



## The Royal Shakespeare Company Histories: "Staging History" Cycle

by Kevin Crawford. Written on 2008-11-19. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Henry VI Part 1 (2008, Royal Shakespeare Company, UK). See production details at the end of the review.

FROM 6-9 MARCH, 2008, I WAS PRIVILEGED TO SEE SHAKESPEARE'S THE HISTORIES OCTOLOGY IN the Royal Shakespeare Company's Courtyard Theatre, performed in the order of the plays' "Staging History," as RSC literature billed it (my weekend fell between two others that presented the plays in "Full Cycle," or historical, order). The eight plays that chronicle English history from the later years of Richard II's reign through the death of Richard III, of course, really form two tetralogies. Or, in terms of their likely composition, a successful two-partter that prompted a multi-authored "prequel" followed by a conclusion that led to a more cohesively-planned tetralogy. Or a bunch of plays with more dukes, earls, kings, alarums, coronations, spectacular deaths, exeunts, and mustered men than one usually sees from Thursday evening through Sunday afternoon.

Much has been written about this project: one company of actors performing the whole cycle (34 artists in 264 roles), the gradual "building" of it (Henry V was the last installment in November 2007; the Henry VI plays were revivals of Boyd's 2001 outings with that trilogy, though with twenty-three new performers and a conscious decision not to recreate the plays move for move), Michael Boyd's directorial stewardship of the project (aided by Richard Twyman for 2H4), etc. Indeed, I was asked by the editor to respond to this weekend mostly and particularly as a "first-timer." Despite thirty years of Shakespearean theatre-going, and in what seems to me to be a strange twist of theatrical fate, I've never seen these plays on stage. I've flirted with and around them in performance for years—I've played Falstaff in *Merry Wives*, and once doubled as Clarence and Richmond in *Richard III*—and have tackled them as a professor in the classroom. Video and film galore. But I've never seen them live. All eight in four days proved to be quite an experience. "Once-in-a-lifetime," I crowed all weekend, and have since.

"This is too long"

Buying tickets for eight plays—or one play, for that matter—shouldn’t signal to a director that an audience member wants to hear every word of a Folio or a Quarto text, texts that, whatever their provenance, surely do not represent the early modern performance scripts or “approved books” that saw cuts for playing times. I can’t believe anyone still frets about this. There is no virtue in, or historical precedent for, a “full-text-anything.” Why are some directors still so afraid to cut text, or academic (mostly) performance critics so opposed to it? If I may pick a synecdochic example: who has ever complained about not seeing Clarence’s children in Richard III (who, in the twentieth century, never saw the stage in any discussed production)? I remember Antony Sher’s diary account of his highly-praised performance as Richard III at the RSC in 1985, a rare production that actually entertained—in rehearsal—the idea of keeping them. Frustrated by the increasing need to eliminate excess playing time, the actor playing Edward IV gripes, “There are scenes in our production never witnessed before on the English stage” (Sher 221). Finally, director Bill Alexander cut the children’s scene wholesale, along with Elizabeth’s flight to sanctuary and a few lines in most scenes. One little girl’s mature and realistic response after being let go? “Well, that’s showbiz” (240). Yes, it is. From Boyd, though, I get Clarence’s kids and Maureen Beattie’s Duchess of York who is forced, in the weekend’s most ridiculous blocking choice, to mop up the bloody stage on her knees with a bucket and rag. I found nothing provocative or suggestive in this decision, no “Oh, look, she’s cleaning up the mess her wicked son has made” metaphorical nonsense. Thirty-four actors? Find a servant to clean the floor. And I don’t care about those kids. They don’t have to recall the cycle’s other “lost children,” or serve in any way to anticipate the deaths of the princes in the tower, or come to my sympathetic mind later in the play when Richard refers to the “brats of Clarence” or announces bluntly, “The son of Clarence have I pent up close. / His daughter meanly have I matched in marriage”; they just annoy and bore me. Like a groundling, only in the top-most Courtyard Gallery (a galleryling?), I was standing for that production. I was entering my eighth Shakespearean hour that day by then, I was in pain, and I wanted Richard back on stage. I don’t think I’m making too much of this, especially considering that this production actually cut—or, as it turns out, consciously chose not to bring into a mostly Folio-based performance script—the sure-fire crowd-pleasing Quarto exchange between Richard and Buckingham in 4.2: “Ay, what’s o’clock?” I found it all simply unbelievable, since the company had rehearsed those lines. Excited about the cycle, I had scoured the RSC’s website and had seen a video of the post-coronation scene in rehearsal; there, one found Buckingham’s jack striking betwixt his begging and Richard’s meditation, safely and soundly introduced by Slinger and Richard Cordery as Buckingham. These lines were not accidentally dropped the evening I saw the production (I checked, as I’ll explain below). I now have to imagine a brief debate in later rehearsals going something like this:

