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Henry VI, Part 2

Directed by Brian Isaac Phillips
Cincinnati Shakespeare Company; Cincinnati, Ohio
Performance Date: February 4, 2017

Reviewed by MARCIA EPPICH-HARRIS

When the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company decided to stage the entire history cycle, starting in the 2012-2013 season with *Richard II* and ending in the 2016-2017 season with *Richard III*, the company never could have predicted the impact the November 2016 U.S. election would have on its productions of the Wars of the Roses plays. Yet, in their recent staging of *Henry VI, Part 2*, which is a combination of the original *Henry VI, Part 2* and *Part 3*, the company produced a true mirror up to nature, reflecting the political moment of our time. Opening on President Trump's Inauguration Day, the clearly partisan production depicted the rise of populism, the downfall of integrity, and the forecast of terror and murder both within and beyond the bounds of this play. The production proved to be a successful political argument that the world needs Shakespeare now more than ever.

Cincy Shakes's production of *Part 2* began with a video that explained the story so far, detailing the usurpation of Richard II's throne, the rebellions in Henry IV's reign, the rise of Henry V, and the problems caused by his untimely death and the crowning of his infant son, Henry VI. The video was a smart, engaging introduction to bring audience members who might be unfamiliar with the previous plays up to speed, especially due to Cincy Shakes starting their *Part 2* in the middle of 2 *Henry VI* with the last speech of act 3, scene 1, by the Duke of York, played by Giles Davies. At the opening, as with the previous productions in Cincy Shakes's five-year project, the stage was set with portraits of all the kings in the serial history plays, with the titular king, Henry VI, on the center-stage easel. A curtain behind the paintings displayed a family tree of Edward III. King Henry VI, magnificently played by Darnell Pierre Benjamin, knelt near his portrait as if in prayer throughout York's speech, in which York reveals that he has "seduced a headstrong Kentishman, / John Cade of Ashford, / To make commotion, as full well he can, / Under the title of John Mortimer."

The illustration of the populist rebellion led by Jack Cade in the first act made Shakespeare's work a prescient commentary on America's recent political upheaval. In fact, the Cade rebellion was the most memorable portion of the play, for me, as the political parallels between Cade's rebellion and the Trump regime quickly became evident—simultaneously entertaining and terrifying in their similarities. Matthew Lewis Johnson's performance as Cade included Trump's signature hand gestures, New York accent, and reality-star swagger. Even without these nuanced additions, the thrust of Cade's populist rhetoric so fully

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complimented Trump's election campaign that Cincy Shakes didn't have to work hard to represent the political moment of 2017, dressed up in Elizabethan clothing. Cade's statements about his false claim to the throne, such as, "Ay, there's the question; but I say 'tis true," provided an uncomfortable analog to Kelly-Anne Conway's coinage of "alternative facts" following Trump's inauguration. When a character says, "Jack Cade, the Duke of York hath taught you this," Cade's response in an aside, "He lies, for I invented it myself," rang with insinuation. The brood of rebels chanting "Lock him up! Lock him up!" mimicked the jeers of Trump's followers in his pre-election rallies, and when Cade remarked upon his puissance, he pronounced it "pussy-ance," a clear nod to Trump's comments in his *Access Hollywood* video scandal. While these instances, and these are just a few of many, might sound over the top, Johnson's portrayal of a Trump-like Cade was mostly subtle, with the exception of imitating Trump's degradation of a disabled journalist.

The parallels between the past and the present allowed the Cade rebellion to go on longer than most productions would dare. It felt important to let claims like, "I am the besom that must sweep the court clean of such filth as thou art" compare with the president's contemporary pledge to "drain the swamp," and see the hypocrisy in both. Also memorable was Cade's statement that "then are we in order when we are / Most out of order," reflected convincingly the desire of Stephen Bannon to deconstruct the administrative state. The Elizabethan sentiments cut to the 2017 bone.

While the Cade rebellion outshone the rest of act one, it wasn't long before the primary conflict between the Yorks and the Lancasters came into focus. Traditional costuming by Amanda McGee showed understated changes as the play progressed, with the Yorks initially wearing black and grey smocks and white rose breast plates, later adding a layer of white on the shoulders and torso to display their white-rose loyalty. The Lancasters wore red from the beginning of the play. Once the curtain with the Plantagenet family tree came down, the simple set, designed by Andrew J. Hungerford, was revealed: a throne center stage with stairs on either side. The stage was framed with trellises adorned with red and white roses and vines, combining to enhance the contrast between the two sides of the Plantagenet family. A standout performance came from Benjamin's portrayal of Henry, which suggested the king's impotence came not from weakness, but from both anti-Machiavellian integrity, and an implied self-awareness that Henry could not bring himself to compromise that integrity, regardless of the cost. Many productions, including the recent *Hollow Crown*, series two, portray Henry VI as naïve and foolish, but Benjamin's characterization, as well as his appearance, mirrored the intellectualism, wisdom, and poise of former president Barack Obama. Benjamin's Henry seemed always to know what he *should* do, according to a Machiavellian playbook, but he found himself unable to condescend to the level of baseness required to ensure his reign. Margaret, for the most part skillfully played by Kelly Mengelkoch, bullied Henry, at one point slapping him, before taking over the fight against the Yorks entirely. Battles throughout the more than three-hour experience, choreographed by Bruce Cromer, usually included four to six actors at a time. The Battle of Towton, in which a father kills his son and a son

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kills his father, was a bit of a letdown, in that none of these men wore obfuscating facial coverings, so the surprise that Henry witnessed in each of the killers felt illogical, although Benjamin couldn't have played it any better. There was much fighting in the play overall, and it felt tedious after a couple of clashes. Yet, even the monotony of the combat seemed symbolic of the political fatigue some contemporary citizens in today's climate already face.

