

*Henry IV, Part One*

By William Shakespeare

Produced by The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, D.C.

2003-2004 Season

Directed by Bill Alexander

Program Note

*A Primer to Power*

By

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*Henry IV, Part One*, written and produced in 1596-97, is the second installment chronologically in Shakespeare's eight-play series that dramatizes the War of the Roses between the Houses of York and Lancaster. These two noble families, related by blood, fought relentlessly to claim and hold the English throne. *Henry IV, Part One* picks up immediately where *Richard II* ended, focusing upon the royal usurper Henry of Bolingbroke, who seized the throne for the Lancaster clan. Henry of Bolingbroke, the son of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, and grandson of Edward III, was born in 1367. In 1397 Richard II made Henry Duke of Hereford, but a year later, after a dispute between Bolingbroke and another noble, Thomas Mowbray, in which each accused the other of treason, the king banished Henry to France for ten years. John of Gaunt died in early 1399, and in Henry's absence, Richard II seized the Lancaster estates, stripping Bolingbroke of his ancestral rights. Henry, seeking redress against Richard, returned from exile to lead a like-minded group of nobles who claimed that they were rebelling to preserve the prerogatives of the nobility in the face of an autocratic, ineffectual ruler. The rebels forswore any desire to unseat the rightful king, but in the end this is exactly what they did. Richard II was forced to abdicate his throne to Henry of Bolingbroke and then, while being held prisoner, was

ruthlessly murdered. Henry assumed his throne under a shadow of illegitimacy, stained by the crime of regicide.

The newly installed king sits uneasily upon his throne as *Henry IV, Part One* commences, haunted by guilt and threatened by the fear of usurpation. The nobles who assisted him in acquiring his kingdom, most notably the Percy family of northern England (Worcester, Northumberland, and Henry Percy) resent being subservient to the man they placed upon the throne. The Percys expect a level of deference, autonomy, and power that Henry, as king, is simply unwilling to grant. In the first scene of *Henry IV, Part One* the tension reaches a breaking point when Henry Percy (Hotspur), after defeating a Scottish rebellion led by Douglas, refuses to turn his prisoners over to the king, asserting that he has the right to ransom the captives himself. King Henry announces he will forgo his plans to travel to Jerusalem where he intended to expiate his sins in order to deal with what appears to be a growing rebellion within his own court. From this point on, the plot of *Henry IV, Part One*, like the history it dramatizes, proceeds in a simple and straightforward manner as the action moves inexorably towards the fields of Shrewsbury where the forces of King Henry dispatch the rebellious Percys.

*Henry IV, Part One* is much more than a mere recounting of a now obscure uprising by a group of disgruntled nobles. The play achieves greatness not in the telling of English history but in the drawing of extraordinary characters. It introduces three of the most remarkable figures in all of English literature: Prince Hal, John Falstaff, and Henry “Hotspur” Percy. Hal, the Prince of Wales, heir to the throne, is universally held to be a profligate youth given to carousing and thieving. King Henry bemoans the fact that his son is such a

disappointment, particularly at a time of political upheaval. He wishes his son to be more like the young Hotspur, the bold warrior who threatens the kingdom. But in fact Hal is not what he appears to be. He carefully and cleverly disguises his true nature, waiting for the appropriate moment to reveal it. He avoids the intrigue and falseness of the court, choosing instead to mix with the denizens of Eastcheap, the red-light district of London.

Hal does not undergo a radical transformation during the course of the play. He is born into nobility and it courses through his veins regardless of his surroundings or associates. Hal is a thief who returns stolen goods with interest and a drinker who buys for others but imbibes only lightly himself. He observes and ingratiates, getting to know and love the people who will ultimately be his future subjects. Hal cavorts with a series of amusing wastrels, chief among them Falstaff. John Falstaff, like Hal, is much more complicated than suggested by his outward appearance. True, he is a fat, cowardly, drunken braggart; a perennial liar who is always caught in his own deceptions. Yet he cleverly manages to wiggle loose from every corner he gets trapped into. He is a brilliant raconteur, an ironist, and a lover of life. For all his depravity, Falstaff is an endearing figure who completely wins over both the prince and the audience. Falstaff is never in awe of the prince's social status and in no circumstances hesitates to challenge, insult or deceive the future king. Yet he genuinely loves Hal and serves as a surrogate father. Falstaff is Hal's authentic teacher, providing insights into the real world and its inhabitants.

Henry Percy has been simplistically referred to as Hal's dramatic foil: the good, honorable son compared to the wayward youth. This take on Hotspur

suggests that Hal only comes into his own when he becomes more like Henry Percy—a grave error made both by characters in the play and later by a number of literary critics. Hotspur’s good traits—bravery, loyalty, leadership abilities, and military prowess—do not in themselves qualify him to be king. Hotspur is indeed a paragon of chivalric virtue yet he lacks those qualities that make Hal an even more extraordinary figure. Hotspur may be correct when he asserts the rights of the Percy family and challenges the policies of Henry IV or when he argues with his ally in rebellion, Douglas, about the future disposition of land. But he is too headstrong and self-righteous for his own good. He lacks diplomatic skills, self-control, and insight into human nature. He fails to understand Falstaff’s credo that “the better part of valor is discretion.” The macho characteristics of Henry Percy are appealing in a warrior, but his inability to see beyond his own rhetoric and his overestimation of his own prowess ultimately proves his undoing.

*Henry IV, Part One* delineates the qualities that constitute effective royal leadership; it might be subtitled “The Making of a King.” For the play is really not about Henry IV at all, but about his son, Prince Hal, who even as a youth possesses and exhibits the traits that will ultimately make him England’s greatest king. Hal learns from both Hotspur and Falstaff without emulating either. A true nobleman must have heroic chivalric qualities (this is simply a given) but a great leader must have additional ones: He must be self-possessed and able to keep his own counsel, bide his time, understand his subjects intimately and earn their true devotion. Hal takes his final examination at the Battle of Shrewsbury and passes with flying colors becoming the true and rightful heir to the English throne. The enduring lessons about leadership imparted in *Henry IV, Part One* reverberate for us

today in our troubled times as strongly as they surely did for the Elizabethans.