



## Henry the Fifth: Stratford Festival of Canada

by Sarah Neville. Written on 2012-10-13. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Henry V (2012, Stratford Festival of Canada, Canada).

BILLETTED AS A YOUNG KING'S VAGUE ATTEMPT "TO UNITE IN COMMON CAUSE A KINGDOM TORN apart by civil strife", McAnuff's production is short on the motivation that should arise from being the fourth play in a series. Aaron Krohn's Henry is appropriately young, handsome, and martial but nonetheless slightly wooden, and it pushed credulity to believe him capable of the ribaldry and wildness that his Prince Hal id demands. This Henry, a Henry who embraces Bardolph in genuine remorse as he condemns his former comrade to hanging, a Henry that is so eager to hear how he is perceived that he disguises himself to walk amongst his soldiers, this Henry seems incapable of uttering "I know thee not, old man" with sufficient disgust to break Sir John's engorgéd heart. A compelling lover, a brusque and hearty commander, Krohn's Henry was indeed quite good — "I believed in him", said our septuagenarian housemate at breakfast — but he was good only for this particular play in isolation; while one could easily see how such a youth could be persuaded to invade France by a clergy eager to distract him from more opportunistic grasping at home, it is harder to believe that this particular young man, one who spent most of his youth in taverns, was sired by the wily and conniving Bolingbroke. Such a point may be unfair to push too far, however; despite his pedigree, this is only Krohn's second Stratford season, and it is clear that he will grow into lead status. His Henry woos Kate with the adorable self-abasement that redeems the play's general lack of a subplot, and his adoption of royal authority is assured and confident.

But the real star of McAnuff's production is its set. Designer Robert Brill constructed an 18×18' square, a relatively small playing space within the Festival Theatre, broadened by an elevated working wooden drawbridge that enabled actors to enter and exit both beneath and above. Raised, the drawbridge created an alcove to illustrate the death of Falstaff; lowered, it served as a broad entrance for military excursions with three armed men able to walk abreast. Nine equidistant traps within the main playing space memorably served as prisons for the doomed French prisoners, as well as live fire pits during Henry's disguised sortie before the battle of Agincourt, with an extended cast of extras huddled around each for warmth. Kate (Bethany

Jillard) enters her “toilette” from beneath in a bathtub raised through the traps, offering a sweet, apt interpretation of a language lesson centered around the body. The drawbridge offered a venue for the show’s most spectacular act of creation, a gigantic galleon of war comprised of nothing but extras holding sails, dipping and flapping in a paired, extended dance signifying English military might. With the English clearly defined by their red cross of St. George and the French by their blue fleur-de-lis, even those audiences unfamiliar with the plot could keep the warring sides distinct despite the whirl and smoke of battle. Would that I’d had an “Intro to Shakespeare” class to bring along with me to see this!