

Henry 5

Directorial Notes and Conceptual Thoughts

General Observations: This play, as I have noted in other contexts, is unique in its ability to serve simultaneously as an “anti-war” play (laying bare some of the dark side of the ‘run-up,’ execution and aftermath of a war) and as a “let’s-kick-some-arse-for-God-and-country” play (with its stirring patriotic speeches, hard charging plot and text, and featuring its title character who is, by turns, an insensitive brute and a likeable, charismatic natural leader.) I underscore simultaneous as a key notion here, in that a) this is what seems true to me about “war”—that these two energies are constantly in tension or public/private dialectic with each other; b) it make the play a more interesting and complex journey than simply making it a diatribe on one ‘side’ or the other, and c) this is a timely way of investigating the concept of “war,” “citizenship,” “patriotism” and the rest, in light of the fact that we have all been living in the middle of this discussion for many years (at least the last decade of the Iraq/Afghan conflict, but for us older folks, it has really been a lifetime—Viet Nam, Balkan Territories (Czech/Serbian/Kosovar/Bosnian skirmishes), Iraq “1,” Somalia and other middle-African fracas’ and Iraq “2”/Afghanistan “#XX” and more. In short Henry 5 treats its subject in the *most modern* of ways—dramatizing the public face of ‘leadership’ while deconstructing what goes on behind the public mask. Oh yeah, and it happens to utilize some of the most powerful, soaring language in the Shakespearean canon.

Text and “Shape”—We aim to boil the text down to a lean and mean 80-ish minutes of running time, for the following reasons: a) to keep the action hurtling forward; b) to make sure that we can sustain this “hurtling” with energy and mastery of language and movement; c) so that audience members will not have to be on their feet for an uncomfortable time (80-90 minutes is the max-out point. To this end we have, thus far, removed the Bardolph/Nim/etc. section entirely (they barely make sense without knowledge of Henry 4.1/4.2), redacted some of the soldierly banter of Fluellen and her cronies, and trimmed some ‘big’ speeches down to ‘medium’ ones. Thus far we have left the recognizable passages relatively intact (“Unto the breach,” “Crispin’s day,” “What a heavy weight on royalty” [which I call the ‘Gethsemane’ speech!], and much of the “Katharine/Henry” byplay, now known as the “Clarence/Harry” byplay. This being said, this will continue to be a fluid process—I calculate that another 30 minutes or so remains to be excised (to allow for some good “fight time” and the like!)

Reconsidering Gender—My inclination to cast women in many of the written-as-male roles grows from several sources. 1) It adds another compelling layer of conflict (as witnessed in the recent Supreme Court appointment hearings for Justice Sotomayor, the gender wars are still far from over;) 2) last year we came as close as ever before to having a woman as U.S. President and/or Vice-President and currently are served by a female Secretary of State. To my mind, this underscores the fact that this is a very contemporary and timely play and, more importantly, women know about these things! 3) a reading of Canterbury’s lengthy speech in I.ii unequivocally states the position, used by the “English” as rationalization for mobilization, that the “law” (“Salique”) proclaimed by various voices that “women” or off-spring of royal women’s familial lines should be banned from leadership is false, both logically and historically (!!) Enough said! 4) This way of arranging the play suits the Theatre Simpson company well, and allows us to stage a play that might not see the light of day otherwise ...and this would be unfortunate.

World of the Production—Perhaps not surprisingly in light of my previous comments, I read this play as a very contemporary one. To this end, I am not interested in creating a period-looking piece from...uh.....any of the “-i/an” periods—Elizabethan, Edwardian, Victorian or any of the rest. I imagine the piece (and, you’ll note as you read carefully that it’s crafted this way) as a “guerilla-warfare” operation (how else could a rag-tag band, outnumbered by as much as 300 to 1, ‘win the day’????) It is a dark-ish world, references are made to rain and mud in the battle scenes, and, finally, I see the play as of a world unto itself, but with what I will call “parallel” to our own—while also harkening back, back, back to the pre-medieval period. To wit (in stream-of-consciousness-style)—a) no ‘desert storm’ or ‘jungle war’ camouflage....but contemporary lines/elements in clothing; b) no foils nor broadswords....but also no guns (at least for the English; c) no ‘finery’ for Harry and her court until, maybe, V.ii for the surrender—the “English” are an open-air-living band of hardened fighters (in some corners, especially in South and Central Americas, they might be known as “Freedom Fighters.”) d) although I hesitate to use the term because it has nearly become a cliché, this is a (at least quasi) “post-apocalyptic” vibe, to the degree that it is dirty, scrappy, hard-edged....and that being said, let’s keep thinking of it as a theatrical ‘parallel’ universe, metaphorically indicting the current ‘real’ one; e) with these things in mind, I have been looking at some iconography from recent (but not ‘contemporary’ with their flying CG blast-o-machinery) DYSTOPIC (or “in a world of dystopia”) imagery. This led me to (don’t laugh...I mean it!) the series of Mad Max/Road Warrior films and what I found (then and now) to be a clever and ultimately believable atmosphere. We should look to them. So I have and/or am attaching a number of images that struck me as especially tasty with regard to our project.

