

Hooray for Henry

Michael Billington at Stratford

IHEDGED my bets when Adrian Noble's production of Henry IV Part One opened the new Stratford season. Now Part Two has joined the repertory and, after seeing both plays in a single day, I am prepared to leap off the fence: this has matured into a magnificently rich achievement and marks a radical new approach to the staging of Shakespeare's Histories.

Mr Noble and his designer, Bob Crowley, have adapted a style that is increasingly common in

the opera house: a rejection of realistic clutter in favour of a spare, lean neo-Expressionism. In Part One this takes the form of a stark visual contrast between the grey court and the scarlet stew of Eastcheap. In Part Two, a very different play, the implication is that all England is afflicted by a creeping, melancholy sickness.

This sense of national decay is here caught in two arresting images. At the end of the Eastcheap tavern scene, with its talk of mortality, the sleepless, unshaven King Henry wanders into the action, instantly linking the high life with the low. And later, on his expiry, the King is borne

out through Shallow's Gloucestershire orchard filled with white-masked bee-keepers who resemble death's-heads. If Part One is about contrasting worlds, Part Two reminds us that England is unified by the spectacle of national decline.

But Noble's strength is that he combines visual stylisation with psychological realism. Back in April I found Michael Maloney's Hal a rather shadowy figure but he has now grown into a watchful princeling desperate to pierce his father's emotional defences. In Part One he addresses his father like a nervous schoolboy with hands behind his back. But the great moment of revelation

comes in Part Two when he begins to understand the cost of kingship: Mr Maloney apostrophises the crown as if it were an enemy "that had before my face murdered my father" uttering the last words with a heart-wrenching, accusatory cry.

Mr Noble, in fact, makes you realise that the two plays might be sub-titled, after Turgenev, Fathers And Sons. If Hal is a son desperately seeking a father, Falstaff, in Robert Stephens's breathtaking performance, becomes a man in search of a filial substitute. He grows superbly from the guleful charmer of Part One into a much more vicious, predatory figure in Part Two: Stephens unsentimentally becomes the sharp-toothed "old pike" prepared to snap at and devour his former crony, Shallow. But when Stephens

momentarily breaks down on "If I had a thousand sons", you realise the old knight is forever haunted by his childlessness.

Julian Glover's Henry is the third side of this complex emotional triangle and again there is a sense of long-range character development. Seeing both plays, you realise that the austere Gordonstoun headmaster-figure of Part One conceals a man reeked by paternal and monarchical guilt: Mr Glover makes it blindingly clear that his deathbed anger at the prospect of a future England "sick with civil blows" stems from the realisation that he is the ultimate cause. He precisely embodies Auden's point that "the body politic of England catches an infection from its family physician."

Not everything in Part Two is perfect. The eruption of Pistol

into the tavern becomes an excuse for some protracted Key-stone Coppery. But there is a sense of a complete world on stage and of a company that bats all the way down. David Bradley's Shallow wonderfully combines physical frailty with the finicky precision of a bossy local magistrate. Philip Voss's Lord Chief Justice is not the usual stiff-backed prune but a man who treats Falstaff with the right amused condescension. And Joanne Pearce's Doll Tearsheet is a part of unusual vigour.

It is, incredibly, 16 years since we saw these twin peaks of Shakespeare's genius on the main Stratford stage. In Mr Noble's fine production they become a deeply moving study of the inter-action between the demanding claims of kingship and the indissoluble ties of kinship.

Billington On Part Two

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