Actor: “Shouldn’t we keep the lines that both actors and audiences love, and have them spoken by veterans who know what they’re doing?”

Boyd: “No, they’re out, and Maureen on her knees and the two kids who don’t know what they’re doing are in.”

This non-wielding of the textual scalpel meant I also got to see all of Mistress Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and the Beadles in 2H4 5.4, as if I wasn’t dying, along with most of the audience I should imagine, to get to Hal’s dismissal of Falstaff (and the dismissal of David Warner’s woefully uninspired performance in the role).

Company members shared my frustration. After 2H4, an actor enjoyed some rounds with a few friends and me in the Dirty Duck, welcoming any and all questions. I immediately jumped on the productions’ running times. He rolled his eyes, and, waving his pint dribblingly around, began complaining bitterly. He singled out that evening’s performance, especially the first half of the Gaultree Forest scene of 4.1, in which he felt so bored and frustrated that in defiance of his usual blocking he drew his sword and grunted at one point just to alleviate the pain of ennui. And this was a scene he was speaking in regularly. When actors are begging to get rid of lines, something’s wrong. No more of that.

“The best actors in the world”

The company were, in a word, magnificent. It would be hard to write enough in praise of the overall ensemble work, but I must single out a few performances, good or ill. Chuk Iwuji really came into his own as Henry VI in 3H6, and his resigned self-assuredness in 5.6 stood in remarkable contrast to the ebullient, naïve boy king who couldn’t wait to kiss Margaret for the first time in 2H6. Jonathan Slinger was amazing throughout, and while the company—excepting Warner’s comparably limited turn as Falstaff—did more than yeoman’s service in filling all those roles, Slinger stands with a select few who bore huge swaths of text and stage time. Charting the weekend by looking over his sometimes-deformed shoulder, so to speak, is dizzying. He came out of the gate Thursday evening in 1H6 with a delightful Bastard of Orleans, repeatedly popping out of the stage and startling his easily-frightened French compatriots. The next morning he taunted a (planted, I later learned) patron as Bevis in 2H6; after dumping the poor man’s rucksack on the stage, Slinger grabbed a paperback and laboriously read the title—“*Ri-chard Threeree!*” (Holland’s response: “I’ve seen it; it’s shite!”). By mid-afternoon, Slinger was taking on the ever-demanding role of Richard Gloucester in 3H6 (the tremendous speech concluding 3.2 is the longest in the canon), and that evening he played Richard III. The man then woke up Saturday and had a phenomenal crack at Richard II at 10:30a.m., rested a bit as Richard II’s ghost in 2H4 that evening, and returned Sunday to turn in an energetic and

