Ensemble’s ‘Henry IV’: well-done Shakespeare

By Tina Krontiris

The Shakespeare Ensemble at MIT has staged a fine production of Henry IV Part One under the direction of Murray Biggs, Professor of Humanities.

Henry IV Part One the second play in a tetralogy with Richard II, 2 Henry IV and Henry V, is a very powerful play and ranks among Shakespeare’s greatest dramatic creations. Simple in structure, the play deals with the rebellion of Henry Percy ("Hotspur") and his party against King Henry IV ("Henry Bolingbroke"). Because the play’s greatness lies primarily in its characterization, good acting is especially important. The actors of the Shakespeare Ensemble met this great demand.

Tom Stefanick as Prince Hal excellently portrayed the prodigal but ambitious and valiant young prince—the central character in the drama. Stefanick managed to convey this dualistic nature of the character throughout the play, and even in the Eastcheap Tavern scenes he made apparent the admirable qualities of the prince.

Mitchell Rothstein as Hotspur, the second most important character in the play, was also excellent. He so well portrayed the hot-tempered and warlike Hotspur that he caused the stage to vibrate and the audience to feel a thrill. As in its attitude toward Hal, the audience was made both to admire and to condemn Hotspur.

Both Stefanick and Rothstein were able to elicit similar feelings from the audience—and so they should. For the rivalry between the two characters they portrayed is the main dramatic element in the play.

In his role as Sir John Falstaff, Jim Walker was very successful. He definitely conveyed the kind of ease and spontaneity, even nobility, that Shakespeare’s comic invention possesses.

Audrey Picking as Mortimer was too weak-looking and fabled to portray the kind of man who deserved to be the cause of Hotspur’s rebellion. It must be granted, however, that the role of Mortimer is a difficult one to play.

Although Susan Mongello played Mistress Quickly very well, it came as a surprise to see the house of Eastcheap Tavern portrayed as a young woman. It seems that here the Ensemble production departed from Shakespeare—and not for the better. Shakespeare makes no reference to Mistress Quickly’s age in Henry IV Part One, but he does make her a widow in Henry IV Part Two. Somehow one gets the impression from the Henry plays that Mistress Quickly is a middle-aged kind-hearted, simple woman.

The Shakespeare Ensemble offered not only excellent acting but also showed an effort to bring the modern audience closer to Shakespeare. Changes in the language and in the structure of the stage were made to help this effort.

The language was modernized to some extent, but the stage was structured to resemble that of an Elizabethan theater. Because the aisles in the floor of the audience were used as entrances and exits for the actors, the relationship between the stage and the spectators was more intimate than usual.

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