

# Shakespeare Performed

## Speaking with the Dead: The RSC History Cycle, 2007–8

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Only nine years ago, the Royal Shakespeare Company greeted the millennium with *This England*, a deliberately disintegrationist version of the Shakespearean history sequence, with a number of different directors and venues. Michael Boyd's contribution to that event was the *Henry VI–Richard III* group, performed in the Other Place. In 2007 and 2008, with a cast including some of the actors from that earlier run, he (with associate director Richard Twyman, who was responsible for *2 Henry IV*) directed the entire *Richard II–Richard III* sequence in the Courtyard Theatre at Stratford, with a brief final showing at the Roundhouse in London. In the company's London season, the plays were performed in their "historical" sequence, but audiences at Stratford saw them in something like their order of composition, with *Henry V*, not *Richard III*, as the climax. With many of the cast carrying over from the 2000 staging, the basic shape and concept of the first tetralogy were still recognizable, although there were some important changes, particularly in *Richard III*. I shall focus here mainly on the second tetralogy, since this was a new production.<sup>1</sup>

The five kings that we saw—well, there are seven altogether, but no one ever remembers Edward IV or V—were framed by Jonathan Slinger's grotesque, attention-grabbing Richard II and Richard III. Between were Clive Wood as tough, efficient usurper Bolingbroke / Henry IV (and would-be usurper York); Geoffrey Streatfeild as likeable Prince Hal / Henry V (and treacherous charmer Suffolk, lover of another French queen); and Chuk Iwuji as Henry VI, who grows from child king to embittered, if saintly, loser over the course of three plays. These actors were immediately recognizable in every significant role they played and thus encouraged speculation about the motives behind the doubling. The costumes were more or less historical, except at the beginning and end of the cycle: *Richard II* and *Richard III* were populated by characters from the first and second Elizabethan ages, respectively, perhaps to suggest that

<sup>1</sup> I was unable to see *Richard III* in the theater, and the theater's in-house video of the production was (I hope temporarily) unavailable. Hence, my comments about that play are based on reviews.

the kings of these plays belonged to myth rather than history. This was one of the many patterns that the production brought into focus.

Another pattern was the role of the dead. The fact that the first tetralogy is full of darkness, black magic, and recurrent revenges (“Thy father slew my father. Therefore, die” [3 *Henry VI*, 1.3.47]) has inspired other visually striking productions, notably Adrian Noble’s *The Plantagenets* in 1988.<sup>2</sup> Boyd’s production constantly emphasized the presence of the dead, especially the revengeful dead, among the living. As in 2000, the spirit of Joan of Arc lived on in Margaret of Anjou, both characters played by Katy Stephens. The ghost of Henry V appeared briefly in part 1 of the sequence; the murdered Humphrey of Gloucester tormented the dying cardinal of Winchester; Richard duke of York, having died in Act 1 of 3 *Henry VI*, marched into York beside his victorious sons. Ghosts are, of course, called for in *Richard III* (Boyd added York and Warwick to the number and introduced them as guests at Richard’s coronation), but here they showed their power even over his fantasies. Richard dreamed himself upright and undeformed; the ghosts transformed his dream into a nightmare, reimposing his deformities with poetic justice, so that the strawberries from Ely’s garden that he had thrust into Hastings’ face became his strawberry birthmark.

The second tetralogy usually belongs to a very different world from the first—no witchcraft, no serious references to magic unless, unlike Hotspur, we believe Glendower’s boasts. But in Boyd’s reading, these plays were equally haunted. At the start of *Richard II*, the murdered duke of Gloucester—Iwuji, who had played the murdered Henry VI—lay in front of the throne; he rose and walked away while the bickering lords traded accusations about his death. Later, he became the messenger who brings bad news first to the queen and then (as Scroop) to Richard. Finally, he was the groom who visits Richard in prison. The same actor (renamed Coleville) would later take on Morton’s role as the man who tells Northumberland that Hotspur is dead. In what seemed a deliberate move away from the spiritual, he lost this supernatural aura in his final appearance as Coleville, when he was captured by Falstaff and led away to execution. The suggestion of the Keeper / Charon at this point would have been intelligible only to those who had seen the *Henry VI* plays. It was only in *Henry V* that no ghosts appeared. Henry V’s prayer for God to forget his father’s crime may have been answered, if only for the duration of this play.

