

“Hosing Off the Heraldry”: Critical Reactions to Shakespeare’s History Plays at Stratford.

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During the summer of 1901, Frank Benson and his company of young actors performed, in the space of a single week, six of Shakespeare’s history plays at the Memorial Theatre, Stratford Upon Avon. The ‘Week of Kings’, as it came to be called, was given chronologically by reign, but with neither of the ‘tetralogies’ having been preserved in their entirety. King John was followed by *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and finally, *Richard III*. W.B. Yeats, visiting Stratford that summer, welcomed the opportunity of seeing these plays performed in sequence “because of the way play supports play”. The experience had a profound effect on him – ‘The theatre has moved me as it has never done before’. (142-43) Over the next hundred years, Shakespeare’s histories were to appear regularly on the Stratford stage; sometimes at what seemed the crucial defining moments in the history of Shakespearian performance in the English theatre. By looking at the initial reception to these royal marathons, one gains something of an insight, not only into what was valued or rejected by the critics of the day, but we might consider whether these most nationalistic plays offered a commentary on our shared sense of our history. If Shakespeare was our contemporary, what was he saying to us?

Whilst individual history plays have always proved popular on the Stratford stage, *Richard III* and *Henry V* in particular, it wasn’t until Anthony Quayle staged a cycle of the English Histories, as part of the festival of Britain celebrations in 1951, that we have a discernible commentary relating to an ideological context informing the productions. Graham Holderness points to how the influence of Dover Wilson presided over the conservative nature of these productions. The orthodoxy of Tudor constitutional theory ‘becomes unmistakably clear in dramatic terms as it had already been clarified in criticism

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and scholarship; and the characterizations and perspectives produced by a connected historical narrative would secure more firmly the play’s orthodox position.’ (Holderness 241) The single vision of a sole director seemed to reduce the play’s potential for generating meaning. In his programme notes, Quayle emphasized how his productions built upon the foundations of a pre-existent scholarly and critical orthodoxy, believing it was possible to ‘rediscover and try to reveal the author’s true intentions.’ The author’s true intentions just happened to be identical to those of Dover Wilson, Tillyard and Wilson Knight: ‘A demonstrative celebration of orthodox Tudor historical thought in which a rigid moral pattern secures a correct apportioning of the audience’s sympathy.’ (Ibid 216)

The drama critic of the *Sunday Times* was also delighted, believing that he’d thought it impossible ‘to stage the history plays as Shakespeare intended them to be staged.’ T.A. Jackson, reviewing the production for the *Daily Worker*, valued the ensemble quality of the project and praised the stage setting, which he thought reproduced the lay-out of the Elizabethan stage. What was certainly new and noticeable in 1951 was the construction of an emblematic rather than an illusionist set. Many critics disliked Tanya Moiseiwitch’s permanent set, that offered an inclusive element in the overall continuity of the project, but it was this single element from this production sequence that was clearly to influence future stagings of these theatrical chronicles.

The Memorial Theatre at Stratford continued to stage an annual season of Shakespeare’s plays, known as the Stratford Summer Festival, throughout the 1950s, but without a further attempt to stage the history plays. With the visit of the Berliner Ensemble in 1956, a different vision of theatre practice took hold of the imaginations of many directors, designers and actors in Britain. The idea of a permanent company of actors seemed exciting once more, with its promise of political progressivism and egalitarianism. The new wave of writers, directors and actors working in the new subsidized repertory theatres and high profile theatres, such as the Royal Court and Stratford East, certainly encouraged those

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who dreamed of forming national ensembles during this period.

The first of the national companies was to be the Royal Shakespeare Company, formed in 1960 and headed by Peter Hall. Hall was only twenty-nine and was fired with determination to be innovative and radical during his eight years as head of the company. 'We must be expert in the past, but alive to the present.....I am a radical and I could not work in the theatre if I was not. The theatre must question everything and disturb its audience.' (4 March 1966, *Stratford Herald*)

Hall was able to employ fifty actors during the early years of the company and each actor had the security of a three year contract, with the right to decline parts if they so wished. This allowed Hall the opportunity to develop an ensemble of young actors who would be well versed in Shakespeare and give them the opportunities to tackle major roles. The culmination of this first three years of the RSC was to be judged by their staging of the history cycle.

