

Coonrod staged history as a circus: for Joan's execution, Joan was represented by a paper cut-out burning in a cylinder; Henry often sat on a swing suspended in mid-air; wooden chairs were lowered from the ceiling on long red ribbons; bearded ladies attended the French King. According to Nina da Vinci Nichols, these wild theatrics represented 'the eclipse of our own historical consciousness' (Nichols 12).

However, in productions like this Shakespeare's text is usually treated irreverently, as if staging *Henry VI* in a modern theatre is itself part of the joke. Another example is Michael Khan's 1996 adaptation which cut the three plays into one fast-moving performance; in response, one reviewer wrote, 'I'm not sure a modern American audience actually wants any more of these plays than we get here' (*The Washington Post* 5 September 1996).

Viewed from the wider stage of Shakespeare's global revivals, the *Henry VI* plays remain Shakespeare's most English plays in part because they are the least appropriated by other nations. In Britain, the rediscovery of the *Henry VI* plays has seen them placed at the heart of British Shakespearean performance. Their heyday is indebted to the passing fashion for Brechtian-style epic theatre, the same fashion that the large 1970s London theatres (the Olivier, the Barbican) were designed to accommodate. Their recent history owes more to postmodern preoccupations with fragmentation, marginality and the limitations of reason. But whether they are staged as rational plays about politics or haunted plays about the terror of fractured identity, the persistence of these, Shakespeare's most Elizabethan plays, on the modern stage is remarkable. This is the story we wish to tell.

Playing *Henry VI* in the early modern period

A question that dogs the *Henry VI* plays is whether they are best approached as a trilogy or as three single plays. Their textual history offers few clues. They were first published by the printer Thomas Millington in 1594, although he printed only versions of *Part Two* and *Part Three* and with different, cumbersome titles: *The First Part of the Contention of the two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster with the Death of Good Duke Humphrey* and *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York, and the Death of Good King Henry the Sixth, with the whole contention between the houses Lancaster and York*. *Part One* was not published until 1623 (seven years after Shakespeare's death), when it was presented with its now traditional title with fuller versions of the other two parts, now renamed to construct a sequence. In recent years, textual criticism has tended to stress the differences among the three plays and there is currently a prevailing view that *Part One* was written last. Until recently, a single editor would oversee the publication of all three plays in a series (as Norman Sanders did for Penguin, Michael Hattaway for Cambridge); however, new series editors for Arden and Oxford have appointed different editors for each play. In the Oxford Complete Works it is not even possible to read the plays as a trilogy, for *Part One* comes after the other two plays, to which the original Quarto titles have been restored. But if textual critics are doing all that they can to interrupt trilogy-thinking, theatre has gone the other way. In the theatre, a mixture of artistic and logistical priorities has created a tradition of performing the plays together even if, by doing so, much has to be cut or rearranged to fit the trilogy into a more commercially viable two- or one-play show. As a way in to talking about the little we can say about the plays' first performance, maybe it is time to approach the question of their origin from a theatrical rather than a textual perspective.

Shakespeare in Performance: No Henry VI Plays
Playhouse - Leeway, Street + Carl Chalkley's letter
CHAPTER 1
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So used are we to thinking of the *Henry VI* plays as inferior examples of Shakespeare at the start of his career that we overlook just what a bold (even preposterous) enterprise it was to stage them in the early 1590s. Shakespeare's many biographers skirt over what an audacious and unprecedented project it must have been and instead linger on the plays as 'crude' works by the 'very young Shakespeare' (Bloom 43), his 'first dramatic job' (Chambers *Elizabethan Stage* vol. 2, 129–30), at best a 'laboratory' in which Shakespeare experimented with ideas he would later develop in his 'mature' works (Bloom 50). Some like the plays: Park Honan is impressed with Shakespeare's attempt to 'respond imaginatively to history's chaos' (Honan 139) and Peter Thomson thinks them masterpieces of Elizabethan epic theatre (Thomson 60); but neither asks why an untested dramatist was put to work on the most ambitious theatre work yet seen on the London stage.

To our knowledge, there was only one precedent for a *trilogy* of history plays, and this was Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius*. Legge was twice Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University and it was there in 1579, in St John's College hall, that he staged his remarkable dramatisation of the reign of Richard III over three successive evenings. Even though written in Latin, the play was well known in the 1590s: Shakespeare used it as a source for his own Richard III play (Richard's seduction of Lady Anne is based on Legge), and in 1598 Francis Meres (himself a Cambridge man) praised 'Doctor Legge' alongside Shakespeare as 'our best for tragedy' in his commonplace book *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury*. It is highly probable that in the audience for *Richardus Tertius* in 1579 was the future playwright Robert Greene, who graduated from St John's College the following year and was, like Legge, a Norwich man. Many years later he saw *Henry VI*: we know this because he quotes from it in his posthumously published *A Groatsworth of Wit*, where he calls Shakespeare a 'tiger's heart wrapp'd in a player's hide' (which is based on York's insult to Margaret in *Part Three*) and moans that Shakespeare was an 'upstart crow ... beautified in our feathers'. No doubt Greene was annoyed that Shakespeare, an uneducated actor, was having more success than he; but perhaps Greene was also remembering Legge's Latin *Richardus Tertius* and criticising Shakespeare for trying to match that achievement with a three-part *Henry VI* written in English. For, if nothing else, Shakespeare brought to the London stage something that had been available before only to an educated university audience. It is

surely more than a coincidence that Shakespeare chose as subject matter for his trilogy the events which led up to those Legge had already dramatised.

Whether or not the plays were written as a trilogy, from the beginning they have been unusually fit for adaptation. Their episodic structure can indeed be seen as a structure based on disorder and fragmentation, but this may be to put too modern a spin on them. In truth, Shakespeare was writing for a theatrical culture that demanded flexibility. The plays, like all of Shakespeare's, were performed only a few times (by our standards) to an audience that was relatively consistent and expected constant novelty. The repertory system familiar to us now did not exist then: plays were staged for one day and only revived if popular, and perhaps then on only a few occasions. Yet we know of – or rather, we can infer – at least one other kind of performance: context: that of the provincial tour.

There is no doubt that, at the very least, versions of *Part Two* and *Part Three* were toured during the mid-1590s, both probably by a company called Pembroke's Men. Some time in 1595, the company returned to London, exhausted and broke. To repair their finances, they sold their scripts to Thomas Millington, among them *The First Part of the Contention* and, in all likelihood, *Richard, Duke of York*. Although there are important differences between these plays and the ones published in Shakespeare's first Complete Works in 1623 (usually regarded as authoritative), they are clearly versions of the same plays: slimmed down perhaps, an earlier incarnation maybe, possibly texts written for the logistical realities of touring. Millington published little else in the drama area, but he made the most of his *Henry VIs*. The plays were reprinted several times over the next twenty-odd years, sometimes together to comprise a cycle.

From the plays' early printing history, account statements and contemporary allusions, we can infer one thing: the plays' texts were as malleable then, as open to adaptation, reduction and rewriting, as they have been ever since. We should bear in mind that the insistence on playing full or near-full texts of any Shakespeare play is a relatively modern one – even in the early twentieth century, it was still very common for companies to perform adaptations of many of his plays. But the *Henry VI* plays are the only ones to continue this tradition; in fact if anything, the practice has accelerated. There is no standard adaptation, no one model

that solves the plays' logistical and (arguably) artistic problems. Instead, it is up to each director to assemble a text, to decide how much rewriting needs to be done, whether to conflate the plays to two, or to one, or even to inflate the cycle by adding *Richard III* to make a tetralogy. Neither theatre nor textual history clarifies whether the plays are understood best as a series of single works, or a trilogy, or a tetralogy. What this exercise shows is that, from the beginning, the texts have been unusually mobile, their episodic structure making them peculiarly open to reinvention, more so than any other Shakespeare play. Shakespeare wrote a theatre piece, not a work of literature, and he wrote it to be flexible and portable. They are single plays, they are a trilogy, they can be a duology, part of a heptalogy, all three plays can be done as one. Companies can choose the stories they want to tell, conceal others for economy, expand parts where appropriate, and add their own verse to help the story along. The *Henry VI* plays were written to be adapted.

Adapting *Henry VI*

What's in a name? Shakespeare does not seem to have given much thought to titles: for him they were functional and descriptive, and if they weren't, they said so from the outset: as you like it, what you will, much ado about nothing. Those plays which we now know by short if unexciting titles have been abbreviated over time, which has sensibly squeezed *The History of King Lear etc.* into the much more pithy *King Lear*. *Henry VI* breaks all the rules. Early editions do not agree on their titles at all: in 1592–95, they were *Harey the vi*, *The First part of the Contention* and *The true tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*. By 1623, these same plays (albeit with extra material and some minor editorial differences) were republished as *The First Part of King Henry the Sixth*, *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth* and *The Third Part of King Henry the Sixth*. Upon their revival in the Restoration, they were billed as *The Miseries of Civil War* and *Henry VI* and then appeared intermittently, sometimes as *Hunſphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, sometimes as *Richard, Duke of York*. A brief vogue for the Folio titles took hold towards the end of the nineteenth century and survived two world wars; but with the RSC's *The Wars of the Roses*, titles became once again fair game, and since then we have had variations on the *Roses* theme: *Wars of the Roses*, *The Red Rose* and *the White*, even *Rose Rage*.