In moving to the second tetralogy, Boyd obviously recognized that its more realistic, character-based writing called for a different style. Various textual changes worked to clarify the characters’ identities, as well as their language.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations of Shakespeare’s works are from David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004).

Some of the jokes in the Falstaff scenes were updated and the Chorus in *Henry V* referred not to a wooden O (Prologue, l. 13) but the railway shack where the plays were actually being given. When Worcester named the various parties in his plot—the Archbishop, Mortimer, and Douglas—each appeared on a balcony as he was mentioned. Gadshill (whose name is always puzzling) was rechristened Cuthbert Cutter (the name of the thief in *The Famous Victories*) and Lord Bardolph became Sackville, to avoid confusion with Falstaff's red-faced follower (the name suggests a pun more appropriate to the other Bardolph's drinking habit, but it was not exploited). Peto was conflated with the boy (not very young in this version) who, as usually happens nowadays, went from Eastcheap to die at Agincourt (Figure 1). Henry V addressed his brothers by the names they have in the Henry VI plays. The earls of Warwick from 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry VI* were conflated and played by the same actor, Patrick Naiambana. He was apparently Henry IV's physician as well as adviser, and later he would use his expertise to argue that the duke of Gloucester was murdered (2 *Henry VI*, 3.2.153–78).

Both the Courtyard Theatre (the prototype for the new main house in Stratford) and the Roundhouse allowed the use of a still more vertically oriented set than in 2000, with actors performing in the air on ropes and rising from under the stage via trapdoors. The use of the upper and nether regions suggested a larger world than the one the characters recognize, but not always one based on the traditional polarities of heaven and hell. In 2.2 of *Richard II*, Bagot (Forbes Masson, who also absorbed the roles of the Lord Marshal and Salisbury) descended from above on a rope, seated at a small piano on which he played during the scene between the Queen and Richard's other favorites. In the prison scene, he turned up again, in place of Sir Pierce of Exton, now wearing a white carnival mask that he removed only in order to kill the king he had once flattered. In the final scene, he scrambled onstage, dragging the coffin by a rope, eager to present it to the new king. When Henry IV repudiated him with the command that, like Cain, he should "go wander through the shades of night" (5.6.43), he apparently became a sort of Wandering Jew, since part 2 of the *Henry IV* sequence brought him scrambling on again, as if condemned forever to carry the coffin of his victim. This time, he opened the coffin and kissed the dead king's face. Richard rose and walked away (he would reappear as Henry IV's time ran out). Bagot then spoke Rumor's prologue. The same actor returned to play the Chorus (and the piano) in *Henry V*. This, to me, was the most difficult aspect of the production to interpret. Richard II calls his favorites Judases; two of them die loyal to him, but Bagot does indeed accuse Aumerle in front of Bolingbroke's court, so the accusation is perhaps relevant to him.



Figure 1: Henry V (Geoffrey Streatfeild) with the Boy (Wela Frasier). Photograph by Ellie Kurttz. Courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Like most directors, although not in the usual way, Boyd emphasized the difference in style between *Richard II* and the Henriad. Richard's court was a nightmare of artificial and meaningless ceremony, presided over not by the beautiful young man of history, but by a grotesquely painted, androgynous figure in Elizabethan costume and a curly red wig (Figure 2), who might have



*Figure 2: Jonathan Slinger as Richard II. Photograph by Ellie Kurttz. Courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company.*



said, "I am Elizabeth I, know ye not that?" He was surrounded by young followers and his first line, addressed to "Old John of Gaunt, time-honored Lancaster" (1.1.1), stressed the first word, dripping with contempt for anything the old man might have to say. The contrast between his world and that of his successor was encapsulated in the aftermath of Gaunt's death, when the soberly dressed Bolingbroke supporters fell abruptly silent as Green crossed the stage with an apologetic giggle, wine glass in one hand and a plundered painting of Gaunt's in the other. Yet, like Elizabeth I in the 1590s, Richard was only pretending to be young. He may have been avoiding mirrors for years. When he called for one in the deposition scene, he tore off his wig, revealing the bald head of an old man. The end of the scene left him in a spotlight, dust raining down on him to give him once more the white-painted face of a circus clown. Clowning had in fact been his other role. His Queen was startled by the punch line to his wish that Gaunt's physician would "help him [*slight pause; she nods*] to his grave immediately" (1.4.60). One of his funniest moments was the withering look he gave Aumerle who, after the announcement of a series of disasters, naïvely asked, "Why looks Your Grace so pale?" (3.2.75).

