



Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival's *Henry the Eighth*

by Michael Luskin. Written on 2013-08-01. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: King Henry VIII (2013, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, USA).

ON THURSDAY, THIS REVIEWER ATTENDED THE PENNSYLVANIA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL production of *Henry VIII*. The company is professional and performs at DeSales University, just south of Allentown, PA, an hour north of Philadelphia and an hour and a half west of New York City. The theater is small and intimate, and the acoustics are excellent—every seat is a good seat.

Before the performance, the production stage manager, Marguerite Price, gave a short presentation on the history, the play, and the circumstances of the production. She described to the audience prevailing historical opinion about performance in Shakespeare's day: that there was no director, the Globe presented about forty plays a season, and actors had to learn or renew their acquaintance with their parts in a few days, with almost no rehearsal time. As an experiment, the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival decided to recreate these performance models with this production. The cast first met less than a week prior to first public presentation, they had to rummage in the production warehouse for costumes, the lighting was borrowed from another production, and there was almost no scenery. Finally, Price warned us in advance that the actors had not had time to fully memorize their lines, and that there might be calls for help to the prompter. Given the lack of rehearsal time, Wolsey (Richard B. Watson) had to call for lines a dozen times, but he did it so smoothly that it did not interrupt the flow at all. All the characters were well-presented, especially Henry and Wolsey. The production is well thought out, with great attention to detail. *Henry VIII* is often considered a dull read; I personally had never seen it performed, but the group brought it to life and I am very glad I went. Also, the play appears a series of vignettes, a series of scenes, and a collection of characters, though not really a play because nothing grows and develops. Nevertheless, and in spite of this, the production was compelling.

My only cavil is with the production is with the actress who played Katherine (Susan Riley Stevens). In the playtext, before her trial, she has a magnificent speech, denouncing the process, protesting her devotion to Henry (Ian Bedford), and condemning the obvious outcome.

On paper, the text is powerful, but in performance, Stevens did so much yelling and arm waving that she simply appeared very angry, the pathos and nobility of the speech being lost.

All told, PSF's production was very good. If you are in the Philadelphia/New York area, I strongly recommend attending. By the way, at the very end of the play, there is a paeon to Anne Boleyn's daughter Elizabeth, who has just been born. Given that George Alexander Louis was just a day or two old, this was very well-received.

The Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival is presenting six plays this summer, including *Measure for Measure*.