Peter Hall asked John Barton to adapt the *Henry IV* plays and *Richard III* into a three part production that could be played as a continuous sequence, often in a single day. The notion of a sacred text took something of a hammering, as Barton cut the 12,350 lines by about half and added 1,400 lines of cod-Elizabethan verse, which he penned himself. Barton's credentials as a former Oxbridge Don were often 'trotted out' to bring a degree of academic respectability to the choices made by the company. In the case of *Henry IV*, Barton thought it needed re-writing, as it was clearly a case of 'Elizabethan hack-work, dry of imagery and vigor, and different in kind, as well as quality, from the remainder.' Shakespeare's text was 'fitful, pragmatic and hasty.' (Addenbrooke 61) Hall and Barton still believed that they had not changed Shakespeare's main intentions and yet they wanted to clearly locate these plays in contemporary life.

'The uses and misuses of power within a political context and the various maneuverings and double dealings of the political machine. In particular *The War of the Roses* and

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Hamlet (with David Warner) were designed as studies in power politics; in both cases relating the historical text and situations to modern political and social parallels.' (Ibid 32) In the programme notes for *Henry IV*, Hall stated that he wanted his productions to follow a 'new' policy:

Over the years I have become more and more fascinated by the contortions of politicians and by the corrupting seduction experienced by anyone who wields power... I realized that the mechanism of power had not changed in centuries. I was convinced that a presentation of one of the bloodiest and most hypocritical periods of history would teach many lessons about the present. (x-xi)

Hall has never openly allied himself to Brecht and yet his choice of the word 'teach' is at the root of Brechtian intentions here. What *The War of the Roses* achieved was the politicization of Shakespeare. Where he and Brecht differed was in 'presenting the work as a divine comedy of God's revenges' (18 July 1963, *Times*)

The critical reaction was overwhelmingly favourable, once certain critics had got over the idea of cutting and adapting the Bard. Bernard Levin called it 'A landmark and a beacon in the post-war English theatre. A triumphant vindication of Mr. Hall's policy, as well as his power as a producer.' (18 July 1963, *Daily Mail*) What grabbed the attention of many critics was the sheer sweep of the chronicle. T.C. Worsley found it: 'An unforgettable production in its sweep and its flow, in its atmosphere and its refusal to duck away from the worst of the horror. This is what civil war is like, unspeakably and filthily cruel. And that is what we are shown without shirking.' (18 July 1963, *Financial Times*) The headline to the *Bristol Evening Post* review read: 'These Wars makes sense at last.' Having seen all the plays in sequence, John Coe found the production to be a 'chronicle of intrigue, passion, hatred and civil strife without parallel in the history of this country: a story of bloodshed that put even Cromwell in the shade.' (20 July 1963, *Bristol Evening News*) Too few critics drew the

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contemporary parallels Hall had hoped to illuminate. Ken Tynan, however, did draw parallels. 'What we have at Stratford is gang warfare in armour, history seen as Lord Beaverbrook still sees it, in terms of clashing greeds and temperamental incompatibilities of feudal potentates.' (21 July 1963, *The Observer*)

The cycle came to London in 1964 and played as part of the 400th anniversary celebrations of Shakespeare's birth. The critical acclaim increased and the newly formed National Theatre, who were just about to move into the Old Vic, felt the pressure. Whilst 'The National were mounting beautifully engineered productions... the RSC [were] trying to find a new means of locomotion altogether.' (Addenbrooke 65)

This scale of work was to be costly, and both in 1963 and 1964, the RSC was to announce large deficits in their budgets. Any hopes that the new Labour government would increase their support for such a high profile and costly ensemble, were not to be realized. The acting company was therefore reduced and the new contracts insisted that the actors 'play as cast'. To ease the financial burden, *The War of the Roses* cycle came to be broadcast over three consecutive weeks on BBC1 (later it was televised worldwide).