Some titles have gone in the other direction and tried to create a Saturday morning, serial film feel, perhaps in homage to the often unacknowledged pleasure of watching episodic, cliff-hanger drama: hence we've had *The Battle for the Throne*, *The Wax King*, *Age of Kings*, *The Edged Sword*, *England's Fall*. On occasion, directors have tried to revive a true Shakespearean spirit and make the title as bland and informative as possible: *The Plantagenets*, *Talbot and Joan*, *Edward IV*, *His Death*. Few plays boast such a range of names, yet each one says curiously little about the plays themselves. Of these, perhaps only the irreverent *Rose Rage* and the reactionary *The Miseries of Civil War* describe a thematic idea that is central to the performance: the rest wish only to make more attractive plays which for most of their theatrical life have been unknown to both players and their audiences. Yet, in their departure from tradition, these newly minted titles advertise a kind of ownership over the *Henry VI* plays, which are open to reinvention with each performance. In many respects the story that this book tells is one of a constant negotiation between tradition and reinvention, between the iconicity of Shakespeare and the exuberant creativity that is not only permissible with *Henry VI* but apparently demanded of it by a legacy of textual uncertainty and theatrical opportunity.

Part One starts with the traditional ending for a tragedy (a funeral march, as in *Hamlet*) and closes with the traditional ending for a comedy, a wedding. This inversion is attractive to many critics but not so to the theatre, which has only infrequently revived it as a stand-alone play despite the *dramatis personae* including, as a central figure, the one historical character likely to be recognizable to modern audiences: Joan of Arc. Joan is even something of a liability, as Shakespeare seems to leave little doubt that Joan's real power does not derive from either a Holy Spirit or self-determination, but from the devils that desert her at the end of the play. Shakespeare adds a vicious end to her story by portraying Joan attempting to evade execution by claiming that she is not a holy maid but 'with child'. So horrified was George Bernard Shaw that he wrote his own version of the Joan of Arc story, and even in the early twentieth century directors such as Robert Atkins at the Old Vic felt compelled to rewrite Joan's part to introduce more ambiguity into her portrayal. More recently, an adaptation at Ashland in 2004 called *Talbot and Joan* began with a new scene depicting the moment that Joan became infused with divine fervour. For the rest

of the production she was followed by a silent female figure dressed in blue, who was, it seemed, some sort of angel there to remind the audience that, whatever the text says, Joan is one of the good guys. A virtuous Joan is also an anaemic and theatrically dull Joan, at least in the play that Shakespeare wrote, so many directors have simply chosen to avoid this play altogether or to cherry-pick those scenes which are important to establish the key narratives of the next two plays: York and Somerset squabbling in the rose garden, Henry's weak attempt to control his feuding uncles in court, York's visit to Mortimer, Suffolk capturing Margaret on the battlefield. Adaptations often condense Talbot and Joan's story so that it has run its course by the first interval. Talbot can be a more interesting figure than Joan: his early bombard and derring-do battle scenes were a gift to Victorians and Edwardians who saw the play as nothing less than a patriotic romp. However, more recent and more sceptical productions have got a lot out of Talbot's sombre reflections on the value of heroism in his final scene which chime well with postwar sentiments about the horrors of war and post-Vietnam cynicism about the exploitation of war for political purposes.

Although often thought to be the best of the trilogy, *Part Two* is rarely seen on the stage these days. It suffers particularly in adaptations, which usually divide it at the end of Act III. The political intrigues surrounding the fall of Gloucester are made the final act of plays which are, in effect, extended versions of *Part One*, with battles conflated to make the running time shorter. The riots of Act IV and the Battle of St Albans in Act V are likewise made a prologue to an extended *Part Three*; Cade's scenes are reduced to one or two episodes and the Battle of St Albans is combined with the Battle of Tewkesbury (the first battle in *Part Three*). A typical sequence of events is that, following Cade's uprising, York immediately takes the throne, and there follows a long battle which includes the events of both St Albans and Tewkesbury, ending with York's death. Other key scenes frequently hit the cutting-room floor. Suffolk's death at the hands of pirates rarely gets staged even in full-text productions, coming as it does at an awkward place between the climactic death of Winchester and the start of the Cade scenes. Instead, Suffolk has met many different fates. Sometimes he has been ambushed by murderers at the edge of the stage or lynched by a mob of peasants. The pirate captain has been reinvented as both a swaggering naval aristocrat and the zombie of John Talbot. On occasion, the death has been cut altogether and

one's learned of it only when Margaret cradles Suffolk's head in her lap. But it is the Duke of York who steals the play, literally, and in two-part adaptations he is often more obviously the central character of the trilogy.

Part Two is also a significant play because it is arguably the only one of the histories that gives a substantial voice to the presence of ordinary people in history and their ability to mobilise themselves in sufficient numbers – Shakespeare's stage directions actually call for 'infinite numbers' – to disrupt the conventional notion of history as the story of kings and nobles. The commoners first appear as petitioners, creeping through a gap in the fences of enclosed lands, almost as if stealing themselves into the pages of history. Suffolk and Margaret tear their petitions; but one, an apprentice, presents Suffolk with a political opportunity to undermine his rivals at court. The apprentice, Peter Thump, is a comic character, as can be surmised from his name, which would not be out of place in a Peter Quince production. The whole scene is set for comedy, yet it ends in a furious murder that visibly upsets the court, who quickly exit. Thump is often one of the first scenes to be cut from adaptations, but without it, the ensuing riot is little more than an unannounced episode of black comedy. From this point in the play, the lower orders become increasingly vocal, volatile and finally violent. They throng at the doors when Gloucester is killed, they are whipped up by York's stooge, the maverick Jack Cade, and they dominate the stage for an act in a bloody carnival of misrule before being finally shackled again. Whether Cade should be played as an out-and-out monster or a revolutionary who marshals genuine grievances has differed not only from production to production but from era to era. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, a strong interest in countercultural politics cast Cade as almost a Che Guevara figure, his allegiances to York played down. In the 1980s, he was a neo-fascist, a football hooligan; in the millennium, he was a demonic comedian, an anarchist from hell.

Few companies will not be tempted to revel in and even embellish the comedy of the Cade scenes. Rarely cut is the knockabout violence of the scene in which Cade declares death to anyone who calls him Jack Cade. Just then, a messenger runs onstage calling for him, only to meet his death. Played right, the scene is funny, and of course it is funny only because, like all comedy, there is an implicit, knowing relation with the audience, as if the actor playing Cade were winking to them to say 'you know this is not real, it is

dies so early. In the eighteenth century, Edmund Kean employed John Herman Merivale to write a play called *Richard, Duke of York* based on materials culled from the *Henry VI* plays, with this scene the climax. That it should come so early tells us something about Shakespeare's conception of the play: it is episodic, its actly moments aria-like so that, though the tragedian playing York might complain about his lack of lines, he had his moment on the stage which, if played right, few in the audience would ever forget. The play is full of such arias. Warwick's change of allegiance and lonely death; Margaret's desperation after her son is murdered; Henry VI watching with horror as a soldier drags a body off the field to loot it and discovers it to be his son, and another does the same to find his father.

If the Duke of York is a short-lived character in his own play, this is possibly because Shakespeare had found another character who offered more opportunities to entertain and terrify audiences: this was Richard Gloucester, the son of York, and later Richard III. There are many for whom the *Henry VI* plays are of interest only as 'prequels' to *Richard III*; many more do not realise that the bunch-backed toad appeared in plays other than the one that bears his name. For generations of theatregoers, the last act of *Part Three* was included in *Richard III* because of its depiction of the regicidal Richard. Colly Cibber's adaptation of *Richard III*, written towards the end of the seventeenth century, decapitated *Part Three*, robbing it of its concluding Act and so making it virtually unplayable on stages where this newly minted Richard was fast becoming the dominant text. (Even recently Cibber's adaptation has haunted productions – both films starring Olivier and later Ian McKellen in the title role included materials from *Henry VI* as Cibber had done.) Colly's nephew, Theophilus Cibber, tried to rewrite *Part Three* with the final Act missing. But this attempt to create a new prequel failed and his text is unlikely to have been performed more than once. Modern productions of *Part Three* continue to feel the pull of *Richard III* – it is rare to see the last scene played without Richard starting to recite the first words of his famous soliloquy, 'Now is the winter of our discontent ...' Academics often cringe at such blatant attempts to underline to audiences what comes next. But it does at least serve to underscore the dramatic irony of the final scene, when Edward IV celebrates his 'lasting joy' (*Part Three* V.vii.46) by presenting to the court his child, whom we know will be murdered in the next play.

Richard is a devil from the old morality plays, Backbiter from *The Castle of Perseverance*, the Bad Angel from *Doctor Faustus*. He begins the play carrying the head of Somerset. He persuades his father to break his oath, arguing much like the Bad Angel. He ghoulishly mocks Clifford's body and later Warwick's, and he slaughters Henry as if the previous three plays had been little more than a childish game. Although a fierce soldier, a revenger who never lets up after news of his father's death, Richard ends the play with an extraordinary statement: 'I had no father, I am like no father' (V.vi.80). This is not the same Richard whose love for his father in Act II drives him into a seemingly suicidal battle rage. The play's final Act sees the murder of Prince Edward by York's three sons, each stabbing their prisoner. But what is, for Clarence and Edward, essentially a political act, a last step needed to secure their power base and bid 'farewell' to 'our annoy' (V.vii.45), is for Richard an intense moment of blood frenzy which can have only one sequel. Dashing off the stage, not even pausing to kill Margaret, he heads for a bloody supper in the Tower. Edward's remark, 'He's sudden if a thing comes in his head' (V.v.85), notes Richard's urgency, which goes beyond political need. In the penultimate scene, denying his father and his brothers openly to the audience, insisting 'I am myself alone' (V.vi.84), Richard rejects the basis of his father's rebellion. York appealed to history as his judge, to true lineage and past transgressions; Henry, in his defence, pointed to his ancestor's military achievements. Neither matters to Richard: his ambition is a pure desire for power which has no interest in the claims of past or present. This extraordinary character is modelled on the Marlovian overreacher, a Tamburlaine combined with Barabas. But, unlike those characters, Richard has a smack of modernity about him. For modern directors and actors, Richard is often a way to explore contemporary anxieties about a desire that is not anchored to any wider purpose. He has been a Thatcherite entrepreneur, a football hooligan, a Serbian war criminal: in each incarnation, he represents fear of excess, of unchecked ambition.

