



## Stratford's Breath of Kings Offers Bold and Bumpy Rebellion

by Jim Volz. Written on 2016-08-23. Published in 2017 Issue 1.

For the production: *Breath of Kings: Rebellion* (2016, Stratford Festival of Canada, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

IT TAKES INTREPID SHAKESPEARE FANATICS TO ENDURE AND APPRECIATE THE BOMBAST of *Richard the Second*, *Henry the Fourth, Part 1*, *Henry the Fourth, Part 2*, and *Henry the Fifth* all in one day, but that was the challenge for Stratford Theater attendees who watched the Graham Abbey conceived and adapted *Breath of Kings: Rebellion & Redemption* this summer. Audiences could have chosen to break them into their two separate parts (*Rebellion & Redemption*), but to fully appreciate the diverse repertory company, it was best to summon up the swagger and bravado of Shakespeare's best soldiers and plunge right in.

As seasoned theatergoers know, the play is a bumpy rollercoaster ride with the long-winded grandiloquence of *Richard the Second* slowing Bolingbroke's eventual drive to the throne. It's actually a pretty simple story of political missteps with *Richard the Second*'s underestimation of Bolingbroke, allowing ego and advisors to mistakenly send the future *Henry the Fourth* (Bolingbroke) into exile. Bolingbroke's complicity in the king's murder was the second major misstep, both in terms of reconciling his own guilt and his countrymen's loyalties and ambitions.

As both adaptor and lead actor (Bolingbroke/*Henry the Fourth*), one can't help but suspect that the incisive cutting and trimming Abbey achieved in bringing the four plays in under six hours ran into significant snags when paring down his own character's bluster. Mr. Abbey offered up an interesting and forceful *Henry the Fourth* but the external posturing and pontification often detracted from the audience's understanding of the usurper's motivations, inner struggles, and tortured soul.

Tom Rooney as *Richard the Second* delivered a more nuanced, assertively suppliant, forcibly departing king who understood both the power and burdens of the hollow crown. The glory of the Stratford Festival, of course, remained in its ability to tell a story with clarity, cleverness,

and panache, and transforming the Tom Patterson Theater into an arena with the audience stacked on top of the playing fields, the battle fields, and courts kept most theater members engaged. Anahita Dehbonehie's set design shrewdly converted the stage from a dirt battle field (actually something similar to tire shreds to keep the dust down) to the court with the help of a few brooms, rakes, and shovels. Yannik Larivée's costume design was inventive and helpful in determining who was who, and composer and Sound Designer Debashis Sinha underscored the intermittent action with a strong guiding hand without tromping on the language.

In Part 2 of *Rebellion*, Geraint Wyn Davies's Falstaff was as savvy as he was salacious, and lead us through *Henry the Fourth, Part 1* with gusto and intelligence. Johnathan Sousa as Henry Percy/Hotspur was a feisty, fur-covered, single-minded warrior with enough humanity that one felt sorry for the treachery that led to his ill-fated demise. Araya Mengesha as Prince Hal survived a slow start where he was gobbled up in scenes with more seasoned actors. Fortunately, he hit his stride midway and despite some seeming vocal strain or limits, stayed focused and carried the day. His best scenes were with the infinitely likable Davies as Falstaff, and together, they brought *Rebellion* and the trimmed *Henry the Fourth, Part 1* to a satisfying conclusion.

Kate Hennig as Mistress Quickly made understatedly bold choices and clearly ran the Boar's Head. Michelle Giroux as Doll Tearsheet captured the pathetic hell-bent-on-survival heart of the character, and Stephen Russell as the Earl of Westmoreland was solid from start to finish. Nigel Shawn Williams also excelled as the Earl of Northumberland, and of course there are too many other fine performances to mention.

Directors Weyni Mengesha and Mitchell Cushman carefully blended the sights, sounds, speeches, and choreography of the two plays with experienced eyes and a clear vision. The heart of the history played center on the kings (and men who would be king), but the rapid pulse of each scene was accomplished by the parade of actors who played the dukes, duchesses, bishops, earls, and queens. The Stratford Festival was blessed by the depth of its overall company, and the artistic team was cast well with a strong and surprisingly liberal colour and gender conscious approach with women in men's roles and mixed-race families that adroitly allowed the words and talent to carry the day.

