



Julian Glover: like some stern, unforgiving Old Testament patriarch . . . a marvellous portrait of a frosty spirit incapable of warmth PHOTOGRAPH: DOUGLAS JEFFERY

A stark choice

Michael Billington at Stratford on Avon

THESE are early days. But if one looks to Adrian Noble's Stratford production of Henry IV Part One, his first as the RSC's artistic director, for portents, one discovers a rejection of processional pageantry and a penchant for visual stylisation. This is a radically stark, emblematic production; but, although the concept has much to recommend it, it is still waiting to be fully inhabited by its actors. Mr Noble and his designer, Bob Crowley, present us with an unequivocal morality play: the story of a young prince torn between two

fathers, between a cold Heaven and a merry Hell. Henry's court is seen as a bleak, barren place filled, rather like Doctor Arnold's Rugby, with chastisement and the odour of sanctity. The Eastcheap tavern, in contrast, is a scarlet, multi-storied stew full of nooks and crannies where people rut up against the wall. We could hardly be reminded more forcibly that Shakespeare's matchless history has its roots in mediaeval drama or that Hal is poised between an angry God in Henry and a ribald Satan in Falstaff.

It is a clear, Christian reading of the play given some much-needed human complexity by its two best actors. Robert Stephens's Falstaff is a magnificently paradoxical

creation: a bloated porpoise with the strange daintiness of the truly fat, a cawing reprobate who kisses Hal as tenderly as if he were a lost son, a consummate actor who yet cannot disguise a flicker of real pain at Hal's adjectival abuse. But what makes Mr Stephens moving is that he is like some fallen Lucifer with residual memories of a better life: when he finally vouchsafes to "live cleanly as a nobleman should do" you sense a poignant hunger for lost, aristocratic values.

The other twin peak of this production is Julian Glover's king: the best since Gielgud's in Welles's Chimes At Midnight. I cannot say that Mr Glover, a massive, stone-grey figure, exactly looks "wan with care"; instead he is like some stern, unfor-

giving Old Testament patriarch who provokes rebellion by his curt dismissal of the Percys and who alienates his son by treating him as a recalcitrant hooligan. It is a marvellous portrait of a frosty spirit incapable of warmth: at one key moment Hal, having earned his father's praise, rushes impetuously towards him only to be met by Mr Glover's implacable, basilisk stare.

But although Mr Noble plausibly sees the play as a mixture of mediaeval morality and modern Bildungsroman about the education of a prince, his production lacks a compelling centre: Michael Maloney's Hal, to date, remains a curiously undefined figure who seems more like one of Barrie's Lost Boys than Shakespeare's watchful observer. And although Owen Teale makes a strapping virtile Hotspur, there is little hint of the reckless, chivalric wild animal. The only figures, Stephens

and Glover aside, to stand out are Sylvestra le Touzel's grievously neglected Lady Percy, who might be described as bra-less in Northumbria, and Philip Voss's double-dealing, suitably saucy Worcester.

Whether Mr Noble can fully encompass the variety of England's national epic will be clearer when we have seen Part Two. At the moment you sense he is struggling to redefine the RSC aesthetic by banishing historical realism. This yields one notable victory in the battle scenes where the back wall rises to reveal a line of Japanese-style percussionists and where soldiers cluster round an ascendant monarch as in a Jericault tableau. But although I welcome the move towards visual simplicity, everything will hinge on the company's ability to match Shakespeare's psychological complexity. At the moment, the Stratford jury is still out.

Billington on Henry IV Part One

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