



Solid Henry the Fourth, Part I Soothes Reviewer's Shakespeare Festival Angst in Colorado

by Jim Volz. Written on 2014-08-17. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

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RETURNING TO THE COLORADO SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL MANY TIMES OVER THE PAST FOUR decades allows one a bit of perspective in regards to the delightful, open-air 1,000 seat red-rock historic Mary Rippon Theatre, the sassy, somewhat quirky city of Boulder and the joys of a true Shakespeare Festival where the whole is almost always greater than the sum of its parts.

Operating on a slim budget with a small, impressive Equity actor core and a company carefully cobbled together largely from local talent and the nation's BFA and MFA programs, the 57th season of Colorado Shakespeare offered a diverse and generally satisfying weekend of theatre.

Timothy Orr was selected to helm the theatre in 2014 after a nationwide search and a season as Interim Producing Artistic Director. He welcomed audiences to each of the four productions this reviewer attended (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, *I Hate Hamet*, *Henry IV, Part I* and *Henry IV, Part II*) and it was his decision to produce the two Henrys on one intriguing six-hour Sunday that pulled me back to Colorado. To up the stakes a bit more than this fairly rare day-long staging of the two Henry plays, Mr. Orr decided to "experiment in working with original practices" for CSF's *Henry IV, Part II*. The artistic initiative was clearly rewarded with boisterous sold-out crowds of Colorado Shakespeare loyalists, curious educators, and theatregoers from across America.

Shakespeare's well-crafted tale of traitors, tarts, trysts and family strife is anchored by King Henry IV's eldest son, Prince Hal, and his ignoble misadventures with the scoundrel Falstaff. Sam Gregory is a complicated and wonderfully nuanced Henry IV and Benjamin Bonenfant rises to the substantial challenges of the surprisingly heroic Prince Hal. Geoffrey Kent shines as the cocky Henry Percy (Hotspur) and Michael Winters melds the play's merriment, philosophical charm and political power together as the incorrigible, bombastic Falstaff.

Director Carolyn Howarth embraces the play, brings the best out of her wide-ranging company of actors, and manages to extract still timely and universal political truths that clearly resonated with the audience.

Scene designer Carolyn Howarth's simple, clever, pivoting set pieces distinguished court room from bar room and kept the focus on the mad-cap antics of Sir John Falstaff, the agony of a King trying to quell a rebellion and the inevitable showdown between Hal and Hotspur. Hugh Hanson's costume designs and Jason Banks lighting designs helped distinguish the warring factions, focus the action and move the play along.

The world's best Shakespeare's Festivals are indeed more than the sum of its parts. After a less than glorious start to the weekend with an ill-advised, clumsily directed, oddly annotated rendition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, it was grand to see most of the same company (with a different director) rise to the challenge of *Henry IV, Part I* and delight audiences with a rambunctious, very funny production of Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet*, over the next two days. Add in the bagpiper, singers, dancers, tattooed Shakespeare t-shirts, moonlit mountains, local brews and knowledgeable, eager audiences and Colorado Shakespeare's festival formula is tried and true.

Cheers to Colorado Shakespeare's 57th Season and to the artistic, production, education and management team assembled by Timothy Orr. *Henry IV, Part II* and *I Hate Hamlet* will be reviewed in companion pieces to follow.

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