

HENRY VI: Revenge in France, HENRY VI: Revolt in England

Based on the three Henry VI plays by William Shakespeare

The Tom Patterson Theatre, Stratford, Canada. 5 July 2002

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Director Leon Rubin's deft editing of Shakespeare's bloody Henry VI trilogy into two productions commissioned by the Stratford Festival gives the bard's episodic history plays a terrible relevance and coherence. Along with clarifying the political broils in fifteenth-century England for an audience necessarily familiar with them, Rubin's two-part version creates a Machiavellian world peopled by ambitious characters embodying the human will to power. Their pride unleashes civil butchery in terms so savage that the contemporary audience feels uncomfortably at home. Using the betrayals, burnings, stabbings, and beheadings that proliferate in Shakespeare's dissection of human ambition exercising direst cruelty, Rubin's direction focuses on the visual and verbal ambiguity of blood that unites and separates characters. Blood signifies family pride and kinship bonds as well as the inhuman violence that humiliates and undoes those bonds through cruel, self-serving actions as Yorkists and Lancastrians grope for the crown in the oxymoronically named War of the Roses.

Stratford's adaptation streamlines Shakespeare but retains his epic scope, sweeping geographically between England and France and chronologically from the heroic Henry V's funeral to the rise of the House of York and the ascendancy of Richard of Gloucester, the future Richard III. Part One, *Revenge in France*, depicts the squabbling English nobility, unreined by a strong king during Henry VI's minority, losing Henry V's claims in France. Part Two, *Revolt in England*, opens with the barbarous Jack Cade's peasant revolt and chronicles the rise of York's white rose; it concludes with the lustful Edward IV's ascension and the ruthless plotting of his younger brother, the crookbacked Richard of Gloucester, who stands as the culminating emblem of the will to power shorn of any moral constraint but masked in the robe of family fealty.

Using a broad historical canvas and large cast of characters, these productions bore into the core of human power, presenting a parade of well-defined characters, each rising, then falling as Fortune's wheel turns them topsy-turvy. At the center of this wolfish parade of power-obsessed individuals are the royal couple, the politically inept Henry VI, played by the sweet-faced, diminutive Michael Therriault, and his audacious, cruel queen, Margaret of Anjou, played with vigor and venom by Seana McKenna. Wearing a simple monk-like gray habit, Ther-

riault's Henry smiles with boyish charm and dangerous naiveté. As the action unfolds, his faith in God's benevolent will makes Henry's unwillingness to use power with force and purpose politically sinful, a great evil masked in religious fervor. McKenna's Margaret, though small in stature, looms large, both politically and emotionally. Scheming ambition spurs her charming manipulation of the sexually innocent Henry; later, in the absence of the too pious king, she takes the field in breastplate and skirt, an oxymoronic image of femininity. Both end pathetically: the feckless Henry stabbed and literally thrown headlong down by Richard of Gloucester; the grief-stricken Margaret humbled by York's triumphant sons, shuffling off, bereft of love and power, her illicit lover beheaded, her husband, and her young son stabbed.

Set designer John Pennoyer's metal trestle running above two-thirds the length of the Tom Patterson's long thrust stage creates a highly flexible playing area and links the contemporary audience with the historic action. Like a world dominated by power and bloody ambition, the set is stark, shorn of human touches, a cold network of steel that supports characters or imprisons them. The set functions literally to highlight the play's gory spectacle as gibbet, rack, and rampart in various battles, but it also works metaphorically as an emblem of power's inhumanity. It supports the powerful aloft; below, it imprisons in its steel web those about to fall. It serves also to set off the many tableaux the production uses like glorious but ghastly illustrations in history books.