In April 1965, the innovative head of Drama at the BBC, Sydney Newman, broadcast six RSC productions. None made a bigger impact than the History plays. As Gareth Lloyd Evans put it in a Guardian interview, 'The RSC had become the pace setters for Shakespeare production in Britain... 'for good or ill'. What Peter Hall did today, Northampton and Nottingham did tomorrow.' (29 March 1971) John Bury's innovative metallic setting for the cycle, like a great steel cage of war, was copied by many. The further movement away from stage illusionism became emblematic of the RSC style for the 1960's. A new generation of great actors was born too. Not least of these was David Warner, who played both title roles in *Hamlet* and *Henry VI* and Ian Holm who played *Richard III*. Each actor seemed comfortable with handling verse and yet were excited by the challenges of modern production

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work.

A decade later, the RSC, now with Trevor Nunn as the Artistic Director, also faced financial crisis. As they planned in 1974 for their 1975 Stratford season, they were faced with a projected shortfall of £200,000. Only four productions were now planned; a revival of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV part 1*, *Henry IV part 2* and *Henry V*. All of these productions were to be directed by Terry Hands. Hands felt he needed to perform the histories out of sequence, starting with *Henry V*. It was with the opening speech by the Chorus that Hands wished to proclaim his theatrical intentions, not just for that season, but for the future work of the RSC.

The chorus describes two kinds of theatre, the literal and the ideal. 'His speech is an apologia and a plea. He describes an actual stage (the 'wooden o') and apologises for its scenic inadequacy. But he also describes another kind of theatre, the theatre of the mind and the imagination. The first may be inadequate, but if the audience can be engaged, the second – in which anything is possible – may occur. It is a direct and quintessential definition of theatre, and one that happened to be well suited to an organisation pledged to austerity. It posited the kind of theatrical experience that a new generation, evangelically devoted to close range naturalism, doubted could properly occur in a large proscenium-arch auditorium. From both points of view the RSC could not have chosen a play that was more timely and potentially more controversial.' (Beauman 326-27) Hands believed that this first speech from the Chorus provided the company with 'an artistic 'dictionary', not just for the production, but for the whole season – perhaps even for the RSC's future work.' (Ibid 326)

Trevor Nunn, writing an introduction to the accompanying production book that came out as part of that centenary season, shared this vision of 'a theatre of words'. 'Actors on a bare stage conjuring the audience with language and nothing else on to 'the vast fields of France', the ramparts of Elsinore or Prospero's island. Because the histories demand this more insistently than any other play in the canon, they are the best for bringing a Shakespeare company back to the basic discipline

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of such a theatre. Their size and fast moving variety resist any single, neat directional concept. There is no way a designer can bring on stage literal representations of Shrewsbury field, Shallow's orchard, the breached walls of Harfleur, or the mounted chivalries of Agincourt. In any re-thinking of Shakespearian practice, the histories are an obvious place to start.' (in Beauman, *Henry V* 7)

The 1963/64 history cycle was seen as a half-way house between the traditional staging of Shakespeare and the possibility of a return to a fully authentic, anti-naturalistic Elizabethan staging. 'It covered half the distance between two distinct, diametrically opposed kinds of theatre: the theatre of illusion and the theatre of convention', according to Ronald Bryden. He thought that by the mid 1970s, 'it seemed time to go all the way: to see if it were possible once more to re-create a theatre which takes place not before the eyes of an audience, but within its head.' (Ibid 245)

Most of the critics praised the cycle, and Alan Howard as Henry V in particular, but showing their conservative tendencies, many of them seemed worried about the mixing of modern dress with traditional costumes, a practice that is common place today. The RSC would return to *Henry IV part 1* again for its opening gala production at the Barbican Theatre, but the next artistic director, Adrian Noble, would wait until October 1988 before presenting *The Plantagenets*.

Noble asked the playwright Charles Wood to adapt the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* into *The Plantagenets*. This time there was to be no cod-Elizabethanism, just a nine hour conflation of the four plays. By the late 1980s, the RSC had grown considerably, with three theatres at Stratford, two at the Barbican and a touring policy that included a residency in Newcastle. The history project was, nevertheless, seen as a prestige production for the 1980s. Noble employed a cast of forty actors and allotted an eighteen week rehearsal period to the project. The scale of the production seemed to attract Noble, at this stage in his career. In an interview for the *Observer*, he spoke of how 'they capture the audience's imagination by the scale of the plays, which is essentially

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Greek – the epic working out of a tragic curse.' (23 October 1988)

