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“This England:” *Henry VI Parts 1, 2, 3* and *Richard III*, RSC at the Young Vic 2001

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1 Henry VI (hereafter 1H6) is unique in that we have extant one of the few contemporary rave reviews of a Shakespearean play. This is Thomas Nashe writing in *Piers Penniless* (1592):

“What if I prove Playes to be no extreame; but a rare exercise of virtue? First, for the subject of them (for the most part) it is borrowed out of our English Chronicles, wherein our forefathers valiant acts (that have line long buried in rustie brasse and worme-eaten bookes) are revived, and they themselves raised from the Grave of Oblivion, and brought to pleade their aged Honours in open presence: than which, what can be a sharper reproofe to these degenerate effeminate dayes of ours?

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at severall times), who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.” (McKerrow, 1:212)

Nashe corroborates Henslowe’s note in his diary on receipts, which together provide invaluable proof of the popularity of Shakespeare’s first history play. His comments also highlight the way that the audience responded to Talbot: they wept. 1H6 was popular theatre that spoke to the Elizabethan heart. The great strength of the Millenium RSC production of the play was that it recovered this sense of the play’s populism, allowing us to understand what it was that made the play such a box office hit, a brilliant start to a young playwright’s career.

“This England,” the RSC millenium project of performing all the history plays, reached completion with the performance of the second half of the Henriad, H6 (three parts) and *Richard III* (hereafter R3) at the end of May, 2001 in the Young Vic, near

Waterloo. The H6 plays were amongst the earliest things that Shakespeare wrote. On the rare occasions when they are performed, the RSC has favoured turning the three plays into two plays, with scenes reordered and some rewriting. John Barton's *The Wars of the Roses* (1963) was a trilogy titled H6, *Edward IV* and R3; Terry Hands returned to the original text (1977); Michael Bogdanov turned H6 into *The House of Lancaster and The House of York* (1988), and a year later Adrian Noble turned four plays into three, in an RSC series called *The Plantagenets*. We were therefore lucky to be able to see the four early plays together and largely uncut. The RSC presented the three parts of H6 as Part 1 "The War Against France", Part 2 "England's Fall" and Part 3 "The Chaos".

The plays had their first performance at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon in late 2000 (first performance Nov. 23, 28, Dec. 2 and R3, Feb 14 2001); and moved from there to the Young Vic. The plays were directed by Michael Boyd, and designed by Tom Piper. Leading players included: Fiona Bell, who played Joan la Pucelle and Margaret of Anjou; Richard Cordery, Duke of Gloucester; Richard Dillane, Suffolk; Geff Francis, Earl of Warwick; Aidan McArdle, Dauphin, Richard III; Deirdra Morris, Duchess of Gloucester; Jake Nightingale, Jack Cade; David Oyelowo, Henry VI; Geoffrey Streatfeild, Young Clifford; Sam Troughton, John Talbot. Full cast lists and production details are appended at the end of this review. The Young Vic, where I saw the four productions, is theatre in the round. The building itself is square, and the stage something of a pentagon, with tiered seating arranged concentrically, and two walkways from the front of the stage, left and right. Noone is more than five rows away from the stage. There is a first floor gallery with seats and also places to stand. The space worked exceedingly well, practically placing us on the stage with the nobles in their many confrontations, and holding us up close to the savagery of medieval warfare, or making us (against our will) part of Jack Cade's rabble, in the very thick of the action. There was a planked-in walkway suspended diagonally above the stage into and from which at various points actors would ascend and descend. There were various lighting combinations used, for quieter scenes candle-lights around the edge, spotlights on individual actors, and brighter lights for the ensembles. Despite the technical limitations of the venue (compared with bigger theatres), the lighting design worked very well, assisting the acting to change mood and tempo, which was something that this production was very good at.

1 *Henry VI*

Part One lasted for three hours and ten minutes, including one fifteen minute interval, with approximately one hour 30 minutes to the interval. All four productions were characterized by strong beginnings. *Part One* begins with lamentation over the death of Henry V. A trap was open front stage, from which smoke billowed out, lit from beneath. The smell of church incense filled the theatre. The four nobles were attired in black. Henry's corpse was slowly lowered into the trap, which was the tomb. The four nobles lamented Henry's death while this occurred.

The verse in H6 is often stylized, formulaic and rather wooden (compared with later Shakespeare) so it was of interest to see what the actors would make of it. The surprise of the production was that it sounded a great deal better on the stage than when read through: it benefited from the excitement of the action. The opening scene set the pace for the rest of the production, with lines being given forte and at speed. This worked well, though lines like "His brandished sword did blind men with his beams" with its rather overemphatic alliteration, and formulaic epithets such as "eyes, replete with wrathful fire," sound rather hollow however they are spoken.⁽¹⁾

Early in the play the conflict between Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester and Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester is sketched, and this is followed through until Gloucester is murdered in 2H6. In the first part this was given a pantomimic flavour, with Gloucester and the Bishop facing each other and slinging verbal mud. It was something of a comic treatment, the Bishop of Winchester being the pantomime villain that we love to loathe. This rumbustious knockabout rivalry worked extremely well, indicating how the play might have appealed to the groundlings, for whom it was probably something of an introduction to the fifteenth century. There were unsatisfactory moments. The exchange at 1.3.44-48 did not work very well, for Winchester plucked at Gloucester's non-existent beard:

Winch.: Do what thou dar'st, I beard thee to thy face.

Glouc.: What? Am I dared, and bearded to my face?

[And later:]

Glouc.: Priest, beware your beard,

I mean to tug it and to cuff you soundly.

Surely both Winchester and Gloucester need to sport large imposing beards.

The key to the popularity of the play is of course Talbot. He was played as a grizzled veteran, with a sword that he carried slung over his shoulder. We first meet him in the report given by the messenger at 1.1.108, pithily delivered. As a read text, it does not stand comparison with later similar reports (i.e. Macbeth reported to be Bellona's bridegroom Macbeth 1.2.55) but delivered with conviction it whips up our interest and excitement:

The French exclaim'd the devil was in arms;
 All the whole army stood agaz'd on him.
 His soldiers, spying his undaunted spirit,
 "A Talbot! a Talbot" cried out amain,
 And rush'd into the bowels of the battle. (1.1.125-28)

In 1.4 Talbot joins Salisbury on ladders against the battlements, which were here a walkway suspended about the centre of the stage; at the back of the stage, on the balcony, the gunner and his boy. The production made excellent use of vertical alignments, as well as deploying characters over the whole stage for the ensemble set pieces. It is a play with a great number of scenes aloft, and the director was exploiting this. Placing Talbot and Salisbury above the stage also offered a comment on the way we should consider Talbot, an English Hero, an ideal to look up to, detached from the wrong kind of ambition that plagues York and Winchester. The gunshot that strikes down Salisbury was performed by the small gunners' boy (dressed in) swinging across the stage on a rope and striking the place where Salisbury stood in the central walkway with his feet. This was spectacular. Most of this scene took place mid-air, and the use of the rope for swinging across the stage, and ropes dropped down from the central area, reminded us of the circus. This popularistic appeal was also to be seen in the Jack Cade scenes, where he gave his lines seated on a red swing above the stage. The production injected pace into the whirl of events and brought out the strong narrative line: it was easy to see how this could have appealed to a sixteenth century audience. Talbot's death was powerfully dramatized by a phalanx of French soldiers marching on with raised spears in silhouette.

The fights were another strong point of the production as a whole. Prior to combat, a phalanx of the English marched onto the stage marking time to a powerful drum-beat. They then exploded past the audience, yelling and waving swords, disappearing

down the two walkways and reappearing engaged in combat from back stage: this worked very well, not failing to make one start in alarm, pitching us into the midst of the action. Ladders were used very effectively, a feature also of William Houston's H5 shown earlier in Stratford, the English scaling the walls of Rouen—here the ladders were tumbled forward and lifted up again in a stylized wall-scaling, within the small space of the theatre expertly choreographed to rhythmical drumming. There was a good laugh achieved by an interpolation when Joan, in reply to Talbot's boast that he would retake the city, mocked the English from the Rouen walls, by producing a torn off limb, and saying: "What, without an arm?"