charming Fluellen for H5. (Like all company members, he had one show out of the eight off, in his case 1H4.) To Slinger's immense credit, his characterizations never "blurred." His Richard of Bordeaux was not a fey rehashing of his Gloucester, nor was his touchingly funny Fluellen an echo of his comic moments as the Bastard or Bevis (this in stark opposition to Antony Bunsee's...everything, all inaudibly and robotically spoken). Yes, he was always "Slinger," but this was a mental and physical triumph hard to calculate or quantify. I think most actors will agree that the most annoying and frequent question they hear is "How did you memorize all those lines?" The query took on new meaning that weekend, and rose to far greater levels of implication. As some actors were wearing the same costume for more than one production, they couldn't always look down at themselves and remember "Oh, I must be in 2H6 now," as they very well could have been in 3H6 that moment. And considering the sheer number of possible entry points designed for the Courtyard stage, the "memorization" question surely becomes, "How did you learn all those lines, remember what play you were doing, and know where you needed to enter and on which trapeze?" So Slinger accidentally jumped from that lascivious lute to his curtailed fair proportion, omitting the looking-glass and ambling nymph that Friday night (at least my Duck actor/contact confirmed that the lines were usually there, as he lamented the unceremonious dismissal of "What's o'clock" in R3); actors drop lines sometimes. No big deal in light of an entire weekend of nailing things spot-on.

Geoffrey Streatfeild was a wonderful, tremendously moving, mostly soft-spoken Henry V, and Clive Wood was solid and engaging as Richard Plantagenet and Henry Bolingbroke—his elucidation of that potential mess-of-all-speeches in 2H6 2.2, explaining the Yorkist claim to the throne by literally drawing a genealogy chart on the stage with large rocks, was brilliant (and nicely whet the appetite for H5's Sallic Law nightmare). Beattie was a winning uber-Scots Quickly, and Alexia Healy a beautiful, linguistically-challenged Princess Katherine, but some other women didn't fare as well. Though quite popular with audiences and reviewers, I found Katy Stephens's repertoire of expressions and gestures pulled directly from a bizarre synthesis of *Melrose Place*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Young and the Restless* dramaturgy and acting styles. As she was doubling Joan la Pucelle and Margaret in the H6s, we got to see her sneers, huffs, and flounces often. Hannah Barrie's Lady Anne was painfully awful, and so far removed from Slinger's accomplishments that one wondered where she wandered in from (Guildhall, apparently, though I should say in fairness that I'd found her especially adorable as an angelic ghost of Margery Jourdain in the Cade scenes of 2H6, and that she nearly redeemed herself of all Annean wrongdoing with her seductive, smirking Alice in H5). Also contributing to the "what company do they think they're in?" fraternity was Patrice Naiambana as a Warwick in every production except 1H4. Naiambana spoke with a big "Shakespeare Voice," if it can be called that, seemingly channeling late nineteenth-century bombast; this was vocal performance

that could be paired with any Shakespearean acting spoof, from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Blackadder* to Nicholas Craig to *South Park*. Naiambana was also unique in that he frequently wielded two swords like Jet Li, wore what looked more like a leather trench coat than the quasi-period gowns the other men had, stood in wide-spread martial arts stances, and would have been comfortably at home in *The Matrix VI: Warwick's Revenge*. Naiambana's death scene in 3H6 5.2 was jaw-droppingly bad, out-Bottomed Bottom, and had audiences around me laughing unashamedly. His squeals—for so they were—couldn't reasonably be identified as human, and my notes have "Badger? Large cat? Small sea mammal?" scribbled in the margin. I was astonished to later be told by an RSC box office employee and usher that the actor had actually "toned it down quite a lot recently."

"We few, we happy few"

I did not fool myself into thinking I was somehow digesting the project, at least in terms of play order and at most in terms of the concentrated nature of the weekend, as an Elizabethan audience did. I don't think we were really meant to imagine that, but there were a number of minor "see them how they were..." overtones in the RSC's marketing that emphasized the ensemble ethos and the composition trajectory. Not surprisingly, program notes suggested that rehearsing the plays and then seeing them in their composed order gave both actors and audiences "an insight into Shakespeare's journey as a writer, and a deeper understanding of his developing view of England and its history." There was a palpable sense of belonging, nevertheless, to a shared theatrical experience unlike any other. Indeed, like Exeter recalling York and Suffolk's deaths, during the final Chorus of H5 all my mother came into mine eyes and I found myself swallowing down a small lump in the throat and blinking through tears. Many of us had seen our bending author pursue that story, and its larger one, in the "little room" of four days.