The capture and killing of the Duke of York showed the depth and breadth of Giles Davies's acting ability. At first stoic and defiant against Margaret and Clifford (Brandon Joseph Burton), York said his “ashes, as the phoenix, may bring forth / A bird that will revenge upon you all,” yet he eventually broke down from Margaret's taunting. Davies made the sign of the cross at numerous points in the play, and the religious symbolism in his death scene was remarkably effective. Davies wore his hair long and straight, and coupled with his slim stature, he looked Christ-like. Director Philips innovated in this scene by putting a crown of thorns, not paper, on York's head, tying together the “Roses” with a Christ-like martyrdom of York. His face bloodied from battle, York knelt center stage, and wiped his tear-stained and bloody face with the handkerchief soaked with his son, Rutland's blood. The effect was both moving and heavily symbolic, alluding to the cleansing of Christ's face before crucifixion, or in York's case, before being stabbed several times.

With York martyred, his sons Edward (Josh Katawick), George (Kyle Brumley), and Richard (Billy Chace) were allowed to come to the forefront. Chace's Richard, historically the youngest of the Yorks once Rutland has died, but appearing to be the oldest of these three actors, wore a chin-length wig, resembling the style shown in the famous portrait of Richard III. While Katawick and Brumley admirably portrayed their roles as York's sons, and eventually king and prince, Chace's Richard was disappointing in his role, which was played both savagely and with a touch too much melodrama. For instance, in a fight with Sommerset, Richard appears to bite off his ear. When young Clarence is killed, Richard gouges out an eye and appears to eat it, then spits it out. Some of Chace's lines were played for laughs, which squares with the evil wit we see in Richard, and yet, Chace's portrayal, for me, lacked the underlying intellect and charisma of the future king and instead relied on barbarism for his characterization. At the second intermission, an audience member a few rows behind where I sat complained that, despite a few scattered snickers at Richard's outrageous behavior, this sort of violence is “never funny.” I actually disagree. Violence can have a humorous rhetorical point in its outrageousness, but making it work on stage is extremely difficult, and is a matter of finding a truly perfect actor for the role. Chace's Richard did not work for me, nor did he work well in the follow-up production of *Richard III*, in my opinion.

The scope of this production, with multiple battles and back and forth over who was king, showed the exhaustion and frustration that politics can inspire. Even an emotional exhaustion is felt in this play when after the death of Prince Edward, Margaret, his mother, pleaded to be killed as well. Here, Mengelkoch's acting felt over the top because at that point in the play the air had been sucked out of the room so many times that the overwhelming grief she displayed might

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have been more effective if it were less blatant. With so many dead, their severed heads adorning the stage throughout the night, and with the memory of Margaret's taunting of York with Rutland's blood, it became difficult to sympathize with Margaret's outpouring of emotion, no matter how heartrending a mother's grief can be. With such a long production, it might have been wise to show the emotional exhaustion of the entire event through a more restrained grieving that allowed Shakespeare's vitriolic words to do the emotional heavy lifting of the moment.

The trouble with this set of plays is that you don't know whose side you *want* to be on, let alone whose side you *should* be on, so when it comes to finding sympathy for these figures, the production has the burden of choosing sides, and it does so on a case-by-case basis. Between York and Margaret, Davies's York trumped Mengelkoch's Margaret in emotional effectiveness; however, in Richard's murder of Henry, there was one final, strong evocation of pity. The stage was lit with a projection of gothic-style stained glass when Richard came to kill Henry. At this and other points in the play, Richard removed his wig to reveal a scarred and diseased-looking scalp. Henry, wearing in a white dressing gown, looked pure and holy by contrast. When Henry died, red and white rose petals rained from the sky as blood stained his white garments, uniting the colors of the war in one last image of death.

The colors of King Edward IV's court became black and gold in this production—no more white and red roses, for now. But the scandal of his marriage and the ambition of his youngest brother ensured that his reign would not be quiet. As the play came to a close, the tension did not relent with King Edward's proclamation, "For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy." Instead, while Edward and the court struck self-satisfied poses, Richard looked to the audience and spoke the first word of his own play—an exhilarated "Now!"

Overall, the Cincinnati Shakespeare production of the combined *Henry VI, parts 2 and 3*, into a singular *Henry VI, Part 2*, was most memorable for its direct illustration of Shakespeare's political relevance in our contemporary era. The casting of York's sons, however, felt like an error the production could easily have avoided by casting any one of the other talented actors as Richard. The follow-up production of *Richard III*, starring Chace in the title role, did not work for me nearly as well as *Henry VI, Part 2*, and I believe that the overall problems with the *Richard III* production were rooted in the less-than-satisfactory casting of Chace as Richard in both plays. That said, the truly remarkable portions of *Henry VI, Part 2*, were a refreshing reminder that theater, in general, and Shakespeare, in particular, have the power to inspire people to persist, despite exhaustion, with our most important democratic duty: speaking truth to power, which, like Shakespeare, we need more now than ever.

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Marcia Eppich-Harris is Assistant Professor of English at Marian University in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she teaches Shakespeare and dramatic literature. Her published scholarship includes work on Shakespeare, as well as contemporary playwright, Nina Raine; and Marcia is also an active creative writer. She is currently working on a book project about Shakespeare's history plays and the political implications of prodigality narratives titled, *Prodigality, Debt, and Power in Shakespeare's History Plays*.