke directly to us as well. Just as Prince Hal interacted regularly with audience members, Hassell’s Henry V delivered some of his major speeches to the audience (fig. 3). He urged us “Once more unto the breach” and gestured several times for us to follow, thereby making us his hesitant army (3.1.1). He spoke to us at the gates of Harfleur with an earnest, calm tone. He turned to us at the end of his “band of brothers” speech to invite us to fight alongside him. The king’s beginnings as Prince Hal were crucial to Hassell’s



Figure 3: Alex Hassell as Henry V in *Henry V*. Photo by Stephanie Berger.

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performance. He was a thoughtful, principled king, but one who was often distraught. The first time we saw him in *Henry V*, he sat irritated in his throne, clutching papers and appearing uncomfortable in his new role. When he read the list of dead French nobles toward the end of the play, he did so with great sadness and wept as music swelled. This was not a pro-war, simply patriotic *Henry V*, but a version that represented war as destructive and complicated. It encouraged us to see the title character as a kind of victim. His distress at the war made some of his motivations unclear: did he fight this war simply to carry out his father's wishes, or to prove himself to his people and the Dauphin? Why did he order the soldiers to kill their prisoners, and why did he set up Williams to get beaten by Fluellen?

After watching a troubled king fight a war he seemed not to have wanted, we saw a little of Prince Hal return in the final scene. Sliding across the floor on one knee, Henry delighted in wooing Katherine (Jennifer Kirby), and the production represented them as a good match. In an earlier scene, Katherine teased ladies in waiting and appeared more lively than innocent. The production's doubling of Katherine with Lady Percy in *1 Henry IV* might have contributed to this idea, as Lady Percy had a playful, loving relationship with Hotspur. Both marriages differed substantially from the business-like marriage between Richard II and his wife.

The four plays in the RSC's "King and Country" did not produce a singular vision. The production cut little of the play texts, with each play running at about three hours, and the experience of watching them in sequence accentuated their distinctive styles, staging, and music. Yet the experience also highlighted overarching themes of family, betrayal, war, and the challenges of leading. Moments of modern dress and modern technology invited the audience to make connections between the past and present. Because time within and between plays seemed to pass in days or months rather than in years, war sprung up quickly, people rose to power and died quickly, and characters remained consistent more than they developed. The most striking example is Prince Hal, later Henry V. At first torn between appeasing his father and enjoying his friends, he then became a boy who had just lost his father and was thrust into a war. In all three plays, he was uncertain, pulled in multiple directions, and influenced by others. Even though his emotional response to war sometimes seemed incongruent with the text and made us question his motivations, the production suggested that Henry made more prudent decisions than did the previous two kings, and despite the tetralogy's concluding words about the civil wars to come, our final view of Henry alongside Katherine encouraged optimism about the future.

Notes

1. The Ohio State / Royal Shakespeare Company partnership generously funded our trip and made possible this review essay. Elizabeth also thanks Joe Fahey and Alan Farmer for discussing these performances with her.

2. All quotations come from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: Norton, 2016).

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3. On Falstaff, see, e.g., Michael Billington, "Henry IV Parts I and II review," *The Guardian* 17 April 2014; Dominic Cavendish, "Henry IV Parts I & II, RSC, review," *The Telegraph* 17 April 2014; David Cote, "King and Country," *Time Out New York*.

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