Talbot and the Countess of Auvergne (2.3), a scene that is often cut, worked very well. It is a pasteboard tableau of Talbot as heroic icon. He is invited to dine alone with the French Countess of Auvergne, a secret patriot, who hopes thereby to entrap and kill him. Talbot, being a knight, cannot deny the request of a Lady, and accepts, but when in her castle, he states that he is but the shadow of Talbot. The Countess locks the doors on him; and he calls forth his substance, which turn out to be the English troops waiting outside. Valiant Talbot is but a synecdoche for the valiant English army. The tables are turned on the Countess of Auvergne, but she accepts defeat gracefully, ending the scene with a merry feast. It is a curious scene, rather like a rendering of a folkloric anecdote that serves no other purpose than to illustrate Talbot the English hero, and please the groundlings.

Fiona Bell, as Joan La Pucelle, and later as Margaret of Anjou, was consistently strong through the entire four productions. If a criticism were to be made, it would be that her outstanding performance threw a certain shade on some of the weaker younger actors. She has done a range of different productions, working with Michael Boyd at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, where he cast Bell in a variety of roles, from Cinderella to Lady Macbeth, and she has also worked in television and film. For someone whose career seems to have taken off on TV, she was remarkably strong in the difficult conditions of theatre in the round, with the audience up close and all around. The text of 1H6 is ambiguous about Joan la Pucelle, suggesting that more than one hand was at work. Early in the play she is rather less than demonic; but by the end, before her capture, when she summons the fiends, she is out-and-out wicked. Though the fiends were present early on (from 1.5), and this suggested her satanic affiliations, when she first entered it was hard to believe that it was a figure of

darkness who announced:

Dolphin, I am by birth a shepherd's daughter,
 My wit untrain'd in any kind of art.
 Heaven and our Lady gracious hath it pleas'd
 To shine on my contemptible estate. (1.2.72-5)

Her ability to defeat the Dauphin, and later Talbot, seemed to be heaven-granted, rather than satanic. Her triumphant victory in Orleans was accompanied by large sky-blue banners falling from the flies, a rather heavenly effect.

Bell had a gamine innocence which the Dauphin abused, (taking a lead from the innuendoes of the French courtiers), and which Bell resisted. She was a sympathetic bravely-spoken Jean d'Arc, with the exception of the taunting of Talbot from the walls of Rouen, where she was verbally aggressive (getting a good laugh), and in her final speeches. Characterization is not consistent, for at one point she even comes out of character to comment on the inconstancy of the French, when Burgundy is persuaded to leave the English: "Done like a Frenchman—turn and turn again!" (3.3.85) Boyd included this, but it made little sense. In general, the interpretation recovered the sympathy that there is for Joan in the play, making her the heroic counterpart to Talbot, which the Dauphin (ably played by Aidan McArdle as an effete libidinous womanizer) could not be. Joan was the vanquisher of male strength and also the victim of male sexual aggression. There was an exceedingly painful moment after her capture when she claimed to be a virgin, and yet to be with child, held between two soldiers and York thrust his hand up her skirt, and she screamed out in pain, and he held up bloody fingers with the line "And yet, forsooth, she is a virgin pure." This moment alone, in its violence and horror, was perhaps too strong for the play, since it meant that Joan had our entire sympathy over everything else (whereas the text shows her at this point denying her own father), turning the play into "The Tragedy of Joan of Arc." In 5.3 there were three fiends, who lined up behind her (like receding images in a mirror), mimicking her actions in silent mime, to the eerie sound of a Latin plainsong. This worked very well, drawing on the traditions of popular horror. Her departure from the stage left the audience unable to place her very effectively, a heroic leader, inspired by the Virgin Mary at the beginning, companioned by fiends, in the end a victim of sexual violence, a heretic hustled off to be burnt alive—the power of the performance and its commitment required another viewing.

Bell, on her departure as Joan, then returned as Margaret of Anjou, and the doubling here made a powerful statement about Margaret's role in the play. Like Joan, she is a complex figure: a powerful leader, an evil talisman for England in that she brought discord with her (the loss of lands in France a significant catalyst towards conflict); her illicit love for Suffolk symbolised the increasing moral decay besetting the kingdom, and yet who later came to stand (as a bereaved lamenting mother) for the sufferings of the country itself under the ravages of civil war (by the last play both her son and husband had been killed), and whose dauntless courage contrasted with the mild pieties of her husband, and commanded our respect. In 1H6 we meet her directly after Joan's departure, captured by Suffolk on the battle field. The chemistry between these two promised good things—we had an RSC *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* in the making. When Suffolk praised her beauty to the King in 5.5, she stood in a golden frame spotlighted at the back of the stage. Henry falls in love with Suffolk's description, and asked for her to be sent over. The play ended very powerfully with Margaret left on stage alone, walking out of the frame off-stage to the right, looking round slyly and coyly at the audience, a figure of sexual power and dynamism, hinting that everything had gone according to her own plan, and that she would come to dominate the next two plays in the cycle. Bell's thought-provoking and passionate performance prompted one to turn to feminist scholarship to consider how the strong women portrayed in these early histories compare with women in the later plays.

The temple garden scene (2.4) is perhaps the most famous scene in the play. It is a highly-patterned rhetorical piece, with York and Somerset (representing the House of York and House of Lancaster) going through a set of almost ritualistic exchanges, which escalate by the end of the scene to near conflict. In the 1988 production in Stratford "Gloucester / Winchester riots erupt... at the end of the scene, to underline the point that 'this quarrel will draw blood.'⁽²⁾ York was the strongest presence on the stage (ably played by Clive Wood) and the scene represents a further step on his road to power, with Warwick choosing the white rose. Verticals were again made use of for this scene, with red and white roses suspended from the flies, and the speakers plucking them out of the air and pinning them to their cloaks.

This scene was then followed by Mortimer's death scene, with his declaration that York was his heir. This was a powerful scene, which chimed visually with earlier

moments in the series, particularly between Henry IV and Hal, when Henry was dying. The father / son theme, which Attenborough had illustrated in H4 in the Swan in 2000 (Falstaff vs. Henry IV), was also important in this play, with Talbot and his son, John, providing an affecting tableau. Here Shakespeare was indicating that the highest forms of loyalty and courage are wasted by the self-seeking ambitions of men such as York and Somerset, who failed to send reinforcements. Talbot and son die pointlessly. York's scene with Mortimer was also notable for the excellent way that Clive Wood handled the verse, verse which in this scene (2.5) begins to show greater promise than at the beginning of the play.

The H6 and R3 series as a whole eschewed extensive props and scenery, relying on beautiful costumes, inventive use of the stage space, and powerful committed acting, with some of the actors doing very well with rather uninteresting verse. The great strength of the production was that it was both visually and aurally strong. It is not true that all the actors were equally comfortable with the Shakespearean verse line, but notably strong players were: Kane, Cordery, Wood, Dillane and Bell. It is a curious thing that when an iambic line is spoken at the proper speed, with sufficient clarity on the syllables, and with a well-modulated intonation over the whole line (some of the younger actors failed at this, consistently overemphasizing the wrong words), then even the verse of these early histories begins to sound highly poetic, such is the power of a good delivery. Dillane (Suffolk) seemed to have an ear for the verse rhythm, which one could hear beating behind the fluent ease with which he spoke.

