

Henry V

William Shakespeare