There was certainly an appetite amongst theatre-goers for these marathon play cycles during the 1980s, and both the national companies had enjoyed great popular and critical success with epic productions such as, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Mysteries*. Noble admitted to Robert Gore-Langton in *Plays and Players* that 'the taste for serials, soaps and history cycles is part of a new appetite – they certainly seem to suit the time.' (October 1988) In the *TES*, Noble was quoted as seeing the cycle as: 'A sweeping vision of England, a work of art showing us the death of an old order... They offer a paradoxical view of history... A collapse of an empire and the decay of civilization.' (7 October 1988) Michael Billington recognized this decay and disintegration in the production. What the plays were about, was how England had moved 'from medievalism to modernity through an ocean of blood... social disintegration is the overall theme: the decay of England into a blood-filled abattoir before the restoration of harmony.' (24 October 1988) The image of the abattoir was picked up by Paul Taylor in the *Independent*. 'Shakespeare's first English history cycle guides us through a spectacle of unprincipled butchery, compared with which a stroll through an abattoir might seem an unusually wholesome experience.' (24 October 1988)

The contemporary edge to this cycle was clear, but it was stated in universal terms rather than as a specific riposte to Thatcher's England. The eighties had seen Britain go to war and there had been civil and race riots in the inner cities. The social and economic divisions in society had become even more evident. Unemployment was at its highest since the 1930's and the government seemed to have battered the unions into submission. Royalty was seen as fodder for the tabloids, an extended soap opera funded by the tax-payers. Strangely, there didn't seem to be the anger behind this cycle to make it a vital piece of theatre, confronting the 'nowness' that Hall had envisaged during the 1960s. A much more dramatic and angry production of the histories was to come from

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Michael Bogdanov and Michael Pennington, with their newly formed touring company, The English Shakespeare Company. Here was a reaction to Thatcherite Britain at a 'gut level' that was in contrast with Noble's production. Bogdanov wrote:

I was burning with anger at the iniquity of the British electoral system. Eleven million people had voted for Thatcher, fourteen million against. Scotland, Wales and the North were almost totally Labour and only in the flat, green, get-rich-quick Yuppie haven of the South did the Conservative Party hold sway. Moreover, Boadecia has rallied her troops around her with a senseless war of expediency, sailing heroically (in some people's eyes) twelve thousand miles to the Falklands to do battle for 'a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name/ to pay five ducats, five I would not farm it'. (23)

The drama critic of the *Morning Star* lamented that Adrian Noble had 'largely eschewed analysis in favour of spectacle... there is no shaping spirit, no use of history and therefore no meaning. Perhaps, after all, this production does capture the prevailing liberal bewilderment in our period of social savagery.' (Gordon Parsons, 16 October 1988) The majority of the other critics were happy with Noble's production. Michael Coveney admired the conservatism of it all. 'There is no intellectual patterning of the events as there was in both the Hall/Barton cycle and the recent English Stage Company version.' (24 October 1988, *Financial Times*) Charles Osborne, in the Daily Telegraph, congratulated the RSC in what he saw as a return to 'its best form after a series of artistic disasters.' He was delighted that the plays showed: 'Shakespeare's concern for social order based on submission to a just, or even an unjust, authority that is allowed to make its uncomfortable points without impeding the narrative flow of the plays.' (24 October 1988) John Peter exclaimed: 'At last, at last the Royal Shakespeare Company has once again shaken hands with greatness.' (30 October 1988, *Sunday Times*)

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During the 1980s and the early 1990s, several talented female directors were to make their mark at the RSC. Both Deborah Warner and Katie Mitchell were to stage interesting productions of *King John* and the *Henry VI* plays, yet both worked only in the studio space, The Other Place. When Noble looked to producing the history cycle as the RSC's millennium project, the eight plays were to be divided up between the male directors, yet again. Even the addition of *King John* at the Swan Theatre at the start of the 2001 season went to Greg Doran as director. Elizabeth Shafer has pointed out how women directors have been marginalized or overlooked when it comes to directing the history plays:

With the important exception of Joan of Arc and Margaret of Anjou, in the *Henry VI* plays, women characters are marginalized in the plays' narratives of macho brouhaha. Women directors who take on these plays are not only dealing with very male dominated material, but they also have to confront the culturally conditioned expectation that women and violence don't go together, that a woman director is a less obvious choice for warrior culture plays.(13)