And yes, France and England were made to bleed. Everywhere. I've never seen so much fake blood, or as realistic. One of many leitmotifs whose effects were accentuated by the weekend's compressed consumption, patrons couldn't escape the blood even heading for their interval ice cream, as there were backstage stations all around the Circle and Stalls loaded with props and buckets of the red stuff. It pooled out from under the fresh corpses of Henry VI and Richard II, vomited forth from the ghost of Henry V, and gushed from many crushed noses. Richard Gloucester dragged Henry VI off to "another room" in 3H6 5.6, leaving a huge horseshoe-shaped arc of it, blocking mirrored in Exton's removal of Richard II's body—the dragger (Slinger as Gloucester) now the dragged (Slinger as the other Richard). Strangely, considering the rampant sanguinity, Clifford did not enter in 3H6 2.6 with an arrow in his neck, though that decision is also likely to have been a Folio-driven one. Not textually indicated, nonetheless, and in the

entire cycle's most brutal onstage act (and that's saying something), York's hand and dagger re-emerged covered in blood after he'd thrust it up Joan la Pucelle's shift and vaginally penetrated her with the weapon: "And yet forsooth she is a virgin pure!", he scoffed (1H6 5.6.83). Similarly, Boyd's fondness for ghosts meant that audiences could on average spot one about every forty-five minutes that weekend. Henry V crawling into his own grave at the top of 1H6, Richard II lumbering out of a Rumor-drawn coffin to get 2H4 going, York looming over his son's coronation in R3...and this roster doesn't include the scripted ghosts.

There were some light-hearted moments that could only have been truly shared by those audiences in for the long haul. It was one kind of joke for Forbes Masson's Chorus in H5 to refer not to a "wooden O," but rather "this [pause] rusty shed," to the delight of the crowd. It was quite another when the first afternoon pre-show welcome/mobile phone-admonishment (I believe it was delivered by Tom Hodgkins then) announced that we were about ready to see 2H6...which we'd already seen that morning. For a good second-and-a-half a huge group of people—including myself—really thought that they were at the wrong performance and that their dream of seeing *The Histories* was about to be shattered by some Satanic box office error. The actor in question doubled over when he realized his (completely sincere, it seemed) mistake, and worried out loud about the treatment he'd receive backstage from the company. It was the weekend's biggest laugh by far, but as my pulse returned to something close to normal I remember thinking, "That better not happen again." Those announcements also created another kind of bond for full-cycle ticket holders, in that we (I did, anyway) quickly donned veteran mantles and could look down our noses at those being welcomed "for the first time"; by 1H4, I was openly rolling my eyes anytime I overheard someone saying, "Right, what's happened so far?" "Just the battles of Tewkesbury, Bosworth Field, St. Albans, and a few others; a deposition, the executions of Joan of Arc and two monarchs, and Cade's rebellion; oh, and Clarence's children were treated very poorly by their uncle after auntie Cis mopped the floor," I would sigh quietly to myself.

My only other concerns were environmental, or fell under whatever auspices watch over sightlines and seats. Throughout the course of the cycle, I sat or stood on all three levels of all three sides of the Courtyard Theatre. I don't regret this at all, for what I hope are obvious reasons (I spent all six-and-a-half hours of both parts of H4 in the same seat and nearly went mad). I know, however, that I missed a number of entrances, lines, stage pictures, and even deaths. As many audiences already know, the box office qualifier "Obstructed seats" takes on new meaning in the Courtyard, especially when subjected to Boyd's trapeze fetish. The term is no longer limited to a support column blocking a direct view of the stage. I don't remember ever struggling so much to see things in the Swan, and wonder what's in store for us in the new RST,

which is taking so many cues from the Courtyard’s design (regularly described as a “working prototype” for the RST in the company’s advertising). For instance, during R2 I couldn’t see Bolingbroke at all in 3.3 after he’d retreated to a ramp for Richard’s entrance above and the ensuing negotiations. Among other concerns, this meant that Richard’s rapid emotional, psychological, and political shift to “What must the king do now? Must he submit?” was even more inexplicable than usual. I also question the logic in having Stephens’ Margaret retreat so far downstage in 3H6 1.4 that half the audience couldn’t see her relishing York’s torture. Had I been sat in a more blocked position, I wouldn’t have watched her licking her lips and mock-pouting like Susan Lucci any more than I briefly did, but I think all patrons should at least have had the option.

