

Review An honorable, though flawed, 'Henry IV, Part One'

By **PHILIP BRANDES**

MARCH 19, 2015, 4:00 PM

Lest the title make you skittish about having to endure endless sequels, relax—"Henry IV, Part One" isn't "The Hobbit." Although chronologically second in William Shakespeare's historical tetralogy about the turbulent English monarchy circa 1400, the play delivers a satisfyingly self-sufficient narrative in Antaeus Theater's capable revival.

Still, this minimalist, modern-dress, color-blind, dual-cast staging is not without its challenges for audiences unfamiliar with the story—not the least being that, title notwithstanding, King Henry is only a minor character in it. Rather, the dramatic centerpiece is the coming-of-age of his son and heir, Harry (a.k.a. Hal, the one-day Henry V).

Played by versatile Ramón de Ocampo in the "Rogues" cast reviewed here (Michael Kirby in the alternate "Knaves" roster), Hal ducks his princely duties in favor of licentious carousing and petty larceny with the clownishly errant knight, Falstaff (a hilarious Gregory Itzin, alternating with Stephen Caffrey).

It could be clearer that Hal has been deliberately setting low expectations before donning the leadership mantle, but in the nicely played scene that turns around his disapproving father (James Sutorius, Joel Swetow), Hal steps up to fight the armed rebellion led by his volatile cousin Hotspur (Daniel Bess, Joe Holt).

Steeped in moral ambiguity on all sides, the action spans comedy, tragedy and combat (kudos to fight choreographer Ken Merckx). With an enviable abundance of professional talent to draw on, the constants in Michael Murray's staging are his skillful handling of the play's abrupt tonal shifts.

More problematic (especially for purists) is a sometimes loose directorial rein on the scansion; allowing actors to emote through shifting emphasis may further character insight, but it comes at a cost.

Though following the meter seems a curse, the pauses in mid-verse are surely worse. 'Tis clearer — and less likely to offend — to suck it up and honor where lines end.

"Henry IV, Part One," Antaeus Theater, 5125 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Ends May 3. \$30-\$34. (818) 506-

1983 or www.antaeus.org. Running time: 2 hours, 50 minutes.

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