She points out that Joan Littlewood, with her productions of *Richard III* in 1954/55 and *Henry IV* in 1963, brought a welcome irreverence in her approach to Shakespeare, with class politics very much a central issue. Jane Howell, who directed the first tetralogy of history plays for the BBC cycle, also challenged the often pedestrian realism of those television productions of Shakespeare by her intelligent use of playing space – 'a circular space which was a cross between a reconstructed Globe theatre and a children's adventure playground.' (14) This Brechtian, non-realistic style of production also avoided the traditional battle ethic of the *Henrys*. Her most telling image was of Margaret surrounded by corpses, cradling the dead body of Richard in her arms.

If no women directors were employed by the RSC for the 'This England' cycle of history plays, then the list of directors who would be taking on this two year project was interesting,

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if a little predictable. The RSC magazine heralded the individuality of each director's vision of the plays. 'In 'This England', the RSC balances coherence and fracture, using four directors of markedly different styles and with individual concerns. Productions, designed for different theatres, each take a separate approach to period, text and delivery... The productions do not share one voice, but inevitably speak to each other.' (15) What was central to this cycle was an examination of England now (the subtitle to the cycle was 'This Island Now') and therefore a return to the contemporary 'nowness' that Peter Hall had claimed he wanted for the RSC when they first formed. But the vision now was not a unified one; rather it was a recognition that nations were imagined communities. Just as 'the disjunctions, fractures and shadowing in the plays might suggest the complexities of this art of imagining for the Elizabethans. Our own time finds imagining equally compulsive, shifting and necessary.' (16)

Those of a cynical nature couldn't help noticing that after fallow periods, when the RSC had been under close scrutiny and found wanting, they turned to the Histories. Michael Coveney suggested that 'when in doubt, the RSC can always turn to these plays as a way of defining itself.' (31 March 2000, *Daily Mail*) If this was the case, then Steve Pimlott's opening production of *Richard II* revealed a very different sensibility to that of Noble's *Plantagenets*. 'This England could be a mental institution or an art gallery,' complained John Peter. (9 April 2000, *Sunday Times*) Paul Taylor saw that the play was presented with 'chilly clarity'. (31 March 2000, *Independent*) Robert Gore-Langton noted the changes this play had accommodated during the century:

Richard II usually comes with a truckload of velvet cloaks and fake beards, stages as it were a medieval pageant in the John Gielgud tradition... Steven Pimlott and his two designers, Sue Willmington and David Fielding, have hosed off the heraldry, dressed everyone in stylish modern clothes on a white stage with white walls lit by 18 neon panels a la Stanley Kubrick. It's brash, stylishly

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stylishly Spartan, and full of the music of bells.
(31 March 2000, *Daily Express*)

Certain alterations to the text drew the usual carping from the likes of John Gross in the *Sunday Telegraph* – 'Blatant tampering with the text.' (2 April 2000) Otherwise there was considerable acclaim for the intellectual clarity of the production. It may have been presented under the conditions of 'an antiseptic laboratory' (Jane Edwards, 5 April 2000, *Time Out*), but this 'Brechtian analysis of the nature of power... reveals its modern relevance as a study of the way revolution often begets tyranny.' (Michael Billington, 1 April 2000, *Guardian*) Even John of Gaunt's speech was delivered 'not as a celebration, but a vehement lament. What is England? Who owns England? Who speaks for England?' asked Patrick Carnegy in the *Spectator*. 'It's a play about power brokers – we don't see the ordinary people in this play. Other people are speaking on their behalf.' (8 April 2000) Charles Spencer could see the contemporary parallels in a country where 'the old generation is reluctantly giving way to the new... it is a subtle and penetrating account of 'realpolitik'... observing the political pressures under laboratory conditions.' (31 March 2000, *Daily Telegraph*) Robert Butler suggested that it had as much to do with that 'particular struggle for power that has much to do with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as it does with Richard and Bolingbroke.' Pimlott had 'recast a political tragedy as a drama about political infighting.' (2 April 2000, *Independent on Sunday*) In terms of national introspection, Carole Woddis, in the *Herald*, believed that here was 'a gripping distillation of the pomp and circumstance, and cynicism that now beset the term 'Englishman' must now encompass a multitude of meanings. There are no simple conclusions.' (4 April 2000)