Bolingbroke made it clear from the start that he had no time for ceremony. He interrupted the formal question-and-answer session that was built into the tournament protocol, impatiently gestured at his followers to stop their elaborate bowing to him, and was quietly delighted when young Harry Percy turned out not to resemble his longwinded father. But the new king was unable to change his court. Although in the final scene he tried to cut across the rhyming couplets of his followers, as they rushed in enthusiastically waving the bagged heads of conspirators, their undignified flattery was no improvement on the formalized behavior of the previous reign. He too was caught up in comedy in the unwanted role of straight man: the duchess of York's bragging that she and Aumerle could "outpray" York (5.3.109) was the perfect culmination of all the play's increasingly unbelievable oaths and accusations, particularly the second throwing of gages in 4.1, which Boyd did not hesitate to make hilarious.

The two *Henry IV* plays are masterpieces of realistic theater, and Boyd reflected this fact by making minimal use of the expressionistic theatrical effects that had characterized the earlier plays. After seeing the *Henry VI* plays, I expected all battle scenes to be airborne. But Boyd used the ropes sparingly at first, suggesting that, for the most part, the characters of the second tetralogy could tread only on the ground. In the abortive duel of Mowbray and Bolingbroke, the two men were attached to saddles at the ends of ropes, on which they swung across the stage at terrifying speed before the king stopped them (Figure 3). That was the last "flight" in the play, apart from Bagot's entrance at the piano; Richard's descent on the famous "Down, down I come"



Figure 3: Rehearsal photograph of the lists at Coventry in *Richard II*. Mowbray (John Mackay, left) faces Bolingbroke (Clive Wood, right), watched by the King and the Queen (Jonathan Slinger, Hannah Barrie). Photograph by Ellie Kurttz. Courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

(3.3.178) was unspectacular. Ropes were used in *1 Henry IV* for the Gadshill robbery, although Falstaff did not attempt to swing on them and Bardolph's futile efforts to do so were so grotesquely spellbinding that the travelers made themselves easy prey to the robbers as they watched him, openmouthed. The ropes that dangled from above during the Battle of Shrewsbury were used only to tie nooses for Worcester and Vernon. The movement in this battle was horizontal. Since "The King hath many marching in his coats" (*1 Henry IV*, 5.3.25), an army of apparently identical warriors swinging their swords in unison embodied the irresistible force of the Lancastrian monarchy.

Equally unmetaphysical in nature, the "hell" beneath the stage, with multiple trapdoors, became the downstairs of the Boar's Head tavern when Falstaff and Hal performed their impromptu play. Placing stage spectators on the stairs, with only their heads poking up through the trapdoors, was a good solution to the problem of visibility when "real" spectators were sitting on three sides of the stage. The playacting continued even after it was interrupted by offstage knocking. When the Sheriff and his deputy arrived, they were confronted by a large mound that appeared to be a sleeping Falstaff, but on pulling off the blanket they were embarrassed to find the heir-apparent unabashedly fornicating with Doll Tearsheet who, like Mistress Quickly, was highly

susceptible to the aphrodisiac of power. Hal (having already impersonated Hotspur, Lady Percy, and Henry IV) thus had his turn at playing Falstaff as well. The world was a stage but the stage was not a cosmic symbol.

