

# Early Modern Literary Studies

**Henry V, performed by the Illyria Theatre Company at Winchester Cathedral,  
June 21 2012, and on tour.**

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Directed by Oliver Gray. With James Dangerfield (Henry V, Nym), Ben Goodridge (Pistol, Dolphin, Mountjoy, Archbishop Canterbury, Queen of France), Ffion Glyn (Katherine, Fluellen, Constable of France, Bardolph), Kevin James, (Gloucester, Gower, King of France, Boy, Alice), Andrew Lindfield (Essex, Mrs Quickly, Orleans). All other roles by members of the company.

According to an article by Alice Jones in *The Independent* on July 19 2012, there was, at that moment, a ‘horde of Henrys currently cutting a swathe through theatres’:

Propeller has just brought its macho take back to Hampstead Theatre after a national tour, the Iraq war inspires a modern-day version at the Old Red Lion theatre in north London, while Theatre Delicatessen’s Falklands-flavoured promenade production has just ended a run in a former BBC building on Marylebone High Street. And last month the Michael Grandage Company announced that Jude Law has signed up to play the monarch in the West End next year.<sup>1</sup>

It is, perhaps, understandable that, in listing 2012 productions of *Henry V*, Jones should fail to mention productions at two major North American Shakespeare Festivals in Ashland, Oregon and in Stratford, Ontario, but more surprising that she should not include the jewel of a British touring production by the five-person Illyria Company.

2012 marked the twentieth season of outdoor productions by this company, and I have been pleased to see not only their Shakespearean productions, but also their adaptations

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Jones, ‘We Happy Two: Jamie Parker and Tom Hiddleston Tackle Shakespeare’s Henry V’. *The Independent* 19 July 2012. < [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/we-happy-two-jamie-parker-and-tom-hiddleston-tackle-shakespeares-henry-v-7956970.html#disqus\\_thread](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/we-happy-two-jamie-parker-and-tom-hiddleston-tackle-shakespeares-henry-v-7956970.html#disqus_thread) > [accessed 19 July 2012].

of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *Pride and Prejudice*. For their production of *Henry V*, which I saw in the grounds of Winchester Cathedral on July 21, the company erected a simple stage on which sat an inner stage with a blue velvet curtain. The curtain was never drawn, although the actors occasionally appeared above it, and, more frequently, made their entrances and exits through gaps in the curtain. At one point, one actor, Kevin James, went through the curtain in such a way that only his head remained visible, and then reappeared clad in a different costume: no doubt this production could give rise to an interesting version of *Noises Off* if seen from behind the stage. The lighting was confined to simple floods at the front of the stage.

The company consisted of four men and one woman who played all the roles and also doubled as musicians. They eschewed the obvious casting choice of having the woman play all the female roles, and instead male actors performed Mistress Quickly, the Queen of France, and Alice. The company foregrounded the artificiality (and artifice) of their production by bringing onstage the basket that contained their costumes and props and opening it in full view of the audience. Each cast member wore black leather trousers and a black t-shirt, and these were supplemented as necessary with outer garments from the basket. The actors were skilled at rapidly changing characters: it was remarkable, for example, how easily James Dangerfield slipped from the role of Henry to that of Nym, and how utterly different he became.

There was very little cutting of the text - the only scene that I noticed to have been excised completely was 5.1, the scene between Fluellen and Pistol. A brief intermission was taken after 3.6.

In addition to foregrounding theatricality via the costume basket, the production sometimes drew attention to the differences between the language of Shakespeare and contemporary English: for example 'exception' was given four syllables at times, and 'resolution' five syllables. Similarly, the couplet which ends the Prologue to Act 2 and which rhymes 'then' and 'scene' was given its original pronunciation and also, as a comic apology, its modern pronunciation. French place names became Harflew, Callis and Agin-cour, and Fluellen's Welsh tongue could not cope with the name of Pistol - he became 'Pissole' instead.

The company and its director have a fine sense of comedy, and this production incorporated a battle scene in which two actors played both armies: their caps were red on one side and blue on the other, and as they ran from one side of the stage to the other, they turned to show either the English red or the French blue (and to demand an appropriate audience response!). The 'figo's and 'fig's of 3.6 were accompanied by

expressive ‘V’ signs, as was the ‘*figo*’ in 4.1, and the tennis balls of 1.2 were still in their plastic packaging. Perhaps the most fun was had, however, in the scenes involving the French Princess. In 3.4, Alice, who spoke French with a pronounced English accent, persuaded the Princess that the English word ‘hand’ had an initial consonant close to the final ‘ch’ in ‘loch’; ‘fingers’ were ‘fungus’; and ‘gown’ ‘coun –T’. In Alice’s other scene, 5.2, her version of “the tongues of men are full of deceits” (117-18) was “de tongues of de mans is full of de-sheet”: I wonder why that joke had not been thought of earlier?

The evening on which I saw the production was one of the few dry nights in July in England, but there was evidence of performances in poorer weather in the mud that was visible on the curtain and on some of the cloaks: clearly, this is a resilient as well as an energetic and talented company. There might be a horde of *Henry Vs* in 2012, but few will approach the sheer bravura of this Illyria production.

### **Works Cited**

- Jones, Alice. ‘We Happy Two: Jamie Parker and Tom Hiddleston Tackle Shakespeare’s Henry V’. *The Independent* 19 July 2012 < [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/we-happy-two-jamie-parker-and-tom-hiddleston-tackle-shakespeares-henry-v-7956970.html#disqus\\_thread](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/we-happy-two-jamie-parker-and-tom-hiddleston-tackle-shakespeares-henry-v-7956970.html#disqus_thread) > [accessed 19 July 2012].
- Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).