Mad Max and Me—Here are some things I don’t like about the Mad Max images (in relation to our production): 1) too much leather; 2) SOME (but not all) hair and makeup stylings that have become clichéd and overused in the intervening 30 years; 3) “Let’s Get Physical” headbands. Here are some things I REALLY LIKE about this vision—1) creation of a consistent visual environment that walks somewhere in the “parallel world/near-future” territory; 2) the brilliant, often surprising, sometimes humorous (on purpose) juxtaposition of textures, elements, and FOUND OBJECTS—look at how fabric, feathers and old football shoulder-pads make for a lean fighting machine....animal skins, detritus from times and people gone by that now get used for something else....a dirty kid....a strangely familiar toy, now used for something else; 3) the use of non-traditional weaponry (no foils/swords, virtually no guns, admittedly lots of fire)—little hand arrow launchers, clubs and sticks, whips, a home-fashioned wobbly helicopter, and etc. 4) dirty, ‘guerrilla’-type fighters who are ruthless and tough, but who fashion a life for themselves hand-to-mouth and by constantly battling....the elements, the ‘enemy,’ the forces of nature; 5) the total, passionate commitment to the world by director, designers and actors; 6) the nuanced (or sometimes blatantly obvious) thread of sensuality that permeates the world....the underlying sexual tension that rides parallel to aggression, hero-ism (and anti-heroism), in this world and in THE world; 7) a few hockey masks (and note that they don’t look like “Halloween” or “Friday the 13th” per se—both of which had become famous/infamous prior to Max and the gang.)

Some other places to look-- Kevin Costner’s Waterworld. I was one of the few people in the world who actually liked this movie, but that’s beside the point—in it can be found some great images of a decaying world, given to battle-of-necessity, ruthlessness in order to achieve one’s needs....and, again, clever use of cultural flotsam to help ‘people’ survive. ALSO—Viking imagery. Not the cartooned or clichéd kind, but of the early, earthy variety, when people did battle as needed, raid as needed, but also lived as best they could in an untamed world. And, etc.

Staging/"Promenade"/ Environmentalism—As a starting point, we want to create a space in which actors and audience cohabitate. There will be no audience seating per se, and the audience will move and flow as action dictates and as we periodically urge them (“Please step back, a fight is going to break out here.”) Our intention is to bring a sense of immediacy and excitement to the actor/audience relationship and put the audience in the middle of the action. More specifically about the imagined space—we would want a large space that, for the sake of a starting point, wants to include a good share of the ‘stage’ space, and also includes a continuation of the floor at stage level out to the lift area. The space wants to be ‘enclosed’ virtually all the way around (I hesitate to say “walls” because this could be an important visual element beyond “walls”) and at a height that actors can move without being seen when necessary. We would want a couple of main “entrances”—perhaps one stage left and one stage right in this ‘enclosure’ that may be served by gates or something of the sort to allow for passage ‘through’ of shuffling (or running or swaggering) soldiers. One of these will also be where the audience enters the space. At least one of the ‘enclosure units’ wants to be scaleable from both sides (with RELATIVE ease—some work by the actors may be suitably required) for ‘charging,’ ‘raiding,’ ‘sneak-attacking’ and the like. At least one area wants to be useable for standing on top of the enclosing unit (e.g.—when Harfleur’s governor surrenders = city walls.) At a few spots in the ‘enclosing units’ we would want a platform or small/medium ‘mansion-like’ unit (in the medieval staging sense of “mansion”) on which scenes can be played and/or proclamations can be made to allow for acting other than just on the floor. These would come out into the space as useable acting spaces and levels-creators. As a side-note, it has been my experience that such platforms or structural units will want to be a few steps higher than what otherwise might be ‘standard’ so that with an audience on its feet, people have suitable sightlines. These units want to be accessible from behind the enclosing ‘walls’ so actors can appear or disappear in ‘from-backstage’ fashion as needed. We may want one of these units (perhaps in a corner—just now “up left” feels best) to be a bit more decorative so as to serve as the ‘home-mansion’ of the French when they are in ‘palace.’ We also want to explore the notion of using the lift to bring actors (a group of the women-soldiers, and potentially Harry) up to the space in the course of the opening “Muse of Fire” prologue, text of which will be parceled out to various members of the ensemble. With this in mind, this might suitably be a place for a platform/mansion/double-decker (maybe Harry rides up seated in her “throne/not throne” seating unit to begin the “where is Canterbury” unit as it comes to rest) AND some coolness factor and a wing-ding opening. We may then want the “hole” to be blocked/caged/police-taped off at the very beginning..... A final thought—we will likely need a flatbed wagon of some kind, large enough to hold a few dead bodies (a “tumbrel”!), high enough from which political whirlwind speeches can be given for all to see (and fights can utilize the ‘above’ and the ‘under’), and with wheels that can steer into/out of the ‘openings/gates’ as needed. And with a tongue that can be tipped up and locked so as not to trip audience members. A giant “Radio Flyer” if you will....or a small farm trailer...with just a flat bed.

