

British Theatre Guide

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Henry VIII

William Shakespeare
Bridewell
(2002)

It is tempting to attribute this wildly inventive production to its adaptor and director, Phil Willmott, rather than William Shakespeare. This modern-dress contemporary play is always fast-paced but takes tremendous liberties with both Shakespeare and history.

Neither Cranmer nor Cromwell appears, and Brandon, more commonly an almost unseen Sergeant-at-Arms, is, in this version, Jessica Brandon, a TV news reporter. Shakespeare also neglected to include a TV anchorman part for Sir Trevor McDonald. Mr Willmott makes up for this omission.

Since *Henry VIII* is so rarely performed, any version is welcome and his production is both fast-paced and thoroughly entertaining. This is the tale of the period between the accession of Catherine of Aragon and her replacement by her serving maid, Anne Boleyn, who, in her turn, disappoints the King by bearing him a baby daughter. The result is fatal for her.

During the first half of the play, Henry, who originally appears in jogging gear complete with Nike socks, is under the influence of one of Shakespeare's many wicked, conniving priests, Cardinal Wolsey. As played by James Horne, Wolsey is the kind of supreme politician who is fully conversant with every type of financial irregularity and who will always meet a bad end. His major mistake is to take on Anne. Though young, she can more than hold her own and Cara Sweeney nicely balances the pretty seductress and the schemer in her character.

She has initially had to fight her way past her predecessor, Catherine, played by Katerina Jugati. Catherine is both a noble and honourable businesswoman and Queen but, as with her successor, Henry's need for an heir proves overwhelming. Having enlisted the help of both his Cardinal and Rome, Henry manages to dispense with his first wife but not before she delivers a great, human speech. In this, she follows the example of the Duke of Buckingham who is the first political victim in this play, an excellent, cameo performance by Martin Fisher.

It is hard to convey the degree of invention that Phil Willmott brings to this production. His corny sense of humour ensures that music is often very relevant. It seems inevitable that had Henry been the possessor of a mobile phone, he would have chosen his own Greensleeves for his ring tone. Similarly, Grace Jones and Soft Cell are manipulated when pathos is required.

Rosemary Flegg's design, together with Hansjorg Schmidt's lighting and Adam Keeper's fantastic soundscape, all help to add to the exciting, contemporary atmosphere as the play flashes through a series of short scenes reminiscent of a modern day TV thriller.

Despite some studied and unnatural acting on occasion and the depiction of Henry as a surprisingly weak, unimposing man, this is a very enjoyable production and might prove a good

introduction to Shakespeare for the young. It will be intriguing to see where Mr Willmott turns his great talent next.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)