



## To Bring Forth So Great an Object

by Julian Gunn. Written on 2014-08-11. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Henry V* (2014, Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

THE GROUNDS OF CAMOSUN COLLEGE ARE AN INSPIRED SETTING FOR THE VICTORIA Shakespeare Festival's production of *Henry V*. The chorus' famous plea to the audience – set our imaginations to work! – is given unusual support by the expanse of high sun-bleached grass surrounding the stage. It is easy to imagine that we are on the fields of Agincourt. This is an outdoor production that revels in its opportunity for spaciousness.

In fact, during the Festival's productions we are *inside* the action. We are ranged on folding chairs facing a simple stage. Actors enter and exit by running down corridors marked out through the audience. The production makes excellent use of an enormous space, with cast streaming in and out across swathes of lawn from several different directions. A small knoll behind the stage allows the players to rush up over the rise or vanish behind it. This is used to particularly good effect in the scenes of war. The staging is otherwise very simple: a bare stage, iconic costume pieces, and two carts to hold extra costumes and props — one red, one blue, to signify the conflict between England and France.

This is a high-energy, unified cast. It's a pleasure to watch them work together. Standouts among the strong ensemble are Alex Judd as the Duke of Exeter and Susie Mullen playing trouser parts with effortless bravado. Henry himself, as played by Julian Cervello, is charismatic and active. This is a king who still bears traces of his rollicking youth – best exemplified by Henry's elaborate prank in Act IV. In the more serious scenes, it would have been satisfying to see a more grounded Henry, one who is able to modulate between the playful, high-spirited young man and the powerful military leader. For example, during Henry's chilling threat of mass violence and violation at Harfleur, his tone should probably not be quite so cheerful – this is Henry showing his steel. Alexa MacDougall as Katharine and Adrienne Smook as Alice provide a lively comedic contrast – as always, I wish for more of these characters, but Shakespeare has not provided it. The negotiation between Henry and Katharine is given enough

time to allow some emotional conviction to develop — it is an understated but satisfying directorial choice.

Casting limitations have led to the cutting of minor characters and some doubling. There are, for example, two conspirators instead of three. Adrienne Smook handles her shifts between Alice, Katharine's attendant, and the Welsh Captain Fluellen fluidly, imparting to each a distinct embodiment. There are also cuts to some speeches, to varying effect. Removing the Archbishop of Canterbury's long (and to a modern audience quite confusing) Act I speech about Salic law streamlines the action. Yet the text works hard in that first act to provide external supports for Henry's decision, and trimming back the arguments for the war makes his choice seem more arbitrary.

The direction chooses to foreground something of the repetitiveness, even bureaucracy, of war. Rather than inserting much business – swordplay and comic or violent pantomime – during the shifts of location, the production shows us soldiers rushing to, or trudging from, conflict. What we witness on stage is the interstitial action: the conversation, negotiation, complaining and anxiety that make up much of conflict.

If I were to add something to the solid foundation that this production provides, I would suggest a honing of focus. Because there are so many similar scenes, with the action cutting back and forth between the English and the French, each scene can be strengthened by communicating a clear and specific sense of its purpose. When this focus flagged, some opportunities for dramatic irony were blurred. The speech of the Boy prefigures the French attack on the baggage train; the comic exchange between the lower-class soldiers and their French captive increases our dismay when we hear that Henry has ordered the execution of the prisoners as retribution. These emotional elements give the audience something to hang on to even if they become momentarily unmoored in the Elizabethan dialogue, or a passing motorcycle happens to drown out a few words.

This is an invigorating summer entertainment, a spectacle that manages to be simple at the same time. The aim is to present a stripped-down, straightforward Shakespeare, enjoyed on its own terms, and this is largely successful. Go, and deck their kings with your thoughts.

## Production Details

### General

<i>Title</i>	Henry V
<i>Year</i>	2014
<i>Theater Company</i>	Greater Victoria Shakespeare Festival (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2014-07-14
<i>End Date</i>	2014-08-16