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Shakespeare
HENRY IV
St Ann's Warehouse, New York, until December 13

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Clare Dunne as Prince Hal Photograph: © Helen Maybanks

"Make way! Prisoners coming through!" shouts a guard in the foyer of St Ann's Warehouse. Twelve women in chains and matching grey uniforms follow him through the room, paying no attention to the voyeurs finishing their pre-show espressos. The entire affair lasts less than a minute, and almost instantaneously, the crowd's energy picks up again. The air of seriousness that the director Phyllida Lloyd hopes to convey with this spectacle seems strained, however, as it does occasionally elsewhere in her otherwise faultlessly delivered and emotionally charged *Henry IV*.

Lloyd returns to the same prison setting of her acclaimed Donmar production of *Julius Caesar*, in which the actors are inmates performing Shakespeare's play. The Roman tragedy is a favourite in programmes like Shakespeare Behind Bars in America and the UK's Clean Break, which bring theatre into prisons for rehabilitation purposes. For some of the incarcerated, killing is not an abstract concept. In their performances, lines like Brutus's assertion that "we shall be called purgers, not murderers" for killing Caesar are imbued with a potency inaccessible, for better or worse, to actors living calmer lives. By evoking this harsh reality, the conceit – inspired, it seems, by the text itself – was brilliant, giving the work an immediacy often lost on contemporary audiences.

Henry IV too contains parallels with this cold environment. Much like the royal line of succession dismantled by Henry when he deposed Richard II, hierarchy in prisons can rest on shaky foundations. Most respected, or at least feared, at the start of this production is the inmate who assumes the role of the king, played by an unrecognizable Harriet Walter with slicked back hair and a gaunt, steely-eyed complexion. Subtly alluding to Henry's anxiety regarding his reign's questionable legitimacy, she utters every word with immense gravity and conviction, as if aware that her authority may vanish in an instant. Jade Anouka's firecracker Hotspur, topped with a flash of red hair, convinces as the threatening leader of a rival gang. She bounces around the stage in perpetual motion, a boxer with her hands wrapped in red tape as she trains for battle. Hers is not the only faction with stakes in a potential change in the power structure, as Jackie Clune's feisty Glendower and the Douglas (Susan Wokoma) make evident – though the former is most memorable for introducing unexpected levity to the Welshman's grand claims that "the earth did shake when I was born". This violence can also break families apart, which makes the impassioned pleas of a bathrobe-clad Lady Percy (Sharon Rooney), begging her husband and father-in-law not to leave her side, that

much more anguished.

Each character feels necessary to the narrative, and as a result, no actor seems less important than any other. Showcasing one star above the rest of the cast is a tradition these women want abolished (among many other patriarchal practices, including non-gender-blind casting). This pure sense of ensemble is not the only way the company has produced a progressive kind of Shakespeare. Myriad accents – Irish, Indian, Scottish, cockney – and even the Spanish languge itself sing through the theatre. That not a word is lost or intent made unclear should give more conservative directors pause. The single instance of RP, or at least a conscious parody of it, elicits the evening's biggest laughs, as Sophie Stanton's show-stealing Falstaff impersonates Henry as a cross between Lady Bracknell and *Downton Abbey*'s Dowager Countess. At no point does it feel awkward or unnatural for these women (or the women they portray) to take on these parts. On the contrary, it even feels necessary at times, as they subvert Part I simply by being on stage at all, considering it has the fewest lines for women in all the history plays. They also bring instances of misogyny in the text to the foreground, such as a series of lewd insults Falstaff makes about Mistress Quickly which here devolve into an off-book moment of intensified sexual degradation that drives the woman playing the hostess to tears.

Less effective, however, is the invented frame story. Like many critics and directors, Lloyd ignores the obvious: that the *Henry IV* plays are actually about Henry IV. Instead, she heavily condenses both texts (using *Part I* primarily) and builds the narrative too much around Hal's maturation. She then turns this into a rehabilitation story of sorts for the inmate playing the prince (Clare Dunne) who, the moment the show begins, shares news of her impending release. Some alterations do work to the production's advantage. Conflating the civil conflicts from *Part II* with Shrewsbury raises the dramatic tension surrounding the final battle, and were this *Part I* alone, we could not witness Walter's masterly turn berating Hal when he prematurely takes up the crown. Other changes feel ironic though, such as the excision of Doll Tearsheet, one of the few "female" roles, which in turn removes the scene in which both she and Mistress Quickly are arrested on murder charges and taken away – to prison.

That Lloyd concludes her adaptation with the renunciation of Falstaff seems inevitable. What makes less sense is her desire to use this scene in order to turn *Henry IV* into a tragedy. While the inmates drop character on a few occasions, the division between the real and the fictional in the prison collapses entirely at this point. The inmate playing Falstaff hears her paroled friend, not Henry V, dismissing her which compels the former to lunge forward, shouting in agony "You're not going to fucking leave me!" Multiple guards drag her offstage and both plays end abruptly. As a result, the rejection becomes as close to the murder of Falstaff as Lloyd can imagine – because actually staging his death would be impossible. "We cannot see Falstaff die on stage," wrote W. H. Auden, "because, if we did, we should not believe it." The same holds true here. Overflowing with earnest joy and unchecked frivolity even at the darkest moments, the aged knight cannot be assimilated into a vision of the world as hopeless and bleak as that conveyed by the other eleven women following the guards out of the room to the sound of inmate-Hal's sobs. Yet it is always difficult to reconcile Falstaff with Hal's actions; and after all, the play, and this production, have always been about more than him.

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