If Pimlott's production of *Richard II* was one for the post-modernists, then Michael Attenborough's treatment of the *Henry IV* plays at the Swan saw a change of emphasis and established a very different theatrical register. Once more, John Gross in the *Sunday Telegraph* felt a sense of relief with this more traditional approach to Shakespeare. 'It's

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a straightforward rendition, which doesn't wave directional concepts at us or claim to have discovered themes in the play that no-one has seen before.' Here was a production that presented 'Hal as neither a Teflon hero, above criticism, nor a cold fish, but roughly what Bernard Shaw called the Prince – an able young Philistine', moderately attractive, tough rather than vicious.' (23 April 2000) Charles Spencer thought such a reading was to be expected from this director as 'He has always been the most sane and humane of directors, with a particular talent for suggesting that mankind is both fallible and redeemable.... His *Henry IV* is unashamedly old fashioned and romantic.' (21 April 2000) Carole Woddis thought Attenborough did not shirk from the bloodiness of the plays, since 'the bloodiness of civil strife and the reality of how England hacked its way to domination, step by bloody step' (25 April 2000, *The Herald*) was still prominent. The productions still had a sense of continuity for her, 'despite the lack of an overall vision'. Nicholas de Jongh seemed to agree with Woddis. 'England is basically conceived as an often blood-stained, earthy battleground with a steep hill at the rear, [this] conveys Attenborough's sense that the play intensifies the impression conveyed in *Richard II* of a country rent asunder. In this environment anxiety and melancholia flourish.' (20 April 2000, *Evening Standard*)

Attenborough's often melancholic productions came into their own, with part two. Michael Billington astutely analysed the second play as 'a prolonged meditation on time, death, age and mutability of human affairs.' (1 July 2000, *Guardian*) Kate Bassett linked such a meditation on time where 'the clock has been ticking and life has soured,' with a 'pointedly gloomy portrait of our sceptred isle and its royal families.... The whole land seems as sick as its ruler.' (3 September 2000, *Independent on Sunday*) Robert Hewison noted the abrupt change that had to come when Hal takes to the throne – 'Falstaff is banished and the past is dead.' (9 July 2000, *Sunday Times*)

William Houston, who played Hal at the Swan, was asked to discover a very different King Henry for Edward

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Hall's production of *Henry V* (the only one of the cycle to be played in the main house). The actor, writing for the Observer newspaper, appreciated how his initial performance for one director had changed as he faced the responsibility of carrying on with the cycle of plays with another director. 'I do find it quite difficult to go back to doing part one now. Prince Hal is hard to come back to after playing him as King.' (8 April 2001) Hall's production seemed to steer a fascinating course that managed to avoid promoting crude nationalism whilst declining to reduce the King's oratory to mere 'spin-doctoring' or extended 'sound-bites'. Hall democratised the authority of the chorus by splitting up his lines between the squaddies. They were not sanitized though, for the squaddies were 'boisterous lager louts who set off to war singing anthems (commissioned from Billy Bragg)' as Kate Bassett put it. (3 September 2000, *Independent on Sunday*) None of the critics wanted to think of this as a reflection on England's xenophobia, particularly at a time when many of the English were voicing their opposition to being part of Europe.

What it did show about the English character, in times of war, was well expressed by Michael Billington – 'If a key point comes across, it is that the English possess a truculent chauvinism that only turns into heroism in moments of crisis.' (2 September 2000, *Guardian*) He certainly had a point and Hall's monstrous mining machine, which dominated the set, came to life quite frighteningly as a war machine, when England became mobilized against the French. The English were depicted as a 'precariously united national army, swept to war on gusts of excitement.' (Susannah Clapp, 3 September 2000, *Observer*) The production was sometimes reminiscent of the English Shakespeare Company's production, during the 1980s, and Rhoda Kaening asked, somewhat tongue-in-cheek 'can there be such a thing as a protégé of Michael Bogdanov?' (9 September 2000, *Independent*) As for continuity from such a fragmentary approach to the cycle, Benedict Nightingale thought that it was Hall who had done most to bring about some cohesion here. 'This *Henry V* is, after all, the latest lap in the RSC's history