In the absence of Slinger, playing only the ghost of Richard II, there were no larger-than-life characters in these productions of the *Henry IV* plays. This may be why critics found both Streatfeild's Hal and David Warner's Falstaff rather dull at Stratford in 2007 (although they warmed up, or critics warmed to them, in 2008).<sup>3</sup> Both performances belonged entirely to the theater of realism, of which the rest of the production made one notice the limitations. Their scenes together (Figure 4) were played with a light touch, suggesting that they knew each other too well and that they respected each other's intelligence too much to labor their jokes. Warner's Falstaff might be genuinely weary, especially in part 2, but he also adopted the manner of someone whose history of achievement was so long that it bored even him. Where the other characters repeat the roles of others, Falstaff (Warner's only role in the sequence) repeats himself. He was aware of the fact sometimes, as when his huge comic success with a new audience—Justice Shallow—was so easy that he could take no real pleasure in it. But he appeared not to realize that it was a mistake to repeat his pose of the conquering warrior, resignedly posing with his foot on the defeated enemy ("Well, better give the photographers their moment"), first seen when he adopted it in part 1 over the body of Hotspur. It was funny the first time because we were relieved to find Falstaff alive, since he had used stage blood to make himself look like a real corpse. It was not funny the second time, when he posed over Coleville of the Dale, who was alive and wounded; besides, Falstaff was posturing for the benefit of Prince John, who had of course seen him do it before.

At the end of their last scene together, Hal accompanied his "Falstaff, good night" (2 *Henry IV*, 2.4.366) with a kiss on the forehead. Anyone who knew the play was bound to think of the gesture as a Judas kiss, parallel to Bagot's

<sup>3</sup> Early comments described Streatfeild's Hal as "milk-and-water" (Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 17 August 2007) and "almost entirely unsympathetic" (Ian Shuttleworth, *Financial Times*, 20 August 2007). Paul Taylor (*Independent*, 23 August 2007) called Warner "miscast as Falstaff . . . neither larger-than-life nor life-giving" and Streatfeild a "cold, snide Hal." Benedict Nightingale, who had judged Hal a "charmless, unstable boy" who "doesn't bring out the ebullience in Falstaff" (*Times*, 20 August 2007) declared in a later *Times* review that both performances were "much improved," as did Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* and Michael Billington in the *Guardian* (all these reviews appeared 18 April 2008). De Jongh, however, continued to find their relationship "far too perfunctory" and, while most critics praised Streatfeild's Henry V, called him "a desiccated calculating machine" (18 April 2008). These reviews are all in the invaluable *Theatre Record* 27.16–17 (2007): 955–59, and 28.8 (2008): 427–29.





Figure 4: Prince Hal (Geoffrey Streatfeild) with Falstaff (David Warner) in *1 Henry IV*, 1.2. Photograph by Ellie Kurttz. Courtesy of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

transformation from favorite into murderer.<sup>4</sup> In *Henry V*, the king would express unusual affection for a character who appears only briefly, the white-haired “old Sir Thomas Erpingham” (4.1.13), whose cloak he borrows. We could see, although Henry apparently could not, the resemblance between this bulky, bearded man and the old friend he had banished from his presence. Nor did the king seem aware that the boy he knew in London was staring straight at him when he confirmed the order for Bardolph’s execution. (We didn’t see the hanging, as in some productions, but the first half of the play ended with a view of Bardolph and Nym swaying on the ends of ropes.) Yet, by comparison with many recent versions, the negative side of Henry wasn’t heavily emphasized, and Henry and Katharine played the wooing scene as romantic comedy. Incredibly, she even laughed at his joke about wanting France to be “all mine” (5.2.175). Boyd let us see it as a happy ending if we wanted to.

This was a production that, again, made full use of the vertical dimension for spectacle. Once the campaign in France was underway, the French and English

<sup>4</sup> Another ghost from the past, quite possibly intentional: in Peter Hall and John Barton’s 1962 *Wars of the Roses*, Henry VI (David Warner) kissed Richard of Gloucester, who had just stabbed him, and Henry’s ghost kissed Richard again in the nightmare scene of *Richard III*.

occupied different spaces. The English soldiers, standing in the trapdoors, raised their heads cautiously from their foxholes to converse while cannonballs flew overhead. Meanwhile, the French twisted balletically on ropes, all fire and air like the horses they kept talking about, and then, after Agincourt, spun lifeless in the air. There was comedy in the Dauphin's helplessness when he wasn't dancing on his trapeze, but his angry departure at ground level, when his father disinherited him in favor of Henry, was the one moment that pointed forward to the future. Maybe we were being shown that the secret of England's success was that its people were solid and earthy rather than ebullient and airy. Slinger's Fluellen was left over from another age, a grotesque, larger-than-life figure who had absorbed all the eccentricities of the earlier plays into comic earnestness.