As for the seats. When the H6s opened the Courtyard in 2006, Dominic Cavendish wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*, “the seats, incidentally, throughout the long-haul, are a comfortable pleasure” (“Crowning Glory”). I have no idea what he’s talking about or what kind of special reviewer’s throne he got to sit on. I do know that up in the house left Gallery for R2, I became well acquainted with the left side of a nice woman called Sue, and she my right. The seats in the Circle and the Gallery are preposterously narrow and tightly packed, and the Stalls aren’t much better. Single-aisle access demands all kinds of late- or last minute-seating gymnastics. I can’t imagine what the sweet septa- and octogenarian patrons often sitting near me felt like on those narrow fold-down stools—during 1H6, my proud, self-proclaimed 83-yr-old neighbor wistfully remarked as he stretched his back, “Much better than Barton and Hall’s, this, though they did three plays in two.” I was hourly reminded of Rowan Atkinson’s *Blackadder* lambasting Shakespeare himself: “Do you have any idea the amount of suffering you’re going to cause?....The years trying to stay awake at Stratford, your backside throbbing like a Frenchman’s knob!” (Elton “Branagh”).

But perhaps this is all too curmudgeon-like. I’ve tried very hard not to gush, because that’s all I really wanted to do. The bruised tailbone will heal. In truth, I arrived at the Courtyard for every performance at least thirty minutes early. I bought every program and poster with a child-like giddiness I’ve rarely felt since I did the same when I first saw Iron Maiden in 1988 (my most appropriate touchstone for those souvenirs, alas), and my poor students have had everything from Poe to Dante to Freshman Composition filtered through those eight plays and their productions. Throughout the weekend, I struggled to keep my mental “audience member” components distinct from the “professor” components distinct from whatever else I thought I should be compartmentalizing. These wrestlings led to absurd moments in which part of my brain admired the disintegration-of-England metaphor realized through the breathtaking image of sand raining on Richard II’s head for five minutes in R2 5.1—a beautiful, literal

reading of York's later "dust was thrown upon his sacred head" account as well—while another part of my addled mind screamed, "It's f\*\*king raining sand onstage!!!" In the company of friends who might understand or not be offended I took to running around with Slinger's pronounced limp and withered hand, and one night I gravely advised my host to "claim of me the earldom of Hereford" when I became king ("excess of wine," as Hal says, may have set that on). After H5, when it was all over, I wandered home for a final curry via Holy Trinity's graveyard, and was almost dizzy in the twilight. I think I spoke to a tree. It may have been a frightened duck. Something on those hallowed grounds was forced to witness an incoherent American stammer his way through the entire "Muse of fire" Chorus.

At the end of the day, or rather by Sunday at 6:30pm, I'd seen an ensemble working for the greatest English-speaking company on the planet in The Histories. Take it for all and all, I shall not look upon its like again.

## Production Details

### General

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|------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Title</i>           | Henry VI Part I           |
| <i>Year</i>            | 2008                      |
| <i>Theater Company</i> | Royal Shakespeare Company |
| <i>Theaters</i>        | Roundhouse Theatre (UK)   |
| <i>Start Date</i>      | 2008-04-03                |
| <i>End Date</i>        | 2008-05-23                |

### Description

Henry VI Part I directed by Michael Boyd as part of the History Cycle. Civil strife, bloody battles and power struggles provide the backdrop for Shakespeare's compelling depiction of a divided nation and a king in turmoil. Henry VI Part I - The War Against France After the premature coronation of the infant Henry VI, France, led by Joan of Arc, exploits the fierce power squabbles in England and battle to reclaim the French lands lost to Henry V

### Works Cited

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