David Oyelowo, fanfared as the first Black British actor to play an English monarch for the RSC (Henry VI), achieved great success in the role, (Sunday Times / National Theatre Ian Charleson Award for outstanding performance by a young actor in a classical theatre role), with an innocence and otherworldliness appropriate to the pious and malleable Henry. He comes from chieftain stock, Nigerian aristocracy, (his parents eloped to the UK from Nigeria to marry). He was twenty-four at the time of performance (the role may have been played by a boy actor in the 1590s) and is clearly being groomed by the RSC for greater things. He was a rather good Bonario in *Volpone* (RSC Swan 1999). There are now quite a large number of talented Black and Asian British actors playing Shakespeare, including those at the Globe, and at Stratford. Oyelowo characterised Henry rather well by squirming uncomfortably as he spoke to Richard Plantagenet, conjuring up the image of a schoolboy in front of a

particularly nasty schoolmaster. Despite the many plaudits received, the challenge for Oyelowo (and others as well) remains the verse. Oyelowo was breaking up the lines on each word, and losing fluency and rhythm. Hugh Quarshie (who was the first black Hotspur at the RSC twenty years ago), in an article in *The Guardian* called for Black actors not to recite Shakespearean lines, but to speak them, but this is completely wrong.⁽³⁾ We need the lines well-spoken, of course, but they have to be made to sing, and this can only be done by an appropriate recitation. It is the difference between a conversational or more stylized approach. One requires the actor to feel that the lines are beautiful and to say them with a sense of that, not over-slow or ponderous à la Gielgud, or full-throttle à la Olivier, but somewhere between the two, and modified by today's greater acceptance of diverse accents. Quarshie is right that (most of the time) whether the actor is black or white should be irrelevant: with Shakespeare, voice-quality and voice-control is paramount. Visual aspects are vital, but the speaking voices must also conjure shapes and pictures in the mind.

Finally, one might mention the splendid costumes, which, because of the nature of the theatre we were able to view close up. Fabrics used were cotton and wool, but the finish on them meant that they shone like satin and silk. The costumes were accented to the medieval period. The coronation scene was particularly striking, with the King and the nobles all attired in golden robes, gold thread on a dark ground, which looked very costly indeed, and glowed brilliantly in the spotlights. The robes closed at the neck, and meant that the figures looked like golden pillars set about the stage.⁽⁴⁾ As the series progressed, Henry was increasingly dressed in white, which contrasted with his gold crown and black skin, a beautiful effect. The Bishop of Winchester, dressed in Cardinal regalia was very impressive, scarlet hat, cape and skirts. Margaret was dressed in a long red velvet dress with a high collar, buttoned closely down the length of the spine, and spilling onto the floor, which owed more to picture-book medievalism, than to any specific costume. Armour was not worn (as it had been in H4) and in its place heavy-duty padded jerkins were used, which became covered in gore. Full medievalism, with the pageantry of flags and regalia, was eschewed, and the dominant tone was brown and tan, when not dressed in gold at the court. The more picturesque tableaux were balanced with the grimness of muddy medieval warfare.

2 Henry VI

Part Two lasted three hours and fifteen minutes, including a fifteen minute interval. It followed on directly from *Part One*, with the arrival of Margaret at the English court. *Part Two* is generally acknowledged to be stronger than *Part One*, and it is easy to agree with Michael Hattaway in the Cambridge Edition that 2H6 "is a fine, important, and undervalued play" (1). It differs from 1H6 most notably in a marked improvement in the quality of the key speeches, in which Shakespeare becomes increasingly recognizable.

Cordery's Gloucester was played with an increased gravitas in *Part Two*. Gloucester's importance to the play can be gauged by the fact that in the eighteenth century a version was adapted by Ambrose Philips and called *Humphrey Duke of Gloucester* (1723). With the death of Gloucester civil war starts to become a reality. The new serious note was sounded when Gloucester read the articles of peace that accompanied the arrival of Margaret. On coming to the item which surrendered up Anjou and Maine to the French, and delivered Margaret with no dowry, he stopped reading and quailed visibly. Oyelowo responded by being so innocently and boyishly thrilled to have such a beautiful bride that the cost was of no account. The quarrel with Winchester that followed this was played with the same former verbal fisticuffs, with Gloucester stating: "If I longer stay / We shall begin our ancient bickerings," reminding the audience of their antagonism in *Part One*. The knockabout between Gloucester and Winchester brings to mind similar moments in the English Mystery Cycles. Gloucester's prompt revealing of the fake miracle-monger later on is of the same order, solid native wit seeing through wicked imposture to comic effect. York remained on stage to give a powerful soliloquy with lines of greater poetic resonance than in *Part One*:

Then will I raise aloft the milk-white rose,
With whose sweet smell the air shall be perfum'd (1.1.253-4).

Gloucester comes to represent the integrity of England increasingly under attack. In 1.2 we discover that his wife, Eleanor (Deirdra Morris), mirroring York who closed 1.1 with a soliloquy on ambition, has become likewise infected, and is a proto-Lady Macbeth. She says to Gloucester: "Put forth thy hand, reach at the glorious gold"

(1.2.11). The destruction of Eleanor generates greater emotional depth in the play than was met with in *Part One*, with Gloucester showing a tender solicitousness towards her, "Nay, be not angry ; I am pleased again," and in the tragic scene when Gloucester observes his wife's humiliation. Here, Gloucester shows aspects to character not yet glimpsed, which Cordery handled with a grieving dignity (2.4). His final comment to Eleanor was movingly stated: "Witness my tears, I cannot stay to speak" (2.4.86). Gloucester's last words are prophetic of Henry's death: he says that the court has become a den of wolves "gnarling who shall gnaw" King Henry first. Left onstage, York, Suffolk and Margaret plan Gloucester's murder, and as they do so, news of rebellion in Ireland arrives, which will be the occasion that York, supplied with an army to quash the rebellion, will use to offer battle to Lancaster. Gloucester's murder, which happens offstage, ushers in the Civil War. Gloucester thereafter returns as an accusing ghost. He was present at the death of Cardinal Beaufort (Winchester), winching his yelling figure upwards off the stage to the flies—a rather spectacular moment, the cardinal being lifted up, rather than thrust down, into Hell.

Oyelowo in *Part Two* further developed his interpretation of Henry. The boyish enthusiasm of the first scene gave way to an increasing emphasis on saintliness, but with some degree of unevenness. There were times when too much vehemence blurred the shape of the character. His giving way on the arrest of Gloucester came across as weakness and irresolution. On hearing the news of Gloucester's murder Oyelowo fainted astonishingly well, leading to one of the best visual moments in the performance, when the crown, fallen from his head, rolled in an arc away from his prostrate figure, encapsulating the whole play. Occasionally there was an error, with Oyelowo raising his arms above his head in an inappropriate evangelical gesture, when mourning the death of Gloucester (3.2.136). Oyelowo, by being granted the role of Henry, was of course joining a distinguished tradition at the RSC: David Warner was highly acclaimed in Peter Hall's *Wars of the Roses* (1963-4); Alan Howard was very successful in Terry Hands' production some ten years later (1977-8); Ralph Fiennes played Henry with success for Adrian Noble (1988). I had the impression through this performance, however, that there was some degree of self-effacement, something that a performer like Howard or Fiennes would not do. Henry is of course self-effacing, but with such strong cast members, in particular Dillane's Suffolk, or Bell's Margaret, or Wood's York, the holy foolishness, the meekness and otherworldliness needed to be

accentuated more strongly, or the part would simply lack interest. The only way to do this is through voice—for the actor to use voice to sculpt a pious, otherworldly figure, unable to see evil when it stands before him. Perhaps something should be taken from Richard II, a later reworking of the role.

Bell's Margaret built on her short appearance in *Part One*, and stood astride *Part Two*, from the first scene (where she still appeared rather young) through to the death of Suffolk (by which time she had aged considerably). Bell's characterization was very forceful. The incident when she insults Eleanor Cobham, Gloucester's wife, was very adroitly handled, as were the sparks that flew between them. Margaret was marked unsympathetically here, a process that begins to go into reverse later in the play, during her long speech, made in reply to Henry's grief for Gloucester. Her costumes were excellent. In the early scenes she wore a plunging red dress with a red ruby on her finger, and held a fan, with which she struck Eleanor. Suffolk was also attractively costumed, with a brown robe, and brown breeches tucked into long boots. Together on the stage they made a strong conjugal statement. There was a skillful transition from Margaret kissing Suffolk (1.3.100), to the following entrance when she greets Henry with a kiss, all in one shocking fluent movement. During Eleanor's arraignment, both Henry and Margaret stood on a balcony on the first floor gallery facing the stage, both of them dressed in gold with gold crowns, a visual statement of power. During the humiliation of Eleanor she wore a dress with gold daisies picked out in needlework on a purple ground. At the time of Gloucester's fall, Margaret wore a red satin dress, visually aligning her with the actions leading to his murder. On the death of Suffolk, she changed to black. In a production which eschews scenery and extensive props, costume comes to play a much more important visual role, as it does at the Globe. It is also true that the aesthetic potential of costume, exploited effectively by Tom Piper in this series, is often a weakness in British productions.