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marathon, which means we have watched his father usurp the throne, a sin for which Hal may have to atone in a dubiously just war, and seen him go slumming with men he must now have hanged.' (4 September 2000, *Times*)

By December 2000, the three plays in the *Henry VI* cycle had been premiered at Stratford. Audiences were able to sit through the three plays in a single day, stretching over twelve hours, with meal breaks. Michael Coveney drew attention to the George Bush and Al Gore debacle taking place in the United States at that very moment 'That saga is like a vicar's tea party compared to the feudal mayhem enacted here, with a divided nation tearing itself to pieces whilst losing an imperial foothold in France.' (15 December 2000, *Daily Mail*)

John Peter was taken by the sheer power of the trilogy. 'What Michael Boyd's production puts across most forcefully is a sense of power: its awesomeness, its dangers. Its inevitable, insatiable repercussions. The notion that character is fate.' (24 December 2000, *Sunday Times*) In all the cycles, presented by the RSC, this notion of fate plays a part. Again this is in stark contrast with the productions of the more maverick directors, such as Joan Littlewood and Michael Bogdanov. Man has little control over his own destiny according to these productions; 'A totally compelling enactment of Shakespeare's chronicling of England's fate after the death of Henry V' (30 December 2000, *Spectator*) was how Patrick Carnegie described these three plays.

Susannah Clapp praised Tom Piper's redesign of the Swan Theatre. It was as if it had been built to demonstrate the break-up of England during the War of the Roses. 'The action bursts out of the stage, to envelop the theatre in a soundscape of drumbeats and murmuring voices. Foundations are uncertain; the ground cracks apart to reveal a smoking inferno.' (17 December 2000, *Observer*) Certainly Boyd exploited, quite brilliantly, the vertical plane, around which the audience sat. 'Lanterns hang from the high ceiling and out of the darkness, ropes and gigantic portrait frames drop: thrones, beds, bodies (dead and alive) dangle from the

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pulleys; and ladders emerge and rise up to be scaled by athletic actors as they attempt to climb another castle wall. There is never a dull moment', noted Georgina Brown in the *Mail on Sunday*. This certainly helped to reinforce the 'themes of order and dissension and the horrors of civil war.' (7 January 2001) Benedict Nightingale agreed that the 'trilogy is Shakespeare's reminder of the agonies of a relatively recent civil war: less adroitly written than *Henry IV parts one and two*, but more immediate and far more nightmarish.' (15 December 2000, *Times*)

The respect paid to the text was certainly popular with most critics. Joyce McMillan, writing in the *Scotsman*, paid particular attention to these plays, since Michael Boyd was a favourite son in Scotland, having been a director at Glasgow's exciting Tron Theatre for more than ten years. Although Boyd is often acclaimed for his visual inventiveness, she praised the 'rediscovery of and respect for the text,' although, 'written very early in Shakespeare's career... it now stands revealed... as an underrated masterpiece about the terrifying process of political disintegration and decline, and one that could hardly speak more clearly to western audiences today.' (20 December 2000) One question, above all, dominated these plays: as we exercise power, must it always be tainted with dishonest, coercion and betrayal? At its most extreme form, must that lead us to evil and murderous violence?

Boyd's cast handled the bitter cynicism of these political struggles with considerable irony too. The audience laughed when they heard the elaborate professions of faith that emanated from the nobles, who then changed sides within a blinking of an eye. Again, Joyce McMillan was astute in her reading of contemporary parallels, particularly in the portrayal of the Jack Cade rebellion. She saw the young and radical Shakespeare questioning the values of traditional loyalty. 'He even mocks the same anti-French attitudes that survive in the *Sun* today. And the structure of the plays also represents a fascinating, radical collision between medieval morality drama – with its demons and smoking hell-mouths

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and a style of fragmented, fast-moving, morally inconclusive narrative that often seems closer in technique to a modern action movie.' Like the Greek plays, which Adrian Noble had wanted to relate to when he directed *The Plagenets*, these plays still left 'audiences at the end, feeling exhilarated, uplifted and better able to endure and oppose the cruelties of the world,' thought Joyce McMillan. Kate Bassett saw through the glass rather more darkly. With its 'innumerable sallies and rallies, history seems to be not so much tragically repeating itself as going nowhere on a loop tape,' she mused. (17 December 2000, *Independent on Sunday*)