Henry VI in the Restoration

Despite their popularity in the 1590s, the *Henry VI* plays were not revived again for nearly a century when, twenty years after the Restoration of the monarchy, a playwright and eager courtier called John Crowne thought the plays' emphasis on civil war good

material for a strong social message about the dangers of insurrection and the evil of popery. In this final section of the chapter, we will look more closely at these Restoration adaptations and explore how *Henry VI*'s first adapters responded to Shakespeare's text and refashioned it for their own ends. Any student of the Restoration will know that Shakespeare's plays, which had been offstage for years because of the Interregnum and the Civil War, were frequently adapted, and even a cursory scan of the Cornmill facsimiles in a decent library will reveal a surprising range of titles for plays such as *Measure for Measure* and *Coriolanus* which had no stage lives of their own, but survived by the oxygen of new writing. *Henry VI* was no exception, but its first adaptations were surprisingly political in their response to Shakespeare's texts.

The first known performance of the *Henry VI* plays after the Restoration was in 1680, when John Crowne's adaptation of *Part Two* and *Part Three*, titled *The Miseries of Civil War*, opened at the Dorset Garden. The following year, Crowne returned with a prequel, *Henry the Sixth, the First Part*. Both productions were shaped by, and tried to intervene in, contemporaneous national politics: in particular, the political instabilities that resulted when the Papal plot and the exclusion crisis threatened to tip the nation back into civil war. John Crowne can claim to be the first adapter of the Folio texts – and indeed, he does make such a claim, both in the prologue to *The Miseries of Civil War* and in the dedicatory letter in the published edition of *Henry the Sixth, the First Part*. In the prologue, Crowne announces to his audience that 'the Divine Shakespeare did not lay one stone'. In the light of subsequent, modern debates about the authorship of the plays, Crowne's statement can easily be misinterpreted as an early example of doubts about the plays' qualities and authenticity. Here, however, Crowne's intention is to lay claim to authorship of the *adaptation* and not let Shakespeare take any of the credit for it, 'for by his [the Poet's] feeble Skill 'tis built alone'. Crowne was anxious to be seen as the principal author of the adaptation, and he had good reason. Both plays were strongly royalist and strongly anti-Catholic.

Crowne effectively shaped two different pathways for the *Henry VI* plays in the Restoration period. The story of York's rise and fall, and the subsequent rise of Richard, became a cautionary text against insurrection, while the feud between Gloucester and Winchester was refigured as a celebration of a proto-Protestant martyr. In both, Crowne sensationalised Shakespeare's language,

refashioning it as a 'rhetoric of massacre' that, like many Shakespearean adaptations from the period, invoked 'the horrors of civil war' (Wikander 341). Despite the clear reactionary strategies in these adaptorial choices, the political reception of these plays in the post-Restoration period was unexpectedly hostile. There is evidence that authorities twice tried to suppress adaptations of materials from the *Henry VI* plays. Crowne's *Henry the Sixth, the First Part* was 'stifled by command', as the author complained in his dedication to *The English Friar* (1689). A few years later, Colly Cibber's adaptation of *Richard III*, the first act of which is appropriated from the last act of *Part Three*, was performed with its first act missing, because (according to Cibber) it was feared that the weak, effeminate Henry called to mind the deposed James II.

The Miseries of Civil War preached the folly of civil war and dissension from the monarchy. Characters were altered to reinforce the point so that Edward, despite having usurped the throne himself, was horrified by Richard's 'bloody supper in the tower' but George, more worldly-wise, sermonised 'that's all a nation gets by civil war' (*Miseries* V.vii.30). Crowne's most substantial, and most remarkable, addition to the play was a scene involving soldiers who rob a 'couple of seditious rogues' (i.e. supporters of civil war) and rape their daughters. The scene was played in the same comic vein as the Simpcox scenes, except this time the punishment for civil disobedience was more extreme. Before hanging them, the soldiers gave the rogues a stern lesson on the consequences of rising up against the Crown. At this point, according to the stage directions, 'The Scene is drawn, and there appears Houses and Towns burning, Men and Women hang'd upon Trees, and Children on the tops of Pikes.' Here, the miseries of civil war were dramatically visualised to make an unashamedly political point, a graphic, visceral and gaudy emblematisation of the consequences of public insurrection. The scene was likely to have been three-dimensional, perhaps made out of papier mâché, and would probably have been the most expensive and the most spectacular part of the production. It was the image which centred and defined Crowne's interpretation of the civil war theme.

In 1720 Theophilus Cibber wrote *The Historical Tragedy of Henry VI* which, like Crowne's play, was an adaptation of *Part Two* and *Part Three*. *The Historical Tragedy* was clearly meant to be a prequel to his uncle Colly Cibber's *Richard III*, which had been republished in 1718 and was now played in full. Theophilus turned to those

parts of the *Henry VI* plays which centred on Richard's story. The links between his and his uncle's adaptations were strengthened by developing the character of Lady Anne in *The Historical Tragedy*, who of course is only mentioned in passing in Shakespeare's plays. However, Cibber had a problem: his uncle had appropriated the death of Henry to the start of his play. As a consequence, the last scene of *The Historical Tragedy* dramatised the death of Prince Edward, which was crudely combined with the last scene of *Part Three* (skipping over Henry's murder entirely). Richard does exit to make his 'bloody supper in the tower', but audiences had to wait for *Richard III* to see it happen. It is an odd way to end: the play is deprived of its most powerful scene and struggles to justify its titular claim to be the *tragedy* of Henry VI.

Theophilus Cibber was guided not merely by the desire to capitalise on his forebear's work; there is evidence that he consulted and was influenced by Crowne's *The Miseries of Civil War*, from which he borrowed the line 'o piteous spectacle, o sad confusions' (Crowne, *Miseries* IV.i.46; Cibber III.iv.19). Cibber also shared Crowne's interest in exploring the nature of civil war. The prologue, spoken by Cibber himself, intoned 'England can never be, but by her Self Undone' while Cibber added a couplet to Edward's final speech, so that 'our lasting joy' continued with 'And may this Land, learn from our Houses Jars / Ever to dread th' Event of Civil Wars' (V.vi.114). Given this interest in the plays as cautionary texts against insurrection, it is strange that Cibber cuts entirely the characters of the father who has killed his son and the son who has killed his father; but they reappear instead as a speech by Henry, who tells the audience that 'Just now I met a Son bearing his Father / And an unhappy Father with his Son' (III.iv.14-15). By 1720, then, the potential for political controversy surrounding the figure of Henry himself seemed, on the face of it, to be diffused.

Crowne's *Henry VI* focused on Gloucester as a Protestant hero. His anti-clerical squabbles with Beaufort became, in the Restoration climate, a heroic and forward-thinking battle against Catholicism – Gloucester was not just the people's hero, he was the hero of the Protestant majority. In his preface, Crowne even chided Shakespeare for failing to seize the dramatic opportunities presented by the character: 'he has huddled up the Murder of Duke Humphrey, as if he had been guilty of it himself, and was afraid to show how it was done'. But, Crowne boasts, 'I have been more bold, to the great displeasure of some ...' *Henry VI* was a less considered adap-

tation than *Miseries* and lacked the latter's theatrical daring and vibrancy. It was, as Crowne says himself in the prologue, Shakespeare's *Part One* and *Part Two* reworked, with 'a little Vinegar against the Pope'. The stage directions hint at some vivid staging images, perhaps reflecting the influence of Betterton as annotator of the original manuscript. The witchcraft scene was bolstered with some Macbeth-like poetry: 'Our time is in the deep and Silent Night / The time when Cities are set on fire' (II.iii.24-5) and the stage direction, 'The Witch flings something on the Coales, and then the Conjuror immediately falls prostrate, makes a circle with his wand, then takes a Book and Reads'. The stage direction for the opening of Act III describes 'The Duke of York's House, long Scrolls lying on a table'. The scrolls, of course, would have been the records that York uses to demonstrate his claim to the throne, so visualising for the audience what was otherwise a difficult part of the story. This problem has confounded subsequent directors of the play, some of whom have come up with similar solutions. Michael Hayes used a strikingly similar set-up for the same scene in *An Age of Kings* (see Chapter V) and more recently Michael Boyd's actors used stones to map York's family tree (see Chapter IX). Crowne's main agenda was to make Gloucester the main character and his adaptation even opened with Gloucester lamenting the death of Henry V in a scene which conflated the opening of *Part One* with the opening of *Part Two*. To strengthen Gloucester's story, Crowne expanded Eleanor's (in this play renamed Elianor) role and stressed her innocence. Suffolk and Margaret became the instigators of the plot to entrap the Duchess, the Queen willingly giving power to Suffolk as Crowne shows us by reworking one of Suffolk's lines from *Part One* and giving it to Margaret: 'I'll govern that [England], and thou shalt govern me' (II.ii.327). Elianor's trial was the centrepiece of Act III, her fall and shame the emotional turning point for Gloucester, whose own trial covered Act IV. Crowne was true to his word, the murder of Gloucester was given full theatrical justice. The Cardinal stood in the wings watching the murderers and egging them on and preceded the scene with a pep talk in which he developed a murder plan in a wonderfully moustache-twirling, obsessively sinister way:

Which way it shall please Heaven to inspire you.
Stay, let me see! – Strangling I think were best,
Ay strangling! Strangling! (IV.iii.47-9)

At this point, the curtain was drawn to reveal 'the Duke of Gloucester sitting and reading in his Night-Gown'. He was strangled, the Cardinal watching from the top of the stage, and left dead, propped up in his chair. The scene curtain was closed, and then drawn again when Henry came to visit him. In the next scene, the Cardinal was haunted by Gloucester's ghost. At this point, Crowne added a little more vinegar to the recipe with the two murderers, who entered to discover the Cardinal raving:

2 *Mur.* He names the Duke of Gloucester

1 *Mur.* Oh! Does he so?