The high point of Margaret's performance in *Part Two* is the relation of the difficulties she had in arriving on the English shore from France. The speech initially reflects badly on Margaret, showing her to be self-willed and self-pitying: "Is all thy comfort shut in Gloucester's tomb? / Why then, Dame Margaret was ne'er thy joy" (3.2.78). It is reminiscent of Malcolm's comments to Macduff, when he requires Macduff to put by his grief only minutes after hearing of the slaughter of his family. However, Margaret's speech grows in assurance as it progresses, so that by sheer

eloquence, it generates sympathy for her for the first time:

The pretty vaulting sea refus'd to drown me,
Knowing that thou wouldst have me drown'd on shore
With tears as salt as sea, through thy unkindness.
The splitting rocks cow'r'd in the sinking sands,
And would not dash me with their ragged sides,
Because thy flinty heart, more hard than they,
Might in thy palace perish Margaret. (3.2.94-100)

Margaret has of course been plotting the death of Gloucester, and has been adulterous with Suffolk for most of the play. Her upbraiding of Henry is the greatest hypocrisy. But the speech fleshes out the character's humanity. It captures something of the iron will of the young bride sailing to England to marry a man she had not met. This is heard especially in lines such as :

I stood upon the hatches in the storm ;
And when the dusky sky began to rob
My earnest-gaping sight of thy land's view,
I took a costly jewel from my neck,
A heart it was, bound in with diamonds,
And threw it towards thy land. The sea receiv'd it,
And so I wish'd thy body might my heart (3.2.103-109).

She stood on the deck of the ship, eagerly looking towards the coast of England, at the risk of being washed overboard. Shakespeare the word-painter is beginning to show what he can do, and the image of the young Margaret braving the storm from the ship's deck is one of the strongest in the play. The speech begins a process of redressal in our appraisal of her, who, from this point on, suffers blow upon blow, leaving her in R3 without lover, husband or son. Fiona Bell delivered the speech with energy and conviction, the only cavil one might have would be to ask for less forte and more largo (something one could have asked of the whole series); at the same time, however, the pace and rhythm were superb, and without this the play would have dragged.

Richard Dillane, who played Suffolk, has some comments on this speech of Margaret's which are worth quoting. He interprets the lines about standing on the hatches as an attempt to deflect suspicion from her liaison with Suffolk and her involvement in

the plot to murder Gloucester, and as an example of her calculating political intelligence: the speech is a "comically overblown declaration of how earnest her love had been, with Mills-and-Boon lines about standing on the hatches in the storm and throwing a jewel from her neck into the angry waves (and not just any jewel but quite specifically 'A heart it was, bound in with diamonds'— a detail too queasily romantic⁽⁵⁾ to be taken seriously by anyone except Henry Head-in-clouds." One must also mention the leave-taking with Suffolk (3.2), where Shakespeare's voice begins to be heard. It is another moment which succeeds in being greater than its context, the immorality of the liaison being forgotten in the strength of feeling expressed. Bell and Dillane handled this scene affectingly. Note their final shared line which ends the scene:

Suf.: Even as a splitted bark, so sunder we;

This way fall I to death.

Queen: This way for me (3.2.411).

They do not meet again, for Suffolk is murdered by the pirate Walter Whitmore, who is played by Keith Bartlett, who played Talbot—symbolic revenge is thus taken upon Suffolk for his part in losing Anjou and Maine, and for his part in the murder of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. The commons, in the shape of the pirates become instruments of revenge; Jack Cade is of the same order, and evil actions lead to further evil.

Margaret's discovery of Suffolk's head, (a gory detail lamented by J. C. Trewin in his review of Peter Hall's production), produced an astonishing sequence, with Margaret and Suffolk's decapitated head singing a love duet together, observed by Henry. This grisly and surreal moment was one of a number of such moments in the production. Supernatural elements were obviously written in by Shakespeare to add to the play's groundling appeal. Boyd deployed these to good effect, adding to them by bringing the ghosts of murdered figures on stage at key points. Eleanor's conjuring (1.4) was particularly well done, with Eleanor on the balcony backstage observing the proceedings, and Margery Jordan and the others performing a choreographed sketching of a five-pointed star upon the stage using string, at the points of which candles were placed. The spirit came up from the trap in the middle, and the scene was genuinely disquieting. As with Joan la Pucelle, Boyd was drawing on techniques used in horror films. The vividness with which such scenes were realized meant that it was easier to make sense of Eleanor's condemnation for witchcraft. This was an age that

believed that the spirit world was very close, and that it was sinful and dangerous to meddle with it.

Further spectacle was produced in the violent beating administered by Peter Thump to his master, Thomas Horner, the man who had claimed that York was rightful heir to the crown. This was savagely carried out, with the drunken Horner easily defeated. The episode prefigured the civil war itself, with society turned upside down by rival claims. The madness of resolving such claims by conflict was being emphasized here. This is clearly part of Shakespeare's purpose, for the good and true (the truest claim) does not always win, and evil has its triumphs, as is witnessed by Henry's murder, and the murder of the Princes in the Tower. Henry's response to the trial by combat was all too inadequate: "God in his justice hath reveal'd to us / The truth and justice of this poor fellow" (2.3.102-3). There seemed to be little justice in a drunken and misguided man being beaten to death for a careless statement. Henry's response to Saunder Simpcox's miracle was of a similar nature, naïve, otherworldly and all too unkingly, exposed by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, whose skepticism uncovered the truth. True kingship requires the ability to see through imposture, and to mitigate savage laws and customs.

The Jack Cade sequence was played as another example of uncivil barbarity. Two swings with red ropes were slung from the central walkway over the playing area, and Jack Cade sat on one, above the crowds: a child on a swing playing at being king. He was holding court over an assembled mob of country folk, which included the actor who had played Talbot, who stood there, like a ghost, observing what was taking place—inviting us to consider that England had lost its possessions in France and was now at war with herself. On the balcony were the ghosts of Winchester, Suffolk (a headless corpse), and a baleful Gloucester. Jack Cade was obviously an evil force unleashed by the discord at court. He was played with relish by Jake Nightingale, using a South East London accent, getting quite a few laughs. But there was no sentimentalizing the rebellion as a laudable attempt to topple an unjust system: for Shakespeare mob rule is always the worst option, and Cade exemplifies it, with his murder of the clerk, and the shocking killing of a soldier, who is held up and has his liver ripped out, which is then gnawed at by Cade. One of the rebels wore a hockey mask, another element borrowed from contemporary horror. One of the great strengths of production in the round is that the audience is gathered up into the

crowd scenes—we became unwilling participants in Cade’s rabble, just as during the battle scenes, we are placed in the middle of the action.