*Jim Volz is an international arts consultant, author, producer, and professor based in Orange County at California State University, Fullerton. He served as a longtime critic/arts columnist for New York's Back Stage and founding editor of the Shakespeare Theatre Association's international magazine, Quarto. He has produced over 100 professional productions, consulted for over 100 arts institutions and published more than 100 articles on management, arts criticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in American Theatre, Oxford University Press's Theatre Research International, Hollywood's Drama-Logue and myriad other*

articles for national and international publications. He is a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Colorado, Boulder. [jvolz@fullerton.edu](mailto:jvolz@fullerton.edu)

## Production Details

### General

Title	Breath of Kings: Rebellion
Year	2016
Theater Company	Stratford Festival of Canada
Theaters	Tom Patterson Theatre (Canada)
Start Date	2016-06-22
End Date	2016-09-24

### Cast

KING HENRY IV	GRAHAM ABBEY
KING RICHARD THE SECOND	TOM ROONEY
PRINCE HAL	ARAYA MENGESHA
JOHN OF GAUNT	STEPHEN RUSSELL
PRINCE JOHN OF LANCASTER	SEBASTIEN HEINS
DUKE OF YORK	RANDY HUGHSON
BOLINGBROOK	GRAHAM ABBEY
EARL WESTMORELAND	STEPHEN RUSSELL
AUMERLE	SEBASTIEN HEINS
BLUNT	IRENE POOLE
EARL OF WORCESTER	WAYNE BEST
THOMAS MOWBRAY	CARLY STREET
EARL OF SALISBURY	MIKAELA DAVIES
HOTSPUR	JOHNATHAN SOUSA
SIR JOHN BUSHY	ANUSREE ROY
ARCHBISHOP OF YORK	CARLY STREET
SIR WILLIAM BAGOT	SHANE CARTY
SIR HENRY GREEN	GORDON S. MILLER
EARL OF DOUGLAS	CARLY STREET
EARL OF NORTHUMBERLAND	NIGEL SHAWN WILLIAMS
SIR RICHARD VERNON	SHANE CARTY
SIR JOHN FALSTAFF	GERAINT WYN DAVIES
NED POINS	GORDON S. MILLER
BISHOP OF CARLISLE	KATE HENNIG

BARDOLPH	NIGEL SHAWN WILLIAMS
LADY PERCY	CARLY STREET
SIR STEPHEN SCROOP	IRENE POOLE
MISTRESS QUICKLY	KATE HENNIG
YOUNG GARDENER	CARLY STREET
OLD GARDENER	GERAINT WYN DAVIES
QUEEN ISABELLE	MICHELLE GIROUX
SHERIFF	IRENE POOLE
DUCHESS OF YORK	ANUSREE ROY
DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER	KATE HENNIG
LADY ATTENDING THE QUEEN	MIKAELA DAVIES
CONSTABLE	RANDY HUGHSON
NORTHUMBERLAND MESSENGER	MICHELLE GIROUX
DUKE OF GLOUCESTER	WAYNE BEST
NYM	SHANE CARTY
SERVANT TO HOTSPUR	MIKAELA DAVIES
SERVANT TO WILLIAM BAGOT	MIKAELA DAVIES
DOLL TEARSHEET	MICHELLE GIROUX

## Creatives

DIRECTOR	MITCHELL CUSHMAN
DIRECTOR	WEYNI MENGESHA
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	BRONWYN STEINBERG
COSTUME DESIGNER	YANNIK LARIVEE
SET DESIGNER	ANAHITA DEHBONEHIE
LIGHTING DESIGNER	KIMBERLY PURTELL
SOUND DESIGNER	DEBASHIS SINHA
COMPOSER	DEBASHIS SINHA
FIGHT DIRECTOR	JOHN STEAD
STAGE MANAGER	MAXWELL T. WILSON
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	JUDY FARTHING
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	JANINE RALPH
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR	GRAHAM ABBEY
CONCEIVER	GRAHAM ABBEY
ADAPTOR	GRAHAM ABBEY
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	KATHERINE ARCUS
ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER	C.J. ASTRONOMO

ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER	FRANCESCA CALLOW
ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER	CAITLIN LUXFORD
APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER	GREGORY MCLAUGHLIN
ASSOCIATE FIGHT DIRECTOR	GEOFF SCOVELL
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	ZEPH WILLIAMS