

Henry IV, Part One

By William Shakespeare

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

2003-2004 Season

Directed by Bill Alexander

Program Note

The Limits of Friendship

Henry IV, Part Two is the penultimate play in Shakespeare's great tetralogy about the first part of the War of the Roses. In these four plays, (*Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part One*, *Henry Four, Part Two*, and *Henry V*), England undergoes a traumatic, yet necessary, national convulsion as the country moves from disorder to harmony. The tetralogy begins with England suffering dissension and disunity, teetering under the arbitrary and ineffectual rule of Richard II. The nation is made whole, in the end, by the glorious reign of Henry V. This transformation, however, is fraught with difficulties and dangers. Henry IV commits the crime of regicide, an offense against the very fabric of nature. An entire generation must literally pass from the stage before the nation can be cleansed and reborn. The falseness that has crept upon the land must be brought to light and there must emerge a man able to lead the country forward.

Henry IV, Part Two dramatizes the last preparatory phase before Prince Hal's ascension to the throne. The essential biographical elements contained in the work--the final bedside reconciliation between father and son, the death of Henry IV and Prince Hal's coronation as Henry V-- only comprise a few extended scenes. These events, which are presented in the final act of *Henry IV, Part Two*, could just as easily have been added to a longer first act of *Henry V*. Shakespeare, however, needs an entire play to illustrate Hal's

journey to self-discovery, a process of maturation that is a prerequisite to becoming an effective ruler. Shakespeare illustrates this course of personal development by giving Hal an extraordinary breadth of character in a wide-ranging context that takes the young prince from the court to the tavern and back again.

At the beginning of *Henry IV, Part Two*, it is clear that Hal has yet to realize that he must fully break from his wasted youth as well as the vestiges of the dissolute past. The callow Prince of Wales must undergo a series of trials so that he internalizes kingly values rather than merely assuming an inherited mantle. An essential and problematic element in this process is Hal coming to terms with his surrogate father, Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff plays an essential role in the arc of Hal's development, but ultimately becomes an obstacle that must be transcended. Falstaff provides the final hurdle, the decisive test, that Hal must overcome before he is ready and able to lead England back to greatness.

Falstaff dominates every aspect of *Henry IV, Part Two*. Even in scenes in which he does not appear, the other characters invariably refer to him. The play consists of a series of brilliant set pieces that introduce us to different aspects of Falstaff's personality. He is still the rotund, drunken braggart that we simultaneously found appalling and appealing in *Henry IV, Part One*, but in the sequel, he is further developed and becomes an even more dissolute figure. In *Henry IV, Part Two*, Falstaff talks himself out of an arrest, side-steps a promised marriage, accepts bribes from men trying to buy themselves out of military service, arrives propitiously late to the battlefield where he claims the capture of a rebel leader, and takes advantage of a rich

acquaintance by trading upon his connection to the royal heir. The behavior of Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One*, which had a certain nefarious charm, becomes, in *Henry IV, Part Two*, symptomatic of the ills that beset the nation.

Falstaff and Hal share the stage briefly but these scenes are essential moments necessary to dramatize the maturation of the prince. Despite Hal's triumph over Hotspur at the Battle of Shrewsbury in *Henry IV, Part One* and his assertion that he is not what he appears to be, it is apparent that Hal is still not ready to wear the crown. As *Henry IV, Part Two* begins, the king lies ailing and the country is racked by dissension, but the Prince of Wales is still frequenting taverns and hanging out with lowlifes. Such continued associations and activities undermine the supposition that Hal has either seen the errors of his ways or has shed his false exterior. His triumph at Shrewsbury seems to fuel his dissolute lifestyle, and he acts according to his whims in the knowledge that his battlefield heroics somehow make him impervious to criticism. Hal's behavior and his continued relationship with Falstaff remain a topic of conversation at court. In order to break the bond between the old degenerate and the prince, Sir John Falstaff is assigned to service under John of Lancaster, Hal's younger brother. This device allows Shakespeare to follow Falstaff's antics without involving Hal in them and to lay the groundwork for the final separation between the old miscreant and the future king of England.

The second time Hal encounters his dissolute mentor is late in the play when the prince decides to pull a prank on Falstaff by pretending to be a waiter at Mistress Quickly's Boar's Head Tavern. This is a pivotal scene because Hal,

in disguise, hears Falstaff denigrate him in the worst possible terms. Hal is truly shocked by what he hears. It is one thing for the two of them to trade barbs with one another but something entirely different when the prince of the realm is slandered behind his back. Not only is such discourse a personal affront, but also Hal understands the inherent danger such rhetoric has upon his future standing as king. He realizes that the time has come to uphold his vow: to assume a different persona as monarch, and to shed the bad-boy image that served him so well as the heir apparent.

The final meeting between Hal and Falstaff is one of the most poignant moments in the entire Shakespearean canon. The so-called renunciation scene is a watershed event in the life of both men. The bonny prince is now a somber minded monarch coming to grips with the challenges confronting the realm. King Henry V realizes that his youthful actions have cast doubt among his subjects about his ability to rule. He knows the discord that racked his father's reign has not magically disappeared upon his ascension. The appearance of Falstaff at the procession following the coronation is therefore hardly a welcome occurrence. Henry understands that he must put serious distance between himself and his youth and therefore between himself and Falstaff.

Henry banishes Falstaff from the court and orders him to reform his behavior upon threat of arrest. Some readers of the play (most notably Harold Bloom) have asserted that Henry's action is a hypocritical, cowardly betrayal but other critics maintain that it is completely reasonable. Audiences tend to divide evenly over this point, making it a litmus test for their interpretation of the play and their feelings about Henry. In Henry's

defense it must be noted that the king provides compensation to Falstaff and promises even greater remuneration if the old man keeps his distance and behaves properly. Of course, those who are less than charitable towards Henry may interpret his munificence as merely a pay-off for Falstaff's silence. In either case, this is the moment that lingers long after the curtain comes down, and it is a pivotal interpretative cruxes point for actors and directors. A play that has seemed on the whole to be a mere lark turns suddenly into a profound investigation of the human condition exploring the obligations and finite quality of friendship. *Henry IV, Part Two* emerges as a testament to the genius of Shakespeare and lingers uneasily in our consciousness, forcing us to assess our own notions of loyalty, honor and duty.