Finally, one must mention Clive Wood’s York, who went from strength to strength in this play. As with Margaret he is given some very good speeches, which he delivered with energy and distinction. There were moments when the level was pitched too high: I noted at the beginning that he walked back stage and kicked the wall for emphasis during one speech, a gesture that detracted from his dignity as a leader and aristocrat. 2.2 was rather well achieved, with York explaining the technical details of his lineage, laying down smooth sea-stones, one stone for each individual in the family tree. “Faster than spring-time showers comes thought on thought” (3.1.337) was a surprise for anyone who did not know the play very well. It is a powerfully written soliloquy, pointing forward to later soliloquies in the histories, and giving York a bravura set piece. The speech is slightly flawed: York describes himself as a madman, which rings rather hollow (though from an external perspective he is indeed a madman in the horrors he is unleashing); there is also a strong irony running against York, who fails to see that it is wrong to send “ten thousand souls to heaven or hell.” At the same time, and here Shakespeare shows his colours, there is something about York’s energy and ambition that we cannot completely censure, something heroic; this is the complex response that his later work will always elicit:

Now, York, or never, steel thy fearful thoughts,
And change misdoubt to resolution;
Be that thou hop’st to be, or what thou art
Resign to death; it is not worth th’enjoying. (3.1.331-334)

3 *Henry VI*

Part Three lasted for three hours and ten minutes, including a fifteen minute interval. The third part of *Henry VI* takes the sequence into new territory, with escalating violence leading to the final destruction of Henry, and the stage set for the ascendance of Richard, who ended the play with a shout of “Now!” anticipating his speech at the beginning of R3. The play presents more strongly than before a bloody vision of England, with the nation divided against itself, and neither party clearly good—the saintly Henry VI is weak and vacillates, and more obviously than before the wrong

man to be king. Boyd infused the play with an edge of horror: there was relentless carnage, with death scene leading to death scene, as Richard gradually emerges into the spotlight. The set remained a bare stage, with a large wooden structure at the back, which was used as a castle when characters had to stand on the castle ramparts.

The play is organized around the key battles of the Wars of the Roses.⁽⁶⁾ *Part Two* ended with the dispersal of Cade's rebellion and the return of Richard of York from Ireland with an army, (1450) which Shakespeare telescopes with the Yorkist victory of St. Albans (1455), in which Somerset (Edmund Beaufort), the elder Clifford and the Duke of Buckingham are killed. *Part Three* begins with the Yorkist rose ascendant, and Henry cedes to York the succession, disinheriting his own son, Edward. Historically, this was followed by further conflict, Ludlow Bridge (1459), which was a Lancastrian victory, followed by Northampton (1460), in which Henry was captured, a Yorkist victory, both of which battles are omitted by Shakespeare. Shakespeare takes us straight to Margaret's siege of Sandal Castle near Wakefield (December 1460), which resulted in the death of York (1.4) and his son, Rutland (17 years old) (1.3), whom Shakespeare portrays as a child.

The death of York is a key scene in the play, conveying the cruelty of war and also offering the audience an opportunity to revise their opinion of York, hitherto an aggressively ambitious unsympathetic character, who gains tragic stature in his death. Prior to this scene, we have Clifford's slaughter of the young Rutland, a distressing scene, and played by Geoffrey Streatfeild (who has an admirably fluent verse-line) with uncompromising ruthlessness. 40 years ago, critics were complaining about the excessive violence of Peter Hall's production, but violence is intrinsic to the play, and the barbarity of Rutland's slaughter is evidence of England's degeneration. This was followed by York's entry, clasping his head, and from all sides the sound of loud drumming increasing in volume. Four figures moved in upon him: Margaret, Clifford, Northumberland, and the young Prince Edward. Margaret was clad in a grey dress, with a high collar and square shoulders: her face appeared to be lit by demonic power. York is taunted by Margaret with the death of Rutland, and mocked with a paper crown. His final speech was given with a notable venomous energy, and the hyperbole of "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide! / How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child / To bid the father wipe his eyes withal," (misquoted by

Robert Greene in his squib on the young Shakespeare "Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde" cited in *The Riverside Shakespeare* 1835) seemed only too appropriate in the context of performance, with the audience still reeling from the horror of Rutland's death, and the four figures moving in sinisterly upon Richard. The scene was a good example of Shakespeare in performance being stronger than on the page. York is held in an isolated spotlight, and we cannot help but sympathise with him as Margaret stabbed him from behind, and Clifford from the front. This is a world from which chivalry and courtliness has vanished, replaced by savage and bloody strife.

Balancing this scene we have the central scene of the play (2.5), where Henry, sat upon a molehill, observes the battle of Towton, the most bloody encounter of the Wars of the Roses. Shakespeare has again telescoped events, moving from Mortimer's Cross, a Yorkist victory in the Welsh Marches (December 1460), where the three suns in the sky were seen (2.1), through Warwick's report of the Lancastrian victory at St. Albans (Feb 1461), to Towton (March 1461), the conclusive Yorkist victory which led to the installing of Edward as king, and Henry's imprisonment in the Tower. This should have been Oyelowo's strongest scene, and despite the many plaudits he has received, I felt that the copiousness and rhetoricity of the verse were still too much of a challenge. The lines in which he ponders becoming a shepherd lacked life: "So many hours must I tend my flock, / So many hours must I take my rest," with "So many" repeated 8 times, it is no easy task—some means of keeping the lines interesting must be found, without parodying them, for this is an important moment—the anointed king is pondering what it would be like to be an ordinary man. There is also something rather dully obsessive about the repetition, which tells us something about Henry.

However, his reaction to the scene where the son discovered he had killed his own father, and the father discovered he had killed his son, was much better achieved. This particular vignette was very effective, with the two actors swapping over, and doubling as father and son in reverse, a good comment on the indiscriminate slaughter. Oyelowo reacted to this with fulsome grief, "O piteous spectacle!" and this was powerfully sincere. In achieving this Oyelowo placed a still moment at the heart of the play, for Henry's grief at the wanton slaughter stood emblematically for grief for the whole sequence: the saintly monarch, son of a great warrior, ill-fitted to be king, but here the moral center in a way that does not happen at all often in Shakespeare's

plays. In typically Shakespearean way, it required us to rethink our evaluation of Henry, whom we were inclined to dismiss for his lack of firm resolve, but whose heart-felt sincerity here carried authority, in contrast to the worldliness of leading churchmen such as Winchester. However, we were soon reminded of his unkingly irresolution when he followed after Margaret, and the feebleness spoke volumes: "Not that I fear to stay, but love to go / whither the Queen intends" (2.5.138).

Skilful direction was evident throughout the performance. The appearance of the three suns at the beginning of Act 2 was nicely lit and blocked, with Edward and Clarence standing downstage, and Richard upstage. Use was made of white and red feathers falling from the flies during the fight scenes: it was not completely clear what these were; perhaps petals of white and red roses symbolizing lives lost? Feathers are used as a metaphor by Henry for the fickleness of common humanity: "Look, as I blow this feather from my face, / And as the air blows it to me again, / ... Such is the lightness of you common men" (3.1.84). Later, (4.6) Henry gives a white feather to Henry Richmond, symbolizing the Lancastrian cause, and prophesying that Henry Richmond would "prove our country's bliss." Richard of York's ghost stands on the balcony observing. At 2.5 Henry stood alone on stage and white feathers fell about him, followed by a charge past him by a yelling Yorkist cohort, leaving him alone on stage again, contemplating the battle. Ropes hanging from the flies were made use of in the battle scenes; together with the sound of flights of arrows, a terrifying sound—hearing the arrival of arrows meaning death. The treatment of war throughout the series was harsh and unglamorous (despite Talbot's heroism or H5's eloquence); war was a debasing, savage business, and in this the treatment was appropriate to the millennial occasion of the series. This is accurate to the text, for although Shakespeare celebrates martial prowess, he points up the human cost.

Clifford's savage slaughter of Rutland was revenged later by the three Yorkist sons killing and mutilating Clifford after mocking him. Margaret continued to be a most striking figure through *Part Three*, wearing a close-fitting black velvet dress trailing behind her on the stage, laced up the back like a bodice. The costumes continued to be notable: Lady Grey wearing a particularly impressive green satin dress. The scene with King Lewis of France (3.3), in which Warwick attempts to arrange a marriage for Edward with Bona of Savoy, was presented as a dumb show, in which Edward walked on carrying a picture frame in which he stood upstage, and after the arrival

of letters Lady Grey stepped into the picture frame with him. Warwick reacts angrily to this, and joins the Lancastrian cause, and his daughter, a match for Henry's son Edward, steps into the picture frame.

Warwick, played by the black British actor Geff Francis, reported York's death in 2.1, but lacked clarity on the words, and was obviously unpractised at blank verse. He cut a magnificent figure on stage, good-looking, broad-shouldered, strongly-built, but could not deliver accurate and fluent pentameter, and the part lost authority. This contrasted with Streatfeild's Clifford, who gained stature by virtue of the sinew and pace he gave to the lines.

