

No burden in this crowning glory

Theatre

Kate Kellaway salutes the RSC's right royal spectacle.

ADRIAN NOBLE'S production of *Henry IV Part II* (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford) is majestic; it reigns effortlessly over brawls, sack-sodden subjects, wars, moulds whores into treason. Crowns off to the RSC — and to Bob Crowley for a handsome design that never competes with the action.

The tone of this production is set by Falstaff. What is so delightful, and so uncommon, about Robert Stephens's performance is that he does not play Falstaff as a buffoon. He is funny, but never ridiculous. Stephens has a gift for creating intimacy with his audience: his Falstaff is a big man who makes the theatre a small room. He speaks militantly, melodiously defiant, his head tracing a gentle figure-of-eight to bemuse his prosecutors. Suddenly, on almost every occasion: the man has weighty charm.

This is from the beginning, a finely imagined production. Rumour (usually a single character) is here, a vertiginous whirling crowd who breathe together like a single lung; they actually become the 'big year, swollen with some other grief'.

The scenes of political wrangling which follow are austere presented in contrast to the ebullient parties thrown for Falstaff.

A tavern rises from the bowels of the stage, like a doll's house in cross-section. It is red throughout as if the effect of scarlet women were to dye the house. Mistress Quickly (Linda Bassett) acts as if inflated by her own indignation; her grievance comes judiciously out of her like air escaping gradually from a balloon. Joanne Pearce's Doll Tearsheet moves as if her centre of gravity were impaired; she seems always on the point of losing her balance mentally and physically.

But of the Eastcheap crowd, Pistol (Albie Woodington) steals the show: he is a lunatic — really certifiable — somewhere between black knight and blue boy. His 'pizle' is his problem: he tries to rape the girls and kill the boys. Fortunately, he is incompetent. When he sleeps, it is no surprise to find he snucks his thumb.

At the beginning of Act III, Adrian Noble ingeniously recites the tavern set, so that the king's speech about sleep is addressed to those at Mistress Quickly's now slowly slumbering. It makes the 'unsexy palates' the king speaks of wonderfully immediate.

Henry IV Part II is a parade ground for old men: the sick King (Julian Glover) carries his crown like a useless tambourine, as if to emphasise that he is uncertain of his right to it. Old Justice Shallow (David Bradley) earns constant laughter though perhaps he also needs our tears. His gown is the colour of lichen, his voice has reverted to second childhood, his antique anecdotes are funny but also pathetic; he calls out his register of reminiscence against content of autumn leaves, printed on white gauze. The Archbishop (Clifford Rose) is also an old man worthy of study; he seems extraordinarily contemporary, trying to define what constitutes a just war.

But it is when age yields to youth that this production is at its strongest. The scene between the excellent Prince Hal (Michael Maione) and Henry IV is tremendous. The king, at first believing his son to have stolen his crown, tries to make of it a crown of thorns, forcing it excruciatingly on to Hal's head. But when the two are at last reconciled, it is a moment of moving absolution and grace. There is, visually, a sense that the qualities of kingship are being passed on as father and son embrace.

The production ends, gloriously, at Hal's coronation. Falstaff weeps for joy — though his career will not be crowned.

With so many theatres in dire straits, it is uplifting to visit a new performance space. John Napier's small but inviting Timber Street Studios, near the Barbican, opened with Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*. In a motel on the edge of the Mojave Desert a couple torture each other with an emotion that is at once love and hate, sparked by sexual frustration and fuelled by violence. Shepard's play is oddly served by the space. The stage resembles a long pier. This dilutes the tension as the eye can rarely take in a total picture.

As Eddie, Barry O'Rourke looks just right — a handsome cowboy with the sort of macho walk that comes close to a limp.

He gangles in Tequila, does backward somersaults and lasses bedposts with menacing comic accuracy. May (Donna King) moves with animal grace, her hair unbrushed, and flings on her red dress like a second skin. Together, these lovers remake the Wild West.

The claustrophobia is partly in not knowing what to believe. Reality is a threatening commodity; only fantasy is framed and safe, like the covered picture of Tammy Wynette on the wall. Irina Brown's controlled production brings out the predatory power of the piece: May even circles the gun that lies on the bed as if it were her prey.

Kate Kellaway on Henry Part Two

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