The RSC completed this four play cycle with a production of *Richard III*, directed by Michael Boyd, and starring a relatively unknown actor, Aiden McArdle, as Richard. The critical response was a little more muted. 'Aiden McArdle is a nimble, impish Richard; he's swift, funny, volatile, a petulant misogynist who kisses with contempt. But he's never really frightening: he never seems to have a strategy,' wrote Susannah Clopp in the *Observer* (24 April 2001). For Kate Bassett 'what McArdle sometimes misses is Richard's wicked comic timing.' (29 April 2001, *Independent on Sunday*)

It was for the *Henry VI* trilogy that Michael Boyd was to win several awards in 2001, not least being the prestigious Olivier award for Best Director. When Adrian Noble announced his retirement as Artistic Director of the RSC in 2002, Boyd's name came into contention. With the announcement of his appointment in July 2002, Boyd declared that he was 'delighted to be leading the RSC into its next chapter. My aspiration is to ensure that we are an agenda-setting theatre company' (Press release)

Boyd's term as Artistic Director has proved popular on the whole. Whilst he has had to face criticism as he resided over the long over due redevelopment of the main house, he has been able to establish a good financial footing for the company and to open it out more as an international base that showcases the work of others from all over the world. This has culminated in the Complete Works Festival, taking place in Stratford between April 2006 and April 2007,

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led by Boyd and Deborah Warner. The insularity of staging Shakespeare only in English was to be challenged, with companies from across the world staging Shakespeare's plays in Stratford, or responding in radical ways to his texts. In a press release in 2006, Boyd stated that 'The festival is a conscious attempt to showcase and explore the way different cultures, languages, styles of theatre and art forms approach Shakespeare. Like any great festival, there's plenty of opportunity to experiment and stumble across the new.' Well perhaps not quite so new, as far as Boyd the director was concerned: he would, of course, be returning to the Histories. Not only did he want to revive his award winning cycle from 2001, he would later include the second cycle of four history plays in 2007. Back in 2003, when interviewed by the Directors Guild of Great Britain (Spring, 2003), Boyd cleverly summed up the baggage that came with the job, and where he wished to go:

The RSC was conceived and born under the influences of the Berliner Ensemble, but also in the style of a Cambridge tutorial. The textual emphasis was vital – the stripping away of decoration, the cleaning up of presentation – and I take that in with breakfast every day. But there is another world to do with the poetry of theatre itself, which comes, for me, from Russia and from Quebec. One of my ambitions is to make the RSC a bit more porous to that kind of work from outside.

Boyd's approach to the History cycle this time seems to have incorporated this policy of both internationalism and radicalism. Not only has he invited a hugely diverse range of mainstream and fringe companies to perform, he has also enlisted new writing from culturally diverse playwrights, such as Roy Williams, Rona Munro and Sulayman Al-Bassam. He also, significantly, invited Adriano Shaplin from the radical San Francisco based Riot Group to act as dramaturge on Boyd's own histories cycle, as well as writing a new work for the actors employed by Boyd for their two year contract on his project. One critic, Paul Taylor, believes that 'under its

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new artistic director, the RSC has begun to relocate its soul. There's a fresh commitment to the founding principle of a dedicated long-term company of actors who are able to reveal and replenish Shakespeare's contemporary relevance by working on new plays alongside the classics.' (6 June 2006, *The Independent*)

The emphasis remains, however, with the importance of the director at the RSC. W.B. Yeats witnessed the work of one of the last of the great actor managers in 1901 at Stratford. The twentieth century has seen the director being elevated as the central creative force in British theatre. Nowhere has this been made more visible than at the RSC and particularly when each new Artistic Director has staged his interpretation of Shakespeare's history plays. 'Orchestrating the verbal, visual, physical, musical, kinetic, and plastic languages of the state production, the modern director plays a critical role in the transmission of Shakespearian authority during the twentieth century.' (Yeats 17) If this 'authority' is to remain with the director, then one hopes that for the future a more fully representative selection of men and women from different cultural, political and ethnic backgrounds will be given the chance to work on these texts and to continue to delve into their contemporary relevance.

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