The final third of the play brought Richard of Gloucester to dominance, following his first major soliloquy (3.2). The part was played by McArdle, who had been an excellent Dauphin. He was less focused as Richard, displaying an apparent unfamiliarity with pentameter, and needing to be all together more unselfconscious. He relied on turning directly to the audience with stage business, at one point (in the next play *Richard III*), casting a white rose into the front rows. What we needed was more direct address to the audience with soliloquy, delivered with more conspiratorial relish, with more enjoyment of his own malicious cleverness. His performance was at times curiously underpowered, and this carried into *Richard III*, though I differ here from many of the critics, who found much to praise.

Richard III lasted three hours and twenty five minutes, including a fifteen minute interval. I have only a few brief comments to make on this production. Richard's wooing of Anne (1.2) involved throwing her against the back wall rather roughly, at which action the audience fell very quiet. From this pitch it was then modulated down to a quieter level, and I found that the scene worked rather well, given how difficult it is to do. McArdle was perhaps strongest here. Fiona Bell as Margaret turned in an astonishing appearance in 1.3, casting down on the stage a heap of bones (her son) which she reassembled and proceeded to kiss, gibbering as she cursed. Richard recoiled from her very markedly. This was Fiona Bell's final appearance in a voyage of transformation from the young flirtatious Margaret at the end of *Part One*.

McArdle did, however, look the part, saturnine, debonair, devilish. He was an athletic Richard, with only a slight crooked back—he was remarkably good in the fight scenes. Like Oyelowo, this is a young actor that the RSC is bringing forward quickly. With a better ear for the verse line that stills the audience (rather than relying on

business), both these two actors promise much. Their final scene together at the end of *Part Three* was well-achieved, visually very effective, with Richard circling Henry like a wild beast, stabbing him, reeling back when Henry says "Pardon thee," and stabbing him again. Henry's white-robed body, prone on the stage, heavily stained with blood, burned on the retina. There was a good touch at the end of H6, when Richard of Gloucester cradled Edward's son and heir, and made bow-wowling noises, shaking his head from side to side, suggesting a snarling dog worrying a bone. This got a laugh from the audience, recognizing Richard's true nature. In R3, of course, this was the boy he would murder. McArdle attempted to infuse the part with comedy, but too often it faltered for lack of confidence—he seemed more at home with the Dauphin than with Richard.

Critical Response

Critical response to the productions was generally very good. Oyelowo was singled out for praise, the 'This England' cycle as a whole was found to be coherent, despite the different styles adopted by the four directors (Steven Pimlott, Michael Attenborough, Edward Hall and Michael Boyd), and it was generally acknowledged that the Histories are a genre at which the RSC excels. Viewing the productions myself much later than the newspapers, I found that some of the weaknesses highlighted early on had disappeared.

There was extensive media discussion of the fact that David Oyelowo (24) was the first black Henry VI (see Hugh Quarshie above). Visitors from overseas often question how a black British man can be cast as a white medieval king. The reason for this is social rather than artistic. Since the RSC receives large amounts of public money, it has a responsibility to speak to all communities in Britain. There is still under-representation of ethnic minorities in RSC audiences, and one way of making the theatre more accessible is to give prominent roles to talented actors from ethnic backgrounds. This means that an audience member from an ethnic background will not be confronted by an array of white faces, reinforcing the impression that Shakespeare is theatre for the majority population. In addition, since the inception of cinema, or on the stage in London over the last 50 years, black actors have rarely been given such parts, so that the RSC, by casting Oyelowo in this way, contributes to a

sense of social change. Oyelowo himself commented on this: "It was shocking to me the way the press went mad The first thing I thought when I got the part was 'What a great part', as opposed to 'Gosh, I am black'. But then I rang my father who, when he first came to this country 40 years ago, was spat on and things. His reaction was just phenomenal, and that was when I first thought this might be a big deal. He was, like [in a rich Nigerian accent] 'Oh! This is a revolution. I cannot believe it. My boy?!' My father doesn't know anything about acting. If I say the RSC or the National it doesn't mean anything. But King of England he can understand" (Anna Murphy, DT 14 December 2000). Furthermore, because of the high visibility of the RSC, and the contact it has with a great number of schools, Oyelowo offers to school-children from ethnic backgrounds a charismatic role model.

"Colour-blind" is the term often used for such casting, meaning that skin-colour is to be considered irrelevant to the production. It is an ideal notion which does not really work, since one cannot entirely divorce social reality from artistic representation. This was seen in the recent colour-blind RSC *Tempest* (James Macdonald 2001), with a black Miranda (Nikki Amukka-Bird) and white Prospero (Philip Voss), with a black Ariel (Gilz Terera) and a white Caliban (Zubin Varla)—the casting choices inevitably invited us to ponder how they relate to colonial readings of the play; in the case of Ariel and Caliban, turning them upside down (an artistic choice of some interest). Peter Brook's *Hamlet* (2001), on the other hand, with Adrian Lester as Hamlet, was more truly colour-blind. The cast came from half a dozen ethnic backgrounds, and this meant that the fact that Lester is black became less meaningful. This production of H6 was stated to be colour-blind, with Oyelowo's son being white, and although the audience is quite capable of deeming ethnicity to have no relevance (for it is our imaginations that work with Shakespeare to create the play), in practice it cannot be, a point made by Stuart Hampton-Reeves at the 2001 Scaena conference,⁽⁷⁾ Cambridge. We could see this happening with Oyelowo as mentioned above, simply in the way that the director exploited Oyelowo's glossy dark complexion, clothing him in a long cream dhoti up to the chin, with a crown of gold round his closely cropped black hair: creating an unforgettable image of kingship. In a similar way, Fiona Bell's fox-red hair picked up the red and gold in the dress she wore for her scenes with Suffolk in 2H6. This aspect to design, in which skin and hair-colour play an aesthetic role, must also be considered. The danger for the designer is that there are

stereotypical responses in the majority culture: red hair signals "danger", and black a range of negative qualities. The designer has also to consider these stereotypes as well. One of Oyelowo's greatest successes was that he showed how stereotype can wither away.

Oyelowo received almost unanimous praise. Benedict Nightingale of *The Times* wrote: "Oyelowo's fine, gentle Henry is alone in his love of peace and even lonelier in the quiet wisdom he acquires as the evening progresses. It's as if the Dalai Lama were not just caught in a cannibal orgy but married to the hungriest eater" (*Times* 15 December 2000). Alastair Macaulay of the FT wrote: "The Henry VI of David Oyelowo is not the weak part-lunatic of history, but a figure of moral vehemence and rare conscience, the most sincerely religious person in all these plays, tragically disregarded by all the political machinators about him" (FT 3 January 2001). Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, likewise: "Much has been made of the casting of David Oyelowo in the role, the first black actor to play a Shakespearean king at Stratford. Far more important is the moral strength Oyelowo brings to the part. His king may be militarily weak and politically fallible but he has the inner certainty of the believer; and when he rounds on his wife for defending her lover — 'Ungentle Queen to call him gentle Suffolk' — it is with fearsome wrath. In the midst of the carnage, Oyelowo exudes a specific gravity" (*Guardian* 16 December 2000). Other critics struck the same kind of note. One dissentient voice was that of Nicholas de Jongh, in *ThisisLondon*, the online supplement to *The Evening Standard*: "David Oyelowo, the first black Shakespearean king, makes stage history quietly. He looks possessed by anxious meekness, even if he sounds aggressive, and his performance is a triumph of long-distance assurance. But his despair and sadness seem rather glibly put on" (*ThisisLondon* 14 December 2000).