The upper level emphasizes the relative power position of characters in the cycle of bloodletting. In *Revenge in France*, when the French finally slay the heroic but brutal Talbot, their nemesis dies under the trestle, cradling his dead son John in a [End Page 148] sort of macho pieta. The Duke of York's successful assault on the French and his burning of Joan la Pucelle occur on high. At the end of the trestle deepest into the audience, Thom Marriott's huge, bear-like York faces Michelle Giroux's slender Joan at the other end, elevated on a pyre, frozen in prayer like a saint on a holy card. At the conclusion of part one, the upper level functions ironically to emphasize the grief, anxiety, and moral turmoil of the powerful. Both the ambitious, ruthless Margaret and the ineffectual Henry VI appear on the upper level; she faces out into the audience pathetically cradling a red bag containing the severed head of her lover Suffolk while Henry struts away, pacing the trestle in high dudgeon. In *Revolt in England's* climax, Haysam Kadri's bustling hunchbacked Richard of Gloucester, played with an acerbity sweetened by youth, stabs Henry at the end of the trestle and hurls his body to the stage below where falling snow and blood-red rose petals slowly cover it.

The area below the trestle frames characters trapped by power. Just before his brutal, treacherous murder, the good Lord Gloucester, protector of the young king, appears center stage below the trestle, caged and baited like a bear at the stake by his ignoble cousins. Ironically, surrounded by his sons, York accepts Henry's power, seated like a patriarch in a touching family portrait framed below the steel frame. Shortly, fortune runs against him. Margaret, the vicious warrior queen, has him racked under the trestle as she mocks his ambition and gloats at the death of his youngest son. Crowning him with a paper crown and daubing his wounds with a napkin stained in Rutland's blood drive home Shakespeare's recognition of our capacity for inhumanity. The moment seems more pathetic and cruelly ironic because the helpless York is played by the enormous Thom Marriott and Margaret by the diminutive Seana McKenna who smirks and prances around him. In *Revolt in England*, the production drives home its Machiavellian point about power's iron rule. As the climactic battle rages at floor-level, on the upper stage, a gigantic, metallic, skeletal creature emerges. As the family slaughter each other, the symbolic monster spreads its long arms in an infernal benediction, revealing the operator inside, a small, saintly, white-clad figure, suggesting the pious king's role in Armageddon. Finally, the productions close pessimistically. Edward IV, the new Yorkist king, crowned and sumptuously clad in gold, stands below the trestle doting on his wife and children, while Richard of Gloucester stands outside the frame plotting fratricide and his own rise as he coolly reveals his own alienation, denying the human bonds of love and brotherhood. The play closes with Richard beginning Richard III's ironic, opening soliloquy.

In a world awry, ungoverned by a strong king, power bruises and kills; and women strong in will and ambition rise to contend equally with men. These productions represent women with all Shakespeare's ambiguity. Michelle Giroux's Joan is coolly distant but attractive: seemingly saintly in motive, heroic in action, but ultimately as inhuman as any man, consorting with demonic powers to win power. Giroux's Joan is ethereal, a lean, boyish scourge of the English, capable of beating Brad Ruby's burly Talbot in hand-to-hand combat or pleading with cool eloquence to swing the Duke of Burgundy over to the French cause. She seems otherworldly, appearing at first on the upper trestle, still and saintly in a white robe to inspire the French and frustrate the English. Later, before her capture and burning, she appears below the trestle, clothed like a man in leather breeches and bearing a sword as she unsuccessfully attempts to conjure the spirits that have animated her. McKenna's Margaret is a marvel of passion: ambitious in the quest for power, romantic in her illicit love for Suffolk, tart and peevish in exchanges with her uxorious husband, vicious in her torture of York, swaggering in her proud triumphs, yet touchingly pathetic in suffering the loss of her lover, her butchered young son, and ultimately her hope for power. Early on she weds Henry against his advisors' will, charming

Therriault's Henry into a wide-eyed adolescent infatuation and swinging him about as they exit. Once crowned queen, she proves passionate in love and war, a woman of unmatched mettle. McKenna wrings all the emotional changes in Margaret's character, giving a bravura performance.

Stratford's adaptations of Shakespeare's Henry VI trilogy make forceful, pointed theatre. *Revenge in France* and *Revolt in England* are full of powerful characters and big emotions admirably played. Staged dynamically with swirling action punctuated by memorable tableaux, supported musically by driving contemporary and primitive Celtic folk rhythms, and using a spare but highly effective set, these two productions make history palpable and instructive. While Rubin exploits every opportunity to titillate and assault the audience with spectacularly violent battles, stabbings, hangings, and beheadings, all the gore compels the audience to contemplate the political point: a headless state allows faction and ambition to mutilate humanity.