Is his Infallibility come to that? (IV.iv.39-41)

The death of the evil, Popish Cardinal, his clerical infallibility finally mocked and exposed, ended the play. Suffolk's death was only reported, along with news of Cade's rebellion (dovetailing neatly on to the first act of *The Miseries of Civil War*). Crowne's adaptation reduced Shakespeare's complex political drama to a one-sided, dogmatic Protestant revision of history, but it nevertheless preserved much of Shakespeare's own work, despite Crowne's apparent contempt for it, and preserved the basic structure of the narrative which Shakespeare composed out of the chronicle sources.

Ambrose Phillips's *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* (1723) went (if it were possible) even further than Crowne in insisting upon Gloucester as a Protestant hero and in altering Shakespeare to suit his own vision. In his dedication, Phillips describes Gloucester as 'a man of Singular Goodness; a wise and upright Statesman; a great Opposer of the oppressive Usurpations of the See of Rome; a generous Favourer of the, then, poor and distressed Commons'. Remarkably, Phillips considered poverty a thing of the past; the eighteenth-century commons, it seemed, were no longer distressed, but were under threat of Papist oppression. The prologue, not written by Phillips, develops the theme:

Our free-born Bard a free-born Hero draws

But, sure Destruction is the patriot's Doom,

When Kings are only Ministers of Rome.

... Britain, collect this Moral from our Tale:

Should, once again, the Papal power prevail

Again, Religious Fires would dreadful shine;

And Inquisitions prove their Right Divine.

This Gloucester was not just a Protestant hero but a model statesman: Rome represented not just corruption and religious

bankruptcy but political oppression. Phillips went further than Crowne in restructuring the play to emphasise these themes. York, being an enemy of the Cardinal, was thoroughly reconstructed as the hero of the play (an extraordinary switch for a future usurper), while, in Phillips's most remarkable alteration, Henry did not appear in the play at all. In many respects, Phillips follows the outline of Crowne's work closely, using the trial of Eleanor (conducted offstage), the trial and murder of the Duke and the final, harrowing death of the Cardinal as the main markers along the way. Though much of the part Shakespeare wrote was cut, in other respects Eleanor was developed even further, reflecting the progress of her reconstruction since 1680. Phillips's Eleanor was a victim of a Catholic plot. She was noble, pious and pure – all very much removed from Shakespeare's affronted schemer. We never get to see her dabble in magic; York and the rest are talking about her arrest at the start of the play, with York, bizarrely, playing her most staunch defender. Indeed, for Phillips, Eleanor was the victim, and there was no need to make her role in any way ambiguous. Her trial was also not staged, but delivered through report. However, neither Humphrey nor Eleanor appeared until Scene vii of Act I. Humphrey begins his part with railings against the Cardinal. Eleanor was more sanguine, a good Protestant wife bearing her misfortunes with dignity. At the end of the play, Beaufort, raving, asked for Eleanor's forgiveness, and she was brought out of exile to his bedside where, in a final, sentimental act of piety and pity, she forgave him. Henry was relegated to an offstage part: after all, he was a Catholic, and was hence edged out of his own story.

Though written across fifty years, these four adaptations show the dominant themes of the plays' reception in the post-Restoration period and the complexity of playing *Henry VI* in a political environment which was even more rigidly anti-Papist than Shakespeare's audiences were, and in which the memory of civil war was recent and vivid. That *Henry VI* should attract political controversy and suppression twice is remarkable. But by this point, the performance of a religious and weak king was clearly an uncomfortable idea to have in cultural circulation. The interpretation of Humphrey as proto-Protestant hero, the Cardinal as evil prelate and the plays as cautionary (to the point of obsession) tales against the perils of civil war not only recovered a *Henry VI* more suitable for the age, it also diffused some of the potentially troubling aspects of the plays. Henry's part was eroded to the point of extinc-

tion, while York's part (and Cadé's) was played down with first his son Edward, then York himself becoming the very image of a strong, compassionate prince.

CHAPTER II

Rediscoveries: nation, war and Empire (1899–1953)

Caught up in a theatrical cycle of rediscovery and reburial since the nineteenth century, the *Henry VI* plays remain somehow perpetually beneath the surface of theatrical memory, very occasionally coming into view to excite audiences, then sinking once again. Never having generated much by the way of performance history or tradition, the trilogy has been approached by each subsequent production as essentially a new 'found object', directors and actors often describing their work in rehearsal and performance as a kind of 'rediscovery', an adventure for those who have never played them, never seen them before. This can be exciting, even spiritual for performers or viewers who believe that they can gain more understanding about Shakespeare by getting to know his 'apprentice works'. But discovery can also be unnerving. Actors and directors (as well as spectators) may know from experience what to expect when they start digging into *Hamlet*, but no one quite knows what they are going to find when they level their spades at *Henry VI*. In her study of the 1989 excavation of Henslowe's Rose playhouse (where one version of *Henry VI* was first staged), Peggy Phelan argues that the disinterment of the remains of the past is bound up with 'selective memory, anxiety and desire', for the ability to fascinate and horrify the present gives the object of excavation a subversive power. That's also true of textual and theatrical excavations. When the *Henry VI* plays are performed, and when the questions that haunt them are engaged with – 'Are they Shakespeare?'; 'Are they any good?' – theatre practitioners and audiences alike participate in a process of 'memory, anxiety and desire'. The possibility that new knowledge about Shakespeare might be uncovered is seductive, even addictive; but there is also a danger that what is found might challenge some of our deepest-held preconceptions about Shakespeare, his work and its relationship with the present.

In fact, the real danger, as Phelan notes in her 'psychoanalysis of excavation', is that what is uncovered may reveal things about ourselves that we would rather repress. Maybe this is why *Henry VI*'s rediscovery is often followed by its reburial.

In the nineteenth century, the few attempts made at staging *Henry VI* were indeed anxious rediscoveries by directors desperately trying to ignore Shakespeare's dissection of England's collapsing Empire. Productions by Edmund Kean, Charles Flower and Osmond Tearle manifested their concerns by rewriting the plays and cutting key characters. As British history declined from Empire in the nineteenth century through the waste of the First World War to the holocaust of the Second, *Henry VI*'s directors, among them Frank Benson, Robert Atkins and Nugent Monck, turned a blind eye to the increasingly relevant themes the plays explored, they being otherwise engaged, caught up in projects of showmanship: for them, the trilogy really only figured in their individual schemes to stage the Complete Works. However, after the Second World War something changed. Almost as soon as the British Empire came to its (unofficial) end, the *Henry VI* trilogy acquired a new urgency, and, with it, a new theatrical afterlife. In this chapter, two stories that present contrasting anxieties and fantasies about *Henry VI* and its rediscovery are told. One rehearses *Henry VI*'s intermittent theatrical afterlife before the Second World War; the other remembers the first modern production to engage with the plays' more difficult representations of nationhood.

Staging Empire

Because the *Henry VI* plays are also English history plays, they carry with them the potential to comment directly on contemporary politics, and they do so in ways that are hard to contain. They work best as *timely* plays. That is to say, their theatrical power resides chiefly in their ability to comment on the present. They need audiences who recognise something of their own situation in what they see; without that recognition, the plays are simply relics to be enjoyed at the level of historical curiosity. Although Shakespeare's other history plays can be equally trenchant in their portrayal of politics, they are more easily containable by patriotic interpretation – as we know from many such productions of *Henry V*. By contrast, *Henry VI* is the story of those who, as Shakespeare put it, made Henry V's 'England bleed'. The trilogy shows England in



1 Part One (1889). Mary Kingsley as Joan of Arc

defeat, losing its Empire, betraying its national identity. Usurpers triumph, the good guys are murdered and a peaceful empire is lost through infighting. This difference is highlighted early in *Part One* when, in the first scene, a messenger complains to the nobility that the English are losing the French wars because of 'want of men and money' (*Part One* I.i.74); later, York and Somerset's arrogant refusal to send Talbot aid is a powerful examination of the cruelty of factionalism.

