

# British Theatre Guide

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## Henry VI

William Shakespeare, adapted into two plays by Mark France and J D Atkinson  
York Shakespeare Project  
Guildhall, York  
(2007)

The York Shakespeare's Project production of *Henry VI* takes place in the city's medieval Guildhall. Given the location, director Mark France must have been tempted by period dress in keeping with the building. However, in an inspired act he thoroughly updates the play setting it in the 21st century. This allows him to draw out parallels with contemporary political themes: the Duke of Suffolk as a scheming, spin doctor and Joan of Arc as an American detainee. Both the clearly opposing costumes and sparing use of a video screen to project news flashes helped make the complexities of plot more transparent and easy to follow. This was essential with such a lengthy, and potentially confusing, storyline.

The large physical space of the Guildhall also allowed for an engaging style of acting in which the central and side aisles were used as much as the stage itself. This was particularly effective in riot/battle scenes where the audience is engulfed by the action making for intense and sometimes genuinely alarming experiences. This expanded use of space added a real sense of dynamism and suspense to the play, capturing the large scale battles whilst drawing you so completely into the intimacies of the play that you felt you were actually attending Henry VI's coronation.

Equally effective was the imposing set in which the opposing factions (England/France in the first play and York/Lancaster in the second) were symbolised by huge, painted towers. The use of these as watchtowers or turrets on which to severed heads were displayed created a sense of grandeur and power that physically articulated the play's central theme.

Given that the action spans a period of hundreds of years and involves numerous factions both in France and England, the cast is necessarily large with 27 actors playing many roles. As a whole the quality of the acting is extremely high and on a par with professional productions. When the standard is set so high it seems unfair to single out particular actors but there were outstanding performances by Robin Sanger (Gloucester and Clifford) and Andy Curry as Richard. Both actors attended to the detail in their roles resulting in a convincing and gripping realism.

The production condenses the performance from three plays to two but the cutting process managed to maintain a flowing storyline. One consequence was that King Henry matured rapidly between scenes (or sometimes within a single one) creating the occasional sense of incongruity. The two productions together come in at nearly six hours and although the action packed Part Two flew by there was still some cutting to be done. However, this represented a rare glitch in an extremely engaging performance.

Kingsley Ash's techno beats bring the battles thundering past you, while the politician's underhand scheming in the rose garden is set to light jazz as England's government begins to disintegrate. The civil war heralds texting hooligans and death to anyone who can "speak French!". Here Brian

Sharp (playing Jack Cade) comes into his own and shines as the mob leader who is drunk with power.

This production stands out as both as an incredibly well acted piece but also in its ability to make these normally challenging plays extremely accessible and relevant to the modern day audience. York Shakespeare Project are certainly succeeding in their efforts to make community theatre which debunks the myth that Shakespeare is best left behind at school or to the professionals.

**Reviewer:** [Derrol Palmer](#)