There was also praise for the other characters, principally Fiona Bell (31), familiar from a wide range of TV and film work (mother of Ewan McGregor's girlfriend in *Trainspotting*; roles in *EastEnders* and *Soldier, Soldier*). Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* wrote: "Fiona Bell announces herself as a thrilling new talent as a forthright Joan of Arc and as a terrifyingly cruel and sexy Queen Margaret" (DT 15 December 2000). Michael Billington wrote: "Fiona Bell, significantly doubling as Joan la Pucelle and Margaret of Anjou, moves from trull to termagant with crop-haired, iron-souled determination" (*Guardian* 16 December 2000). Nicholas de Jongh was again critical, in

what seems a wrong-headed review: "When Fiona Bell's Margaret dabs York with the blood of his assassinated son or sees her own son murdered before her eyes, she should harrow and horrify. Miss Bell manages snivels where howls and exultation are required" (*ThisisLondon* 14 December 2000). It could be that changes and improvements occurred as the production matured. Kate Basset, in the *Independent on Sunday*, saw a falling off of intensity: "Fiona Bell makes a riveting Joan of Arc, half righteous maid and half devil. But reincarnated as Henry's bride, Margaret, she becomes a wearing harridan" (IOS 17 Dec 2000). This was simply not the case when I saw the production. Comments on other characters include: Michael Coveney, in *The Daily Mail*, who wrote about Clive Wood, who, "as a fleshy, sardonic York has never been better" (DM 15 December 2000: 55). Nicholas de Jongh describes him as "playing York as a cool, quiet calculating machine" (*ThisisLondon* 14 December 2000); Billington, "Clive Wood's Duke of York watches over the action like a still, animalistic predator." Billington describes Richard Cordery, as "plumply complacent as the Lancastrian Gloucester who is Henry's protector, [he] suggests an apple tree waiting to be axed" (*Guardian* 16 December 2000); John Gross appraises him in *The Sunday Telegraph*, saying that his performance as a "weighty Lord Protector" stands out (ST 29 April 2001 Review 8). Some mention was made of Keith Bartlett's Talbot, but little comment on Richard Dillane's Suffolk or Geoffrey Streatfeild's Young Clifford, even though both these two young actors showed great promise. Billington comments on Talbot: "From myriad moments, the one that lingers is when the militant Talbot, having compared his son to Icarus, sees his offspring's lifeless body winched tragically skywards" (*Guardian* 27 April 2001).

Alastair Macaulay made some acute comments on the father / son theme that Michael Attenborough had accentuated earlier in the series in H4. He noted the tetralogy's most heartrending scene to be that when "the son... finds he has killed his father in battle, and the father... finds he has killed his son. The mourning father becomes the mourned parent, the mourned child becomes the mourner, and in their pendulum-like alternation this parricide and filicide become a tragic image." I will quote Macaulay at some length:

The father / son pair keep returning, scarcely changing guise from role to role, until they bring *Richard III* to its harmonious conclusion: Bartlett, [formerly Talbot] playing the new king's rejoicing stepfather Derby; Troughton, [Talbot's son] as

Henry VII, bringing to a close the Wars of the Roses in which, as he says, "The father rashly slaughtered his own son, / The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire."... Having already compared himself to the Cretan inventor Daedalus, Talbot now hails his son: "My Icarus, my blossom"... [1H6 4.7.54] Yet Shakespeare takes up the Daedalus / Icarus motif and—as I had never realised until now—recycles it. Two whole plays later, Henry VI, divining that his visitor Richard has just killed his son Edward (and that he too is about to die), suddenly says; "I, Daedalus; my poor boy, Icarus" [3H6 5.6.11] and keeps on pinning home the comparison for four further lines. At such moments the young Shakespeare stabs you right through, and reveals vast patterns within the most personal moments (FT 4 May 2001).

The relevance of the Daedalus / Icarus metaphor is not immediately apparent. When Talbot uses it about his own son, the metaphor would seem to suggest that his son flies in pursuit of honour regardless of personal danger (i.e. perilously close to the sun), and so perishes. The metaphor points up the poignancy, emphasizing paternal grief, an issue close to the moral core of the Histories. The friction between Hal and his father derives from the fact that Hal is not an Icarus; and his foil, Hotspur, obviously is. In *Macbeth* we have Siward's comments on his young son: "Had he his hurts before?" (5.9.12) Fathers are concerned that sons will uphold family honour. Hal goes on to transcend the Icarian motif by achieving honour in France after his father's death, though, like Icarus, he dies very young. After his death, under the pressure of internal disunity and conflict in *Henry VI*, the proper pursuit of masculine honour goes all wrong, leading to the barbarous slaughter of infants, and reaching its nadir in *Richard III*. Macaulay is right to find the central scene to be the one in which parricide and filicide occurs.

Aidan McArdle (30) played Richard of Gloucester, and other smaller parts, before taking the lead in *Richard III*, the youngest actor at the RSC to do so. My assessment of McArdle differed from the majority of the critics, who found much to praise in his performance. Here is Macaulay again, on Aidan McArdle in *Henry VI*: "part of the excitement is to watch most of the actors playing several parts. Nobody does so with more engaging skill than Aidan McArdle (the impish young Irish actor who in 1998-99 made so bright an impression with the RSC as Puck and as Roderigo) as the French Dauphin Charles, as the Satanist John Hume, as the rebel Bevis, and as Richard of Gloucester" (FT 3 January 2001). Susannah Clapp, in *The Observer*, described

his “dainty malice and opportunism” (*Observer* 17 December 2000). Charles Spencer, in *The Daily Telegraph*, was impressed: “In the earlier *Henry VI* plays, Aidan McArdle had already announced himself as an outstanding Richard—funny, quick-witted, and with a horrible sexual delight in slaughter. With his deformed body trussed up in belts and buckles, hair that somehow contrives to be at once curly and lank, and a sallow, deeply unhealthy complexion, he captures the disturbing paradox of this role” (DT 27 April 2001). John Gross has qualified praise: “Hazlitt described Richard as royal and haughty as well as treacherous, ‘confident in his strength as well as his cunning.’ McArdle gives us the sinister clown and the sly intriguer, but there is a dimension missing—a dimension at once diabolical and commanding” (ST 29 April 2001 Review 8). *The Guardian* carried an interview with McArdle, who explained how he conceptualised the role: Richard “has made a kind of Faustian pact and, to a certain extent, he is getting his own back and shaking his fist at the world. It is a decision Richard takes to be evil and to do as much damage as possible. He hides behind the idea of retribution” (Vanessa Thorpe, *Guardian* 8 April 2001).

Spencer’s review of R3, including a summation of the “This England” series as a whole, saluted the RSC “for the ambition—and the formidable achievement—of its English history cycle” (DT 27 April 2001). Billington also provided a brief overview of the H6 series, commenting that Boyd’s use of ghosts on stage (a technique used in last season’s *Romeo and Juliet*) had the effect of reminding us how past history, and in particular the blood spilt, informs the present in the world of the Histories. Billington commented on McArdle: “What McArdle offers is a puckish, bustling, cerebral Richard who plots his route to the throne like a conscienceless chessmaster methodically eliminating the obstructive pieces. Boyd and McArdle don’t exculpate Richard; what they make clear is that he is an outsider (‘misshapen Dick’) whose deformity has been a lifelong source of mockery and who has grown up in a corrupt ethos of insatiate crown-hunger. One touch brilliantly shows this. Clive Wood’s Duke of York earlier illustrates his claim to kingship with the aid of a bag of stones; McArdle’s Richard pathetically produces the self-same stones at the very moment he is to lose both power and life” (*Guardian* 27 April 2001).

Other commentary highlighted Cordery’s Buckingham. Kate Basset was impressed: “many are strong, including Elaine Pyke’s initially steely, later devastated Elizabeth. What McArdle sometimes misses is Richard’s wicked comic timing. He’s outshone by

Richard Cordery's hilariously conniving Buckingham on that score. Nevertheless, McArdle's almost dwarfish, satanically swarthy Richard can be a frightening, damaged little devil, veering between urbane irony and furious raging" (IOS 29 April 2001). Susannah Clapp comments: "Aidan 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. It's Richard Cordery as Buckingham, the spurned spin doctor, who supplies the chilling element. Bulky but dainty, he looms over McArdle, breathing an emollient nastiness—all perfunctory smiles and prelate-like sanctimoniousness" (*Observer* 29 April 2001).