Kean's *Richard, Duke of York* (adapted by J. H. Merivale, 1817) cut Talbot, provoking one reviewer to complain that, without him, seeing the play was 'like walking among the Elgin Marbles and seeing an empty place where the Theseus had reclined' (reprinted in Wells *Shakespeare in the Theatre* 52). Talbot is a great character for patriotic English theatre: Nashe remembered the tears of Talbot's first spectators as they watched him fight his last battles. By cutting the part, Merivale and Kean were making sure that their rediscovery did not invite topical reflection on England's most recent war with France, which had ended only two years earlier with the Battle of Waterloo (1815). There were plenty of candidates for present-day Talbots – and Yorks. Developing his Duke of York as a 'determined but increasingly isolated and doomed hero' (Martin 15), Kean may well have been unconsciously shaping the part around that other doomed hero, Napoleon Bonaparte, then languishing in exile. Be that as it may, Talbot's 1817 counterpart is much easier to identify, and this perhaps gives a clue to Merivale and Kean's reluctance to include him in the performance: Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington and the hero of Waterloo. Like Talbot, he embodied the aspirations of England in its war with France and, like Talbot, he was made a peer as a reward for his service. (Shakespeare shows Talbot being dubbed the first Earl of Shrewsbury in III.viii – but this, like all the other Talbot scenes, was cut from Merivale's script.) Neither Merivale nor Kean, it seems, had much appetite for playing Talbot, whose final defeat happens partly as a consequence of York's Napoleonic empire-building.

The handling of Talbot in Osmond Tearle's energetic 1889 version of *Part One* betrayed more fantasies than anxieties. The adaptation was written by the eminent Victorian philanthropist and brewer Charles Flower, who founded the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Festival where *Part One* was staged. Between them, Flower and Tearle transformed the play into a rollicking imperial adventure that celebrated the exploits of the Empire abroad and muted the

darker tones of Talbot's tragedy. The promptbooks describe in some detail a series of spectacular battles, most with Talbot as the hero. In one such scene, Talbot leapt on to a gun carriage, threw a sentry to the ground and then jumped over some battlements, leading an army of archers, gunmen and knights, all fully equipped with battle gear. Cannons breached the walls, archers shot arrows from behind the guns, and the din was made even more deafening by the cries of 'A Talbot!' His last stand was equally heroic: the promptbook includes notes on a series of fights between young John Talbot, Charles, Reignier and Talbot. In contrast to all this derring-do, Talbot's death scene was practically glossed over. Flower and Tearle cut most of the dialogue and turned the scene into a moonlit tableau of grieving soldiers. Flower was a *Henry VI* enthusiast, a true believer who spent years trying to convince his main Festival Director, Frank Benson, to stage all three plays as a cycle. Of course, what he discovered in the plays was his own fantasy about the adventure of Empire – a fantasy he could sustain only by suppressing aspects of the play that might challenge it.

Benson may have disagreed with Flower about staging *Henry VI*, but he was, like Flower, committed to culture and Empire, and when he finally *did* discover the plays (after Flower's death), his productions reflected these sympathies. Like Flower, Benson enjoyed the spectacle of war. As Gordon Crosse remembers, there were 'scaling ladders, battering rams and in general as much as he [Benson] could give us of the pomp and circumstances of medieval warfare' (Crosse 33). When Benson was not in Stratford (at this time, the Festival ran for only a few weeks every year), he was on tour with his company, which often took him across the Empire. Benson saw it as a patriotic duty to educate the people of the Empire with Shakespeare. We are accustomed now to accounts of Shakespeare's dissemination across the colonies and the implications this had for post-colonial engagements with Shakespeare – but Benson was one of those who actually put ideology into practice. His own notes to the *Henry VI* cycle he staged in 1906 at the Memorial Theatre suggest that he celebrated the liberal notion of the 'benign' Empire; he even tried to sell the plays as a story about that Empire's origins, for 'during the death and the ruin of so many nobles and gentry, the commons of England were growing in power and importance and laying the foundation of the English empire'. In other words, he was saying, don't just look at the politics in the foreground, look at what is happening in the background as well.

Is this comment bizarre, given that the 'Commons of England' spend much of *Part Two* running riot across the stage? Perhaps not. For in 1864, James Anderson had played a Cade who died 'like a courageous rebel of the true English type' (Salgado 88). If Cade could be a true Englishman, Benson's own conviction that *Part Two* could be a play about the 'Commons of England' makes sense. Of the three plays he was first drawn to *Part Two*, which he staged in a single performance at Stratford in 1899; in the audience was the poet W. B. Yeats, who remembered vividly 'insurgent crowds ... and ... people of the gutter' (quoted by Trewin 127). In 1906, after the final curtain fell on *Part Three*, Benson came down to the footlights, still in costume (he was playing Richard), and made a short speech 'apologising for any defects' in the plays and urging his audience to reflect instead on Shakespeare's 'philosophy of History and his patriotic desire to point out the evils of civil war' (quoted in Hattaway *Part Three* 39). Benson's focus on the role of the commons was, perhaps, a way of flattering his audience by emphasising that the trilogy told *their* story. Hardly disguised, however, is an interesting anxiety brought out by the juxtaposition of Benson's reference to the 'ruin of so many nobles' in his programme note and to the threat of 'the evils of civil war' in his curtain speech. Tilting *Henry VI* towards the English commons, Benson was perhaps also dimly aware of the faultlines in the oxymoronic ideal of a liberal empire. It may be significant that Benson's first production of this play was staged (as Foulkes points out) at the height of the Boer War (Foulkes 170), a disastrous conflict which led many to question the ideals of the British Empire. Not long after, of course, the aristocracy would face ruin again in the First World War.

If there was ever a time when the *Henry VI* plays had a strong meaning for a contemporary audience, it was surely in the wake of the 1914-18 conflict (known then as the Great War or 'the war to end all wars'). After 1918, many audiences and actors had a direct and, for many, personal experience of fighting a war in France. One reviewer of a production at the Old Vic commented that 'just now the historical value of the *Henry VI* trilogy has a special interest for us' (*The Sunday Times* 4 February 1923). This 'special interest', however, did not really emerge strongly in any of the three productions between 1914 and 1939, each of which noticeably avoided picking at the scabs of Britain's war wounds. None showed any appetite for remembering their own war as they dressed in military uniforms and recreated French battle-

fields. If anything, *Henry VI*'s various rediscoveries in this period were indebted to the same kind of patriotic enthusiasm that saw millions of men volunteer for the army in 1914. Each one was produced by a company that was determined to share (as Sir Barry Jackson later put it) the 'honour and duty of having given its public the whole Shakespearean canon' (Jackson 49).

Robert Atkins directed the plays for the Old Vic in 1923, but it might as well have been 1889, for the actor Ernest Meade, playing Talbot, roared his lines so stirringly that he roused one reviewer to praise 'the splendid English spirit that runs through the inspiring patriotism of [his] lines' which 'should make the blood of every true Englishman rush proudly through his veins' (*The Sunday Times* 4 February 1923). Atkins did nothing to give new life to the plays, which he cut down drastically (flouting the Old Vic's 'no cuts' approach to Shakespeare). And his production failed to excite reviewers: *The Observer* thought it 'very ragged' and sniffed: 'the players seemed to get tired long before the audience did' (18 February 1923). However, Atkins did make some important innovations, and one of them was textual, for he was the first British director to adapt the plays into two parts and then add *Richard III* to form a new trilogy, a practice that has since become the standard way of staging the plays as a cycle. In order to give a sense of the historical sweep of the narrative, Atkins recast the lead roles for the second play so that, for example, Henry was played by Guy Martineau as a boyish king in the first part and by the older John Garside in the next. Atkins exploited this further by casting Martineau as the 'son who has killed his father ...' to add an extra level of irony to Henry's battlefield meditations on the state of the nation.

But perhaps Atkins's most significant revision was to do not with war but with gender, for he rewrote Joan's part to make her more sympathetic; in his own words, he 'thought fit to rob St Joan of Arc of all unpleasant lines' which, as *The Sunday Times* noted, brought 'her within a modern conception of the character' (4 February 1923). According to *The Observer*, Joan flashed through battle scenes with amazing power and personality (4 February 1923). *The Sunday Times* bristled at this early act of political correctness: 'I can see no justification at all for this. On this principle Mr. Atkins might as well convert all the Frenchmen to Germans.'

Interest in the *Henry VI* plays was also sustained by the readings of the British Empire Shakespeare Society (BESS), a semi-amateur

organisation with academic, theatrical and clerical patrons that promoted the teaching and performance of Shakespeare's plays. BESS often gave one-off performances of plays in modern dress and in the 1920s performed all three *Henry VI* plays, each with a different cast and director. BESS had already read *Part One* in 1912 at the Haymarket. Between 1925 and 1926, BESS produced one-off dramatic readings of all three plays at either the Haymarket or the Lyric Hammersmith. The 1926 performance of *Part Three* was particularly distinguished: produced by Edith Craig (sister of Edward Gordon Craig), it starred Harcourt Williams as Henry and a young John Gielgud as Richard Crookback.

