Stratford's Breath of Kings Offers Bold and Bumpy Rebellion

by Jim Volz. Written on 2016-08-23. Published in 2017 Issue 1.

For the production: Breath of Kings: Rebellion (2016, Stratford Festival of Canada, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

It takes intrepid Shakespeare fanatics to endure and appreciate the bombast of Richard the Second, Henry the Fourth, Part 1, Henry the Fourth, Part 2, and Henry the Fifth all in one day, but that was the challenge for Stratford Theater attendees who watched the Graham Abbey conceived and adapted Breath of Kings: Rebellion & Redemption this summer. Audiences could have chosen to break them into their two separate parts (Rebellion & Redemption), but to fully appreciate the diverse repertory company, it was best to summon up the swagger and bravado of Shakespeare's best soldiers and plunge right in.

As seasoned theatergoers know, the play is a bumpy rollercoaster ride with the long-winded grandiloquence of Richard the Second slowing Bolingbroke’s eventual drive to the throne. It’s actually a pretty simple story of political missteps with Richard the Second's underestimation of Bolingbroke, allowing ego and advisors to mistakenly send the future Henry the Fourth (Bolingbroke) into exile. Bolingbroke’s complicity in the king’s murder was the second major misstep, both in terms of reconciling his own guilt and his countrymen’s loyalties and ambitions.

As both adaptor and lead actor (Bolingbroke/Henry the Fourth), one can’t help but suspect that the incisive cutting and trimming Abbey achieved in bringing the four plays in under six hours ran into significant snags when paring down his own character's bluster. Mr. Abbey offered up an interesting and forceful Henry the Fourth but the external posturing and pontification often detracted from the audience's understanding of the usurper's motivations, inner struggles, and tortured soul.

Tom Rooney as Richard the Second delivered a more nuanced, assertively suppliant, forcibly departing king who understood both the power and burdens of the hollow crown. The glory of the Stratford Festival, of course, remained in its ability to tell a story with clarity, cleverness,
and panache, and transforming the Tom Patterson Theater into an arena with the audience stacked on top of the playing fields, the battle fields, and courts kept most theater members engaged. Anahita Dehbonehie’s set design shrewdly converted the stage from a dirt battle field (actually something similar to tire shreds to keep the dust down) to the court with the help of a few brooms, rakes, and shovels. Yannik Larivée’s costume design was inventive and helpful in determining who was who, and composer and Sound Designer Debashis Sinha underscored the intermittent action with a strong guiding hand without tromping on the language.

In Part 2 of Rebellion, Geraint Wyn Davies’s Falstaff was as savvy as he was salacious, and lead us through Henry the Fourth, Part I with gusto and intelligence. Johnathan Sousa as Henry Percy/Hotspur was a feisty, fur-covered, single-minded warrior with enough humanity that one felt sorry for the treachery that lead to his ill-fated demise. Araya Mengesha as Prince Hal survived a slow start where he was gobbled up in scenes with more seasoned actors. Fortunately, he hit his stride midway and despite some seeming vocal strain or limits, stayed focused and carried the day. His best scenes were with the infinitely likable Davies as Falstaff, and together, they brought Rebellion and the trimmed Henry the Fourth, Part I to a satisfying conclusion.

Kate Hennig as Mistress Quickly made understatedly bold choices and clearly ran the Boar’s Head. Michelle Giroux as Doll Tearsheet captured the pathetic hell-bent-on-survival heart of the character, and Stephen Russell as the Earl of Westmoreland was solid from start to finish. Nigel Shawn Williams also excelled as the Earl of Northumberland, and of course there are too many other fine performances to mention.

Directors Weyni Mengesha and Mitchell Cushman carefully blended the sights, sounds, speeches, and choreography of the two plays with experienced eyes and a clear vision. The heart of the history played center on the kings (and men who would be king), but the rapid pulse of each scene was accomplished by the parade of actors who played the dukes, duchesses, bishops, earls, and queens. The Stratford Festival was blessed by the depth of its overall company, and the artistic team was cast well with a strong and surprisingly liberal colour and gender conscious approach with women in men’s roles and mixed-race families that adroitly allowed the words and talent to carry the day.

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

Production Details

General

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Breath of Kings: Rebellion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater Company</td>
<td>Stratford Festival of Canada</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start Date</td>
<td>2016-06-22</td>
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<tr>
<td>End Date</td>
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Cast

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>King Henry IV</th>
<th>Graham Abbey</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Richard the Second</td>
<td>Tom Rooney</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prince Hal</td>
<td>Araya Mengesha</td>
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<td>John of Gaunt</td>
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<td>Sebastien Heins</td>
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<td>Randy Hughson</td>
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<td>Blunt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop of Carlisle</td>
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Bardolph
Lady Percy
Sir Stephen Scroop
Mistress Quickly
Young Gardener
Old Gardener
Queen Isabelle
Sheriff
Duchess of York
Duchess of Gloucester
Lady Attending the Queen
Constable
Northumberland Messenger
Duke of Gloucester
Nym
Servant to Hotspur
Servant to William Bagot
Doll Tearsheet

Nigel Shawn Williams
Carly Street
Irene Poole
Kate Hennig
Carly Street
Geraint Wyn Davies
Michelle Giroux
Irene Poole
Kate Hennig
Mikaela Davies
Randy Hughson
Michelle Giroux
Wayne Best
Shane Carty
Mikaela Davies
Mikaela Davies
Michelle Giroux

Creatives

Director
Director
Assistant Director
Costume Designer
Set Designer
Lighting Designer
Sound Designer
Composer
Fight Director
Stage Manager
Production Stage Manager
Production Stage Manager
Associate Director
Conceiver
Adaptor
Assistant Stage Manager
Assistant Lighting Designer

Mitchell Cushman
Weyni Mengesha
Bronwyn Steinberg
Yannik Larivee
Anahita Dehbonehie
Kimberly Purtell
Debashis Sinha
Debashis Sinha
John Stead
Maxwell T. Wilson
Judy Farthing
Janine Ralph
Graham Abbey
Graham Abbey
Katherine Arcus
C.J. Astronomo
ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER  FRANCESCA CALLOW
ASSISTANT COSTUME DESIGNER  CAITLIN LUXFORD
APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER  GREGORY McLAUGHLIN
ASSOCIATE FIGHT DIRECTOR  GEOFF SCOVELL
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER  ZEPH WILLIAMS