Any performance of the grand sequence of Shakespearean (or mostly Shakespearean) histories is an important event, and one likely to be read as a statement about contemporary England. Given all the emphasis on patterns, through doubling and repeated images, one could conclude that the cycle was embracing the cyclical view of history, otherwise known as *plus ça change*. There was also one glaring reference to contemporary events, when the Chorus asked, not rhetorically but seriously, how many people would turn out to see "the generals of our country" if they returned victorious from the war; this updated what would have been an equally jarring reference in the original. There was also some actor-audience contact, reminiscent of the 2000 sequence, where our uncertainty about how to react was part of the point. Characters in *Richard II* looked at the audience when they had lines about fickle favorites or citizens; Bardolph (in extra dialogue) ordered the most visible of the spectators to stand up when Falstaff entered on his recruiting mission, and it was they who became the target of Hal's comments on their pathetic appearance.

It seemed to me, however, that the influence of Boyd's background in East European theater was stronger than any political philosophy. The two kinds of theatricality we saw were not necessarily embodiments of any particular ideology. The characters played by Slinger, for example, often had the grotesque look of the clowns from a pre- or postrealistic European tradition. So did some of the other characters, like Glendower's daughter, with her shaven, tattooed head. Shallow's servant Davy opened the second half of *2 Henry IV* by trying to hang bunting for Falstaff's recruiting session in a Beckettian routine that involved a ladder and chairs. Yet a little later, he had crossed over into the realistic theater, roasting apples over a trapdoor where an electric fire provided enough heat to make real steam rise from the hissing frying pan.

There had been moments in the first tetralogy that looked forward to the second one. Many productions bring young Rutland onstage in 1.2 of 3

*Henry VI* to prepare for the scene in which Clifford kills him and for the later, significant, references to his death. Boyd showed how York, listening to the boy play the recorder, has a brief glimpse of what his life might have been like if he had not become obsessed with the crown, which, seconds later, his son Richard is urging him to win at all costs. This development of an inner life continued into Wood's next role as the more psychologically complex Bolingbroke / Henry IV. At the same time, it emphasized an obvious resemblance which was both tragic and redeeming; totally dedicated to politics and war, the two men achieved an affectionate father-son relationship only at the very ends of their lives.

Similarly, there were moments in the second tetralogy when the terrifying emotional anarchy of the first group of histories burst through the civilized surface as through a trapdoor. The elaborate ceremony of *Richard II* existed in order to suppress such emotions, but in private life Richard II had something of the same out-of-control quality as Richard III. His favorites had to restrain him when his own description of Bolinbroke's courtship of the common people worked him into hysterical anger. Mortimer, usually an innocuous young man, exploded at Hotspur over his treatment of Glendower. Even Fluellen turned out to have moments of terrifying rage—a case, perhaps, of actor-driven characterization, since Slinger was playing the part; one reviewer was reminded that he would soon be playing Richard III.<sup>5</sup> Bolingbroke's anger (unlike York's) was usually under control except in connection with his "unruly son." In part 2, however, both he and Northumberland made themselves ill with emotion. Hal, playing Henry IV in the tavern scene, frightened even himself by unleashing his father's rage on "Swearest thou, ungracious boy?" (2.4.440). The role-playing had shown him both the potential danger in himself and the possibility of controlling it through performance, as he would do in his final confrontation with Falstaff at the end of part 2. In the final play of the sequence, Henry V declares himself to be "a Christian king / Unto whose grace our passion is as subject / As is our wretches fettered in our prisons" (1.2.241–3). These wretches had included Falstaff and his company, carried off to the Fleet at the end of *2 Henry IV*. The triumphant image of the king as humanity at its highest level of rational achievement goes along with a chilling reminder of what must be suppressed for it to be so.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 April 2008.