In 1933, the same year that Hitler took power with a brutality that reminded Brecht of Richard Gloucester, Nugent Monck staged a two-part adaptation in Norwich at the Maddermarket Theatre which, though an amateur theatre featuring amateur actors, produced work from Monck that was highly respected and drew the attention of Shaw, Yeats and Poel. The *Henry VI* cycle was an especially important event for Monck because, with it, the Maddermarket could boast that it had staged the Complete Works. Not far from Monck's mind, then, was a sense of achievement not unlike those other adventurers of the British Empire who endeavoured to scale Everest or reach the Earth's poles. Like Atkins, Monck made sweeping cuts, all with the aim of speeding the narrative drive. (Known for fast-paced theatre, Monck's *Henry VI* was breathless, running at breakneck speed.) The Maddermarket was (and remains) a small, intimate playing space with an apron stage at the front and a curtain across the centre of the playing area. This arrangement allowed Monck to alternate between 'front' scenes and large court scenes without pauses for scene changes. But it may have been that the memory of the Great War was still too sensitive to revive by theatrical recall, for Monck substantially cut the early French scenes and Talbot's death, which was reported, not staged. Monck shied away from some of the horrors of war by adapting the episode in which Henry watches a soldier drag the body of his enemy (whom he has just killed in battle) on to the stage only to discover that his victim is his father. In Monck's version, the soldier entered to find his father already dead, so absolving the son of patricide.¹

Despite attracting curious audiences, none of these productions succeeded in awakening actors and audiences to the *Henry VI* plays' theatrical potential. On the contrary, silence followed each

one – and most have since been completely forgotten. The only director in the interwar years even to consider staging the *Henry VI* plays in a way that would directly engage with the memory of war was Orson Welles, with a legendary history cycle, *Five Kings*, that set the second tetralogy on a revolving stage dressed to recall the First World War. Welles never realised his original ambition to complete his cycle with *Henry VI* – a double loss, since in Welles the *Henry VI* plays would have found what they needed, a director with more courage, vision and sheer audacity than Atkins, Benson, Flower or Tearle.

Fire and slaughter: the Birmingham Rep, 1951–53

In 1951, the plays finally met their match in Douglas Seale and Sir Barry Jackson, whose decade-long project to stage the entire cycle at the Birmingham Rep (starting out of sequence with *Part Two*) produced performances that revolutionised the way theatre and audiences thought about the *Henry VI* plays. Seale directed, and Jackson, the Rep's founder, wrote the scripts (leaving them largely uncut and free of interpolations). That their astonishing work has not been well remembered is partly the fault of Peter Hall who, when he was producing his own *Henry VI* cycle for the RSC in the 1960s, looked back on 'recent' productions – 'recent' productions could only be the Rep's – as staging 'a mess of angry and undifferentiated barons, thrashing about in a mass of diffuse narrative' (Hall and Barton vii). Hall's work heralded such a step-change from the past that the innovations at the Rep have suffered in comparison. Yet Hall himself was later repentant about his remarks and praised the muscularity of Seale's direction. In truth, the Rep inspired Hall.

In their otherwise excellent edition of *Part Three*, John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen rather unfairly characterise Jackson (and, by association, his productions of *Henry VI*) as a 'product of the historicising movement of nineteenth-century criticism and performance' whose main idea was to 'recapture historical stage conditions' (Cox and Rasmussen 19). It is true that Jackson's *Henry VI*s were staged in period dress (as most productions are), but the 'period' was the reign of King Henry VI, not Elizabeth I; there is no evidence from photographs that either Jackson or Seale wanted to recreate an authentic Elizabethan experience for their audiences. On the contrary, even though he was in his seventies in 1951 (and

thus old enough to have grown up a Victorian), Jackson was very much a man of the present, not the past. One of the pioneers of the British repertory movement, he had staged, in the early years of the Rep, many new plays that were then thought uncommercial, among them plays by Chekhov and several premieres of Shaw's work. During his brief tenure as Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Jackson oversaw what would be remembered as a legendary Watteauesque production of *Love's Labour's Lost* directed by his protégé (and fellow Rep émigré) Peter Brook. In fact, far from being a crusty mock-Elizabethan, Jackson has often been credited as the first twentieth-century director regularly to stage Shakespeare in contemporary dress. Although he was in the last decade of his life when he started on *Henry VI* (he died in 1961), Jackson was still alive to the contemporary possibilities of theatre and still keen to experiment.

Jackson was conscious of the plays' relevance and their power to speak to recent trauma, not least because in Birmingham the Second World War was very much a live memory, the city still bearing war scars on its surface: the Rep had been bombed and parts of the city remained in ruins. In this milieu, a scene from *Part Three* stood out with a terrible clarity for Jackson, the scene in which a soldier brings onstage an enemy he has killed – the same scene whose tragic potency Monck had sought to defuse. Reflecting on the awful moment of the son's discovery, Jackson saw its double 'in our own lifetime', in the 'family cleavages of such a tragic nature' that had so recently 'occurred in Germany' (Jackson 51). Conventional critical opinion, led by Tillyard, thought this scene 'dull, primitive, and ingenuous' and mocked 'the utter artlessness of the language' (Tillyard 195), but Jackson saw in it a powerful and moving piece of theatre that 'threw more light on the horror of civil war than all the scenes of wasteful bloodshed': 'the still figures of the father and son speaking quietly and unemotionally, as though voicing the thoughts that strike the saintly, sad King's conscience, presented a moment of calm and terrible reflection' (Jackson 51).

This scene, framed by three brightly painted arches set far upstage that made living stained-glass windows out of the stories enacted under their embrace, was one of a number that developed a sense of disempowerment and sacrifice – both edgy issues for postwar Britain. It began with Henry asleep, surrounded by corpses from the battle; when he woke, the corpses came back to life, two of them playing the father and the son, the rest listening

alongside Henry, the dead bearing witness to the sufferings of war. The King, 'saintly, sad', was an image of innocence and despair, like Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' who stands gaping at the wreckage of human life, human misadventure piling up before it, its wings turned against the future. At the end of *Part Three* came another image of disempowerment and sacrifice: Henry's butchered body was pressed against the portcullis that now covered the central arch, his arms spread out in an image of the crucifixion, a death that faintly remembered Talbot's. (Earlier, set inside the sacramentalising frame of the central arch, the old warrior's death had put him at the centre of the story, cradling his son's body before laying it on top of a pile of corpses. That York and Somerset were stood in the arches flanking him only made the scene more painful and poignant: the relationship between their aristocratic indifference and Talbot's defeat was penetratingly clear.)

Putting Jackson's cycle into historical context sheds important light on the problematic reflections the plays cast on recent history and suggests why they struck contemporary British audiences with such force. 1951 was the year of the Festival of Britain, and Jackson's newly opened *Part Two* was clearly timed to coincide with the Festival's opening ceremonies in May. Although not designated an official Festival event, *Part Two* was exactly the kind of cultural occasion taking place all over the country that year on both professional and amateur stages, and, while the Festival's centrepiece was a major exhibition on London's South Bank, other local festivals and exhibitions took place all across the country, with many towns and villages mounting their own historical pageants to celebrate Festival year. As it turned out, however, the Rep's take on British history collided with the wider purpose of the Festival which, if anything, was meant to be about moving on from the trauma of war. Jackson and Seal's productions after 1951 would perform an increasingly dark version of festival, memory and history.

For, although on one level it was a commemoration of British history, on another the Festival was arguably an elaborate attempt to forget the recent past. The 1951 Festival was a significant event for Britain which left an impression on those who participated in it – and more or less everyone did. Assembling what the Festival souvenir programme called a 'national reassessment', the Festival organisers carefully avoided references to war, to the end of Empire and even to the class and gender struggles that had driven much recent social history. Instead, the Festival chose to remember

Britain's cultural achievements – which told the story of 'British contributions to world civilisation in the arts of peace'. On the face of it, the event was an unusually large, peculiarly national form of what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, usually translated as sites (or realms) of memory. However, by creating a sense of the past where certain memories were glossed over and others forgotten, the Festival avoided the essential interplay of memory and history that Nora, tracing these *lieux* in his monumental study of French culture, finds necessary for their interpretation. In fact, as a site of memory, the Festival was curiously amnesiac – a reminder perhaps that, as Nietzsche once argued, history is a type of forgetting. Still, the war was not wholly repressed; indeed, it returned in an unexpected place when King George VI opened the Festival by remembering how 'Britain's glory' had been swept away by 'fire and slaughter'. And it returned, too, in the Rep's uncomfortable reminders of a far-distant English past that bore disturbing resemblance to the English present.

With uncanny but appropriate prescience, *Part Two* began with a failed festival. The play's opening scene invites players and spectators to reflect on the tension between memory and forgetting, structured around a national ceremony – a royal wedding – that needs both to remember and forget. England has been at war with France, but now an English prince is marrying a French princess, pacifying hostilities, binding up brokenness, repairing loss in a ceremony of restoration, an incorporation of French Margaret into English history. The trouble is, the ceremony fails. Gloucester begins to play his part in the ritual, reading out the marriage treaty to the assembled court; but as the political reality becomes clear to him, his voice falters: the King's uncle, the Lord Protector, cannot carry on. He drops the treaty – a literalisation of a troubling idea, that the ceremonies and performances of the court no longer reflect political reality; that, rather, they are a vast distraction. In Seale's production, set on the Rep's small, crowded, ordered stage, when Gloucester dropped the treaty he triggered a different kind of history to the one being staged, just down the road from the Rep, that same year at the Memorial Theatre (which, unlike the Rep, was designated an official Festival venue). According to J. C. Trewin, the performance 'moved like an angry surge from its opening' (Trewin 149–50), which is a nicely prescient comment: while the 'angry young men' of John Osborne's invention would not arrive on the English stage for another five years, in Seale's

production (and Trewin's review) they seem already massed in the wings. Seale's was a young company, and the energy of the first scene was sustained through all three productions, many reviewers noting the pace, clarity and energy of the acting. York, Somerset, Suffolk and even Gloucester were prototypical Jimmy Porters, railing at the betrayals of history; Joan and Margaret were forceful revelations, discovering for the first time a real urgency and a dangerous sexuality in these parts. Performed by a huge cast in a small theatre – at the time, the Rep seated fewer than five hundred people – *Henry VI* was explosive. And it was meant to be. History was angry. History was 'in-your-face'.

