

British Theatre Guide

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Henry IV Part I

William Shakespeare
Peter Hall Company
Bath Theatre Royal
(2011)

Peter Hall's new production of Henry IV Part I, his first since his acclaimed *Wars of the Roses* cycle for the RSC back in the 1960s, is, in many ways, admirable. Not least of these is its eschewal of what I can only call vulgarity.

I'm thinking here of Rupert Goold's utterly benighted, Las Vegas-themed [The Merchant of Venice](#) for the RSC which has poor old Patrick Stewart marooned in a sea of excess that includes a trashy reality TV show and, God help us, innumerable turns by Launcelot Gobbo, recast here as a Elvis impersonator.

I also recall with a shudder Josie Rourke's equally trashy [Much Ado about Nothing](#) which proves, if anyone really doubted, that Catherine Tate can't act. The action here is relocated to 1980s Gibraltar, offering Rourke the chance to wallow in lashings of high-concept excess that do nothing to serve the play.

As Hamlet ruefully observes to the players, "Now this overdone though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve."

The glory of Shakespeare is the language and it is ill-served at present, by the likes of productions that opt for spectacle first and foremost, and also, it pains me to say, by the RSC where the standard of articulation in productions like Boyd's recent [Antony and Cleopatra](#), by the leads, has been utterly execrable.

Three cheers then for Sir Peter and his championing of understanding of and enunciation of Shakespearean language. A German member of the audience I was in professed herself well able to follow proceedings in *Part I*. God knows, one to the manor-born is too often unable to say the same these days.

On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that one is unlikely to leave a Hall production of Shakespeare feeling that one had experienced his work as though "illuminated by lightning" as Coleridge did having seen Edmund Kean.

And here I think the key, for me, is another remark earlier in Hamlet's address to the players, "be not too tame neither". Perversely, I suppose what I'm saying is that sometimes Hall has too much taste and that it can emasculate.

One longs for a sense of danger, a whiff of sulphur in, for example, the characterisations of Falstaff, of Hal. There is too much *bonhomie*, one positively drowns in the stuff. But that said (and many will disagree), Part I has many splendid things, foremost of which is its serving of Shakespeare's text.

Hall directs the play with supreme clarity, balancing beautifully the various elements within it, court, tavern, the camp of the rebels, and the patterning of relationships, fathers, sons. The production has pace and urgency when it needs it and has a fine cast of which Desmond Barrit, reprising the role of Falstaff which he undertook for the RSC around 10 years ago, is the jewel.

I long for a director who will encourage an actor to find more of a sliver of ice in his heart, to quote Graham Greene, but taken on its merits, Barrit's performance is superb. He is well supported by Philip Voss as Worcester, David Yelland as an especially testy king, Ben Mansfield as the splenetic Hotspur and Tom Mison as Hal who would also improve with a little froideur.

And the set - by Simon Higlett - is splendid. A penumbral, high-ceilinged, brick-walled interior that serves equally well as a castle chamber or a tavern and whose walls can be raised to admit the outside world. And Hall's decision to update proceedings to Victorian England also works surprisingly well and isn't merely a gimmick - Josie Rourke and Rupert Goold please take note.

Recommended.

Pete also reviewed [Part II](#).

Reviewer: [Pete Wood](#)