The Audience—Will be held in the BPAC lobby until just before curtain time. At that time one or more actors will go out to engage them...by which we mean—a) give them instructions about what’s going to happen; b) make them leave their coats, bags, etc. in the coat-check; c) tell them the old adage that if they can’t see or hear something....then MOVE. Etc. They will then lead the audience en masse into the ‘space’, tickets being taken on their way in. (Programs to be given AFTER the show, BTW.) What we anticipate the audience encountering upon entrance will be people from Harry’s band of sisters DOING some things.....sitting by a fire? Napping?

Working on making a board into a weapon? Playing a guitar and singing? Etc. Again, there will be no dedicated seating for audience, meaning that they will need to and want to engage with the space and the people in it. Obviously, as described above, there will be a few platform edges or steps or the like that people can rest on for a few minutes before they have to move for an army to run through (!) Also obviously, if we have handicapped or nearly handicapped patrons, we will have identified places for them to be—this being said, a person in a wheelchair, for example, can, it seems to me, be thought of and moved around as a member of the audience mob....whether by us or by themselves or by their ‘guest.’ The audience will be engaged directly at times by the actors within scenes.....”For Harry, God and England” seems ripe for the picking of including all the audience as the army being cajoled!!

Costumes/clothes: I have little to add that goes beyond my applicable comments above and the pictures/images I am providing, except to say (see also Makeup) that a goodly number (3 or 4 anyway) of our band of sisters have their own tattoos which we should explore showing and enhancing as opposed to hiding.

Makeup: See comments above and pictures. Avoid clichés that we’ve seen thousands of times before....but look for how we can create a world unto itself that is surprising, nasty and sensual (but the French...not so much.) Explore our currently-tattooed sister-warriors for the ONE TIME IN THEIR LIVES that they may well get to show off their tats...and even have them expanded. This said—I don’t want this to be a “tattoo” show, or to have ‘everyone gets a tattoo’ as a model for operation. Those who do, let’s see them (some will have to be made nastier—I’ve seen a few hearts and birds that need a little..uh..nastying up....) We will need to talk about dirt and mud and blood....and its necessity to grow more prominent through the course of the play. Especially mud. And blood.

Lighting: We want to explore textual references to middle-of-the-night, crack-of-dawn, it’s-raining-like-hell, and other lighting excitement. We want to explore and think about what can be done ‘offstage’ (outside the “enclosed area”) to suggest the hellacious fighting (without guns or canon....although maybe the French have some—still thinking about that.) We will have to proceed carefully with how to keep a crack of light over the whole “space” for audience operations, while shifting focus from one corner or entrance to the other, to the other....My eye likes these kinds of plays dark, so let’s think about how to integrate all these disparate needs.

Props: As noted above, we will want to have some good talk (and some fun) sorting out what kinds of “found” items will make for weapons—tree branches? Clubs? 2x4 with nails on the end? Re-fashioned tennis rackets (definitely need one or two of those—for whacking the Dauphin’s tennis balls!), as well as some ideas that might emerge from Mad Max world or etc., about little hand-sized bows with little arrows and the like. We may discover some additional prop needs for the ‘living’ environment—scraps of gnarly food, buckets to drink from, worn threadbare sleeping packs or blankets, and so on.

“ALL THINGS BE READY, IF OUR MINDS BE SO!”