Lions and unicorns

One of the ways the Festival of Britain defined British culture was by appropriating the heraldic sign of the Lion and the Unicorn, the traditional icon of Great Britain. Original Folio and Quarto editions of Shakespeare's works were displayed in an exhibition on the South Bank, presided over by the heraldic animals who troped the dual nature of the British character: the Lion represented 'action', the Unicorn, 'imagination'. In this exhibition, culture and 'the arts of peace' were on prominent display while, as Alan Sinfield points out, 'warlike achievements were strictly excluded' (Sinfield 'The Government, the People and the Festival' 185). Yet references to war kept surfacing, almost like repressed memories. In fact, the tent was framed by symptoms of this repression. The heraldic symbol blazoned at the entrance to the exhibition would have been instantly recognisable to millions of men and women who had seen active service as the badge of the British Army uniform; and, at the exit, the final exhibit was a large display of the old (and unrelated) nursery rhyme about the Lion and the Unicorn 'fighting for the crown'.²

A similar tension between history and memory, between 'action' and 'imagination', structured the Rep productions, where young Henry was a unicorn (though of limited, specialised imagination) surrounded by ambitious lions. Jack May played him straight off the page as a weak and pious king unable to comprehend either the political or the sexual games his subjects were addicted to, games that jeopardised the future of England. He himself moved in the company of monks and nuns, desexualised proxies of the gender wars happening elsewhere who troped Henry's own nostalgia

both for the moral certainties of religion and the innocence of pre-sexuality. But May's Henry was out of place in the postwar, post-imperial world of *Part Two*.

Out-facing the unicorn, Suffolk and York were lions, champing at the bit for power. The action was driven by two power-house performances from Richard Pasco as Suffolk and John Arnatt as York. Both were villains, and in some ways both were the most modern characters onstage: Pasco smouldered his way through most of his scenes as a romantic anti-hero, a Rhett Butler in medieval dress. Arnatt, Russian by birth, looked the part of a dissident outsider, an existentialist with no place in the dominant order of things. The main theme remained that of postwar politics, but Pasco and Arnatt voiced potential instabilities in the new national order. Both characters were brought into the opening pageants of *Part One*, anachronistically mourning Henry V. But it was the opening of *Part Two* which really defined their relationship, Suffolk at the centre of things, not only a substitute bridegroom but a substitute king as well, already dominating politics through his presentation of Margaret to the ineffectual King; York, skulking on the margins of political action, eyeing the ceremonies that should have been his, a self-excluded figure, biding his time.

An audience unfamiliar with the plays might have thought, at the outset of *Part Two*, that Richard Pasco was playing the king: he was fierce, handsome and swarthy, and he commanded the stage in a way that Jack May's shy Henry never could. Suffolk's public subservience to the King was coded and ironic: at St Albans he obediently knelt to Henry and then lounged, a man relaxed in his erotic self-assurance, with Margaret, openly flirting with her. Only Henry was unable to read the signs. Suffolk's love scenes with Margaret were pure Hollywood romance: one photograph shows Margaret resting her head against his manly chest, digging her nails into his arms, Suffolk gazing into the distance with an impassive expression. Such scenes mined clichés from films like *Gone with the Wind* and even seemed to remember wartime weepies like *Brief Encounter*. But Suffolk was clearly the villain of the piece. His agent Hume had remained onstage from the previous scene (with the Duchess of Gloucester); as Margaret berated the commoners who wanted to petition Gloucester, Suffolk signalled to Hume. From this point, spectators knew that Suffolk had set a trap for the Duchess.

After Gloucester's death, there was a rare moment when Henry

broke out of the political frame which trapped him. Suffolk knelt once more to Henry, but the King said, distantly, 'Lay not thy hands on me.' It was a decisive moment: Suffolk's hold on the king was broken; the game was no longer being played by Suffolk's rules. In a nice non-naturalistic touch, he backed slowly into the darkness (the stage was lit only above the centre arch). Suffolk, who had begun as the central actor in a spectacle of national unity, was now powerless. In keeping with Hollywood melodrama, his final scene with Margaret was histrionic; but rather than directing Suffolk's exit, as scripted in Shakespeare's playtext, Seale kept him onstage to watch Margaret go. For a moment, the man who had commanded both the stage and the woman was alone – but only for a moment. Four pirates were waiting in the shadows at the edge of the stage to kill him.

The real Lion, though, was York, who moved from being an outsider in *Part One* to a brooding Machiavel in *Part Two* and a tragic father in *Part Three*. Twice in *Part One*, York's story was used as a lead-in to the interval (each Part having two intervals), the curtain for the first interval coming down on York unfolding his claim to Warwick in the Temple Garden, and for the second, on York picking up a white rose discarded by Henry. Since York is not a main player in *Part One*, these curtain scenes brought his story more into the foreground of the trilogy. Played by Alan Bridges in 1951–52, York was a clear-cut, even cartoonish villain whose 'mad flaw' made him, in effect, a prototype Richard III. Bridges (who would later abandon acting for a career as a director) was only in his early twenties and had to be heavily made-up to play the older York of *Part Three* (in fact, he was younger than Paul Daneman, who played his son Richard). But in 1953, Jackson and Seale gave the part to a tall, slender actor called John Arnatt who could play both a young and a mature York. Known for his golden voice, Arnatt recreated York as a man who is ambitious but 'nobly graced': in *Part One* and *Part Two* he skillfully navigated the politics of Henry's court, often watching with grim horror the ruin of the kingdom he claimed. But it was in his death scene in *Part Three* that Arnatt's interpretation came into its own. Where Bridges had intoned and declaimed his final speeches, Arnatt spoke them softly, with a 'quiet realism' which belied the interior tragedy of a man with no ambition left. This transformed the scene: in the earlier version, Margaret had put the paper crown on York's head while he was held down by sneering soldiers. In Arnatt's perfor-

mance, York tried to pull away from Margaret as she came near him; but after he had spoken his final words, he stood up, quiet and resigned, and contemplated the stained handkerchief. Then, weeping, he removed the paper crown from his head and held it out to Margaret, transforming Bridges' simplistic, bombastic defiance into tragic pathos. As York offered the crown, which Margaret declined to take, the gesture acknowledged that these two players in history were linked, both un-childed parents, York's son already dead, Margaret's soon to follow.³

Playing across this scene, too, was a sense of it summoning ghosts that were elsewhere haunting the Festival, not least in the way it recalled and travestied the tradition of the player-king. No doubt, numbers of spectators had themselves played the king in one of the countless history pageants that were being staged locally across the country. Certainly, most would have seen such an event. Whether or not, while watching *Henry VI*, they related the performance of nationhood in the theatre to the celebration of the national history on the street, the recirculation of these images from triumphal communities to the lonely and wasted scene on the molehill made such a conjunction possible. But, perhaps to reinforce the point, Jackson and Seale made sure that York was the *second* player-king to wear the crown. The first was a boy, dressed as a jester, first seen playing in the background, wearing the paper crown, as hunchbacked Richard tried to persuade his father York to break his oath. (This boy – a curious and unexplained double of Rutland – was later slaughtered alongside York's youngest child by the 'pent-up lion', Clifford.) From its first sighting, the paper crown was an ironic counterpoint to York's failed desires. Later, poised silently between York and Margaret, it brought together history and festival in one ruined image.

But what of the British people in Festival Britain? Where were they in the *Henry VIs*? A clue comes in the posters for the 1951 *Part Two*, which aimed to sell the show on the strength of 'the wry humour of Saunders Sempcox' – despite the fact that Sempcox, whose miraculous cure Gloucester exposes as a fraud in Act III, has only one scene in the play. He is a poor man's Falstaff, his con trick a brief interlude whose main function as 'fall guy' is to presage Gloucester's fall from power. His prominence on the poster suggests a certain kind of play – history with gags – and a certain kind of audience – one that wants to see itself on stage – an advertising play that is both populist and popular, bringing the

story of the ordinary people of Britain into view and promising a crowd-pleasing comic turn. And in this case, the ad-man got it right: the commoners' story stood literally at the centre of Jackson's script for *Part Two*, the whole of the middle act devoted to them, from Sempcox to Cade.

Jackson and Seale built on the banter between Gloucester and Sempcox to make a comic routine out of the charade, almost as if Gloucester and Sempcox were a double act, with the nobleman playing straight-man to the plebeian clown. This vaudeville pastiche continued in the Cade scenes. When *Part Two* was revived in 1953, Seale cast as Smith the Weaver the rising comedian Kenneth Williams, who would later make a name for himself in radio shows like *Round the Horne* and in *Carry On* films as a master of comic voice impressions and sexual *double entendre*. Here, he stole the show. Smith's part was developed, with lines culled from other commoners and extra non-Shakespearean routines thrown in. Much of the humour was slapstick, repeatedly playing on the gag line, 'Thou hast hit it!' But it moved on to more dangerous ground – territory Williams would explore and colonise in the later *Carry On* films – where sexual anxiety lurked: as he hustled a peasant girl offstage as his 'prize', the others raucously called after him, 'Tumble her, Smith, tumble her!'