At the time of writing there was extensive discussion of the future role of the RSC. The company intends to abandon the Barbican from October 2001, and transfer straight to the West End theatres. A further change under discussion is that the current year-long repertory company (working sometimes on a number of productions) will become a company assembled for each individual show. In an interview with Michael Billington in June 2001, Adrian Noble talked about such plans (*Guardian* 4 June 2001). The chief innovation would be to reduce the current 18 month actors' contract to a shorter 6 month contract. This would mean that there would be a greater turnover of actors, and greater flexibility for actors involved. It would make it easier to employ star performers from the US and elsewhere (who could be available for shorter runs) but it might also mean that the immensely valuable experience of working with Shakespeare over an extended period, and the polish that this gives, might be lost. The quality of ensemble acting might therefore suffer.

The RSC, of course, is waging a constant battle with expense versus artistic and aesthetic quality. For the second half of the "This England" series, the RSC could not meet the total cost, and sponsorship was provided through an important new joint-venture with the University of Michigan. The RSC transferred the whole production to the splendid facilities in Ann Arbor (The Power Centre, 1,200 seat theatre), gave performances, and took part in 75 workshops, seminars and public lectures. There may be repeat residencies in 2003 and 2005. RSC actors are thus now being asked to be more articulate about their craft, and to be able to communicate with young students. This was also to be seen in Japan with James Macdonald's RSC production of *The Tempest* (2001) in Tokyo and Osaka, which was accompanied by a great number of workshops. It is to be hoped that this educational outreach will continue.

Audiences need to be familiarized with the beauty and complexity of blank verse and dramatic form.

In June 2001, Noble was talking about reviving the "This England" cycle again. This would be very welcome indeed, particularly for the H6 plays. When we turn to *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* or *Lear*, after the savage world of civil war and blind ambition that characterizes these three plays, we are better able to appreciate what has gone wrong in the great tragedies: *Lear*'s division of the kingdom, easily mistaken by a modern audience as an act of generous abdication, is an act of lunacy—inviting civil war; *Macbeth*'s stepping onto the path of illegal sovereignty requires an unending bloody disposal of dangerous persons; *Claudius*'s granting passage to a foreign army through his territory is a foolish strategic error; and *Hamlet*, with better motive than any Richard or Henry, is unable to kill the king, and we learn from the *Histories* that what stifles action is the very thing that makes him so humane—his thought, his conscience—what makes him so different from eloquent Harry V.

The RSC is to be praised for carrying through the millennial "This England" cycle to completion. The lesson that Shakespeare leaves us with is a good one with which to close the last century, and inaugurate the next: the lesson that selfish, ruthless ambition leads only to greater misery for all. In very many ways, not least in the way we treat the world itself, this is still perfectly true.

Works Cited

McKerrow, R. B. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*. Reprint of 1904-1910. Ed. F. P. Wilson. 5 vols. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966.

Newspaper Abbreviations

DT Daily Telegraph
DM Daily Mail
FT Financial Times
IOS Independent on Sunday
ST Sunday Telegraph

Cast List

Directed : Michael Boyd

Designed : Tom Piper

Lighting Designed : Heather Carson

Music : James Jones

Assoc. Director : Sarah Esdaile

Movement Director : Liz Ranken

Fights : Terry King

Rope Work : Gavin Marshall

Sound : Andrea J. Cox

Music Director : James Jones

Assist. Director : Fiona Walton

Dialect Work : Neil Swain

Company Voice Work : Lyn Darnley, Andrew Wade, Cicely Berry

Prod. Managers : Stuart Gibbons, Jasper Gilbert, Peter Griffin

Costume Supervisors : Howard Raynor and Christopher Porter

Aerial Consultant : Deborah Pope

Stage Managers : Jondon, Suzi Blakey

Dep. Stage Manager : Suzi Blakey, Thea Jones

Assist. Stage Managers : Richard Clayton, Thea Jones

Musicians

Clarinet / Saxophone / Percussion : Edward Watson

Percussion : James Jones

Percussion : Kevin Waterman, Tony McVey

Cast *Henry VI* and *Richard III*

Nicolas Asbury : Somerset (H6), Vaughan (R3)

Keith Bartlett : Talbot / Father who killed his son / Stanley (H6), Stanley (R3)

Robert Barton : Gargrave / William Stafford / Northumberland (H6), Grey (R3)

David Beames : Bedford / Buckingham / Hastings (H6), Hastings (R3)

Tom Beard : Alençon / Holland / Edward (H6), Edward IV (R3)

Fiona Bell : Joan la Pucelle / Queen Margaret (H6), Queen Margaret (R3)
 Philip Brook : Burgundy / Humphrey Stafford / Simpcox / Montague (H6), Mayor of London (R3)
 Edward Clayton : Keeper / Dick the Butcher (H6), Keeper (R3)
 Richard Cordery : Duke of Gloucester / King Louis (H6), Buckingham (R3)
 Sarah D'Arcy : Fiend / Simpcox's Wife / Lady Bona (H6), Dorset (R3)
 Richard Dillane : Suffolk / Rivers (H6), Rivers (R3)
 Christopher Ettridge : Winchester / Norfolk / Watch (H6), Christopher Urswick (R3)
 Geff Francis : Earl of Warwick (H6), Ghost of Warwick (R3)
 John Kane : Exeter / Clifford / John Stanley (H6), Bishop of Ely (R3)
 Andrew Lewis : Alexander Eden / Oxford (H6, Stratford)
 Neil Madden : Keeper's Assistant / Michael / Prince Edward (H6), Keeper's Assistant, Ghost of Prince Edward (R3)
 Edward Marsden : Understudy (H6, R3)
 Gavin Marshall : Mayor's Officer / Horner / Westmoreland (H6), Ratcliffe (R3)
 Aidan McArdle : Dauphin / Bevis / Richard (H6), Richard (R3)
 Aislin McGuckin : Countess of Auvergne / Margery Jourdain / Rutland (H6), Lady Anne (R3)
 Deirdra Morris : Duchess of Gloucester (H6), Duchess of York (R3)
 Jake Nightingale : Bastard of Orleans / Jack Cade / Montgomery (H6), Tyrrel (R3)
 Owen Oakeshott : Alexander Eden / Oxford (H6, London), Oxford (R3)
 David Oyelowo : King Henry VI (H6), Ghost of Henry VI (R3)
 Elaine Pyke : Fiend / Lady Elizabeth Grey (H6), Queen Elizabeth (R3)
 Rhashan Stone : Reignier / Weaver / Clarence (H6), Clarence (R3)
 Geoffrey Streatfeild : Vernon / Young Clifford (H6), Lovell (R3)
 Sam Troughton : John Talbot / Son who killed his father / Richmond (H6), Richmond (R3)
 James Tucker : Sir William Lucy / Peter / Rutland's Tutor (H6), Catesby (R3)
 Jerome Willis : Mortimer / Salisbury / Lord Say / Exeter (H6), Archbishop of York (R3)
 Clive Wood : York (H6), Ghost of York (R3)

Children in *Richard III*

George Clark / Danny Earles : Edward, Prince of Wales

Rupert Carter / Charlie Samuda : Duke of York

Oliver Gallant / Ross McDermott : Son of Clarence

Georgia Greene / Lily Milton : Daughter of Clarence

- (1) All references to Shakespeare's text are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1972). Newspaper articles were accessed through respective websites, which do not give page numbers. The *Financial Times* website <www.ft.com> has an excellent newspaper archive search facility.
- (2) Edward Burns, ed., *1 Henry VI* Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomas Learning, 2000) 319. Burns' edition has a useful account of theatre and film productions.
- (3) Hugh Quarshie, *The Guardian* (20 Sept 2000).
- (4) The souvenir programme has some good photographs of the costumes for the "This England" series.
- (5) Private communication.
- (6) I have made use of Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings: History Chronicle, and Drama*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- (7) "The Nation and its Double: White Mythologies and National Mourning in RSC's latest *Henry VI*," Stuart Hampton-Reeves (Department of Cultural Studies, University of Central Lancashire), conference paper at Scaena Conference, St. John's, Cambridge, 9-11 August 2001.