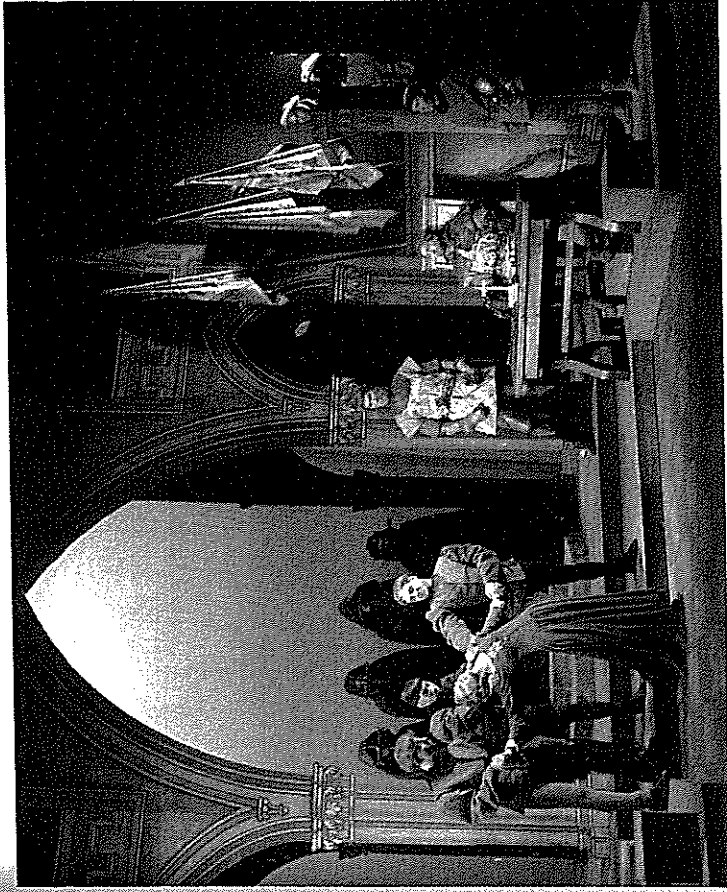
All this humour was deeply fractured. Sempcox disappeared after only one scene; the carnival banter of Smith and Cade turned violent, decapitated heads serving as banners for their class uprising. So with whom on this stage should an audience have identified in Festival year? The patriarch Gloucester, who mocks the lower classes? Or Smith the Weaver, whose seaside postcard humour degenerates into anarchic violence? The simple answer was that, despite its initial promise, the Rep did not offer a vision of British identity that was compatible with that of Festival Britain. While the Festival was busy smoothing over class difference, memorialising a past that aimed to present the British people as a harmoniously unified race, the Rep, particularly in the competing claims made by those comic performances, was drawing attention to class tensions, class difference. What an audience finds funny, Seale's productions suggested, at some level betrays its members' own investment in a society that was still clearly structured along class lines.

Another instability that Britain in Festival year wanted wishfully to ignore but finally had to face was gender. Times were changing.

Even since Atkins's cycle, the roles of Joan and Margaret (and subsidiary characters such as Eleanor and Jourdain) had become both more important and more problematic. This was all part of a number of anxieties about 'the modern career woman' – a creature spawned in the 'all hands to the pump' war years when women discovered they could plough field and build aeroplanes. The consumer age was just beginning, and Britain, having coaxed war-industrious women back into their 'proper' place of work, the kitchen, was struggling to find a way to talk about them that acknowledged their independence and consumer power without overthrowing too many of the nice conventions – femininity, modesty, the 'double standard' – that organised gender relations. The Festival appeared to create a space where Britain could imagine what a world of gender equality might be like. Thus one futuristic Festival design laid out a 'bed-sitting room for the modern bachelor girl' – which depicted a young woman thoughtfully knitting in a room that included the latest sewing machine and a hand-made sewing table. Advertisements in the Festival's souvenir programme were also geared to a particular view of a female future: one advertisement for a vacuum cleaner promised to save 'millions of housewives from hard, wearisome drudgery'; another, for Prestige housewares, promised consumer goods that would make light work of kitchen tasks 'long after the Festival of Britain has become a memory'. Stereotypes like these were confronted head-on when Joan la Pucelle stepped on to the Rep stage. Finding the Dauphin dallying with a peasant girl perched on his knee, Joan saw her off then challenged him to test his manhood on her – but almost immediately, the girl returned, threw herself into the fight and started scrapping with Joan, a bizarre twist to Shakespeare's scenario that manoeuvred Joan back into a more familiar gender role, a woman fighting with another woman for the man. Things got stranger still when, some time later, the peasant girl returned to the stage, this time as one of Joan's spirits. For spectators, the penny could finally drop: she had been, from the beginning, an aspect of Joan's transgressive power and part of the set-up.

That power was as much sexual as martial. The co-ordinates of Joan's character were established early on when, in an added scene that played out action only reported in *Part One*, Joan taunted Young Talbot (John Greenwood), 'Thou maiden youth, be vanquished by a maid.' He retorted that 'Young Talbot was not born to be the pillage of a giglot wench', before discovering, after

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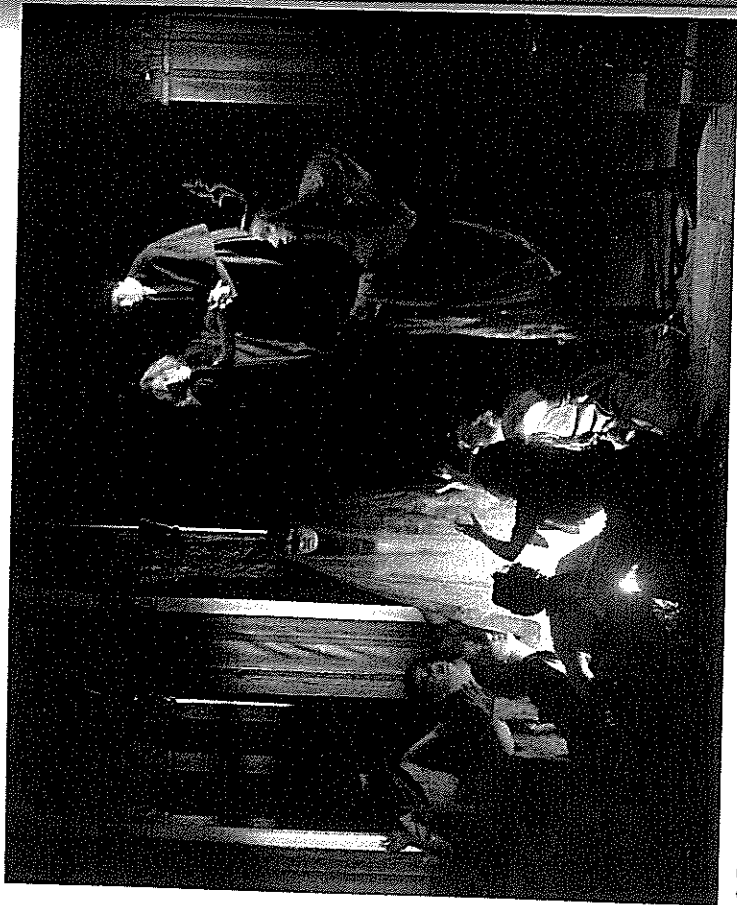
2 *Part One* (1953). Joan (Nancie Jackson) faces York (John Arnatt)

a flurry of action, that indeed he was. This exchange, then, positioned Joan as both maid and 'giglot' – that is, wanton – 'wench', able to move easily between roles. Finally, though, captured by English soldiers who circled her but stood way back, nervously pointing their spears at her; this audacious example of female careerism, this powerful modern woman, could be dealt with only by shackling her and finally incinerating her.

That same scene of capture was repeated for Margaret, but, where Joan was fierce and frightening, Margaret was a plaything; the scenario, sexual foreplay. This time, the spears were clearly phallic symbols wielded by soldiers toying with Reignier's daughter, blocking her way, then letting her go, only to block her way again. Now, the space was controlled entirely by macho display: the modern career woman, it seemed to suggest, would have to play a sexual game – and this is exactly what Margaret did in *Part Two*.

A thematic link between Joan's powers and the sexual politics

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3 *Part Two* (1951). Eleanor (Hazel Hughes) and Hume (Max Brimmell) watch a witches' dance

of *Part Two* was also established by casting Eleanor Bryan (the peasant girl and Joan's demon in *Part One*) as Eleanor, who is, of course, the most careerist woman in the play and one who, like Joan, seeks her career advancement through magic. Jourdain's incantations were suitably spooky: Seale and Jackson added to the stage a whole witches' coven who performed a 'witches' dance' (elaborately choreographed in the promptbook) to give the scene a smack of *Macbeth*-style supernaturalism. Eleanor stood in the shadows at the back of the stage, half-horrified, half-seduced by the spectacle of the witches gathered around a pool of light. Along with Simpcox's humour and the banter that livened up the Cade scenes, here was one more 'festival' added to the play for Festival year.

The Rep histories did not commemorate national identity, nor were they a theatrical equivalent to the Festival of Britain. Rather,

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they traded on the irresolution and fracture of a country traumatised by war and victimised by the appalling destructiveness of power politics. If the Festival set out to show the Britons 'to themselves' in a celebratory mood, the Rep offered, as a contrast, a darker, more introspective engagement with recent history. It performed the nation through, as *The Times* put it, a 'cumulative disorder' in which the violence of the recent past was not elided but revived. Seale's company surprised reviewers by not ending the cycle with *Richard III*. Instead, the end came with Edward's optimistic hope for 'lasting joy'. The bells rang out, and the people cheered, just as they had on VE Day, just as they would on Elizabeth II's coronation day in 1953. But this exultant mood was broken by a voice – it was Richard's – cutting through the celebrations with a speech that began, 'Now is the winter of our discontent ...' The bells eventually drowned out the words, but the point had been made: try as he might to declare a 'festival for Britain', Edward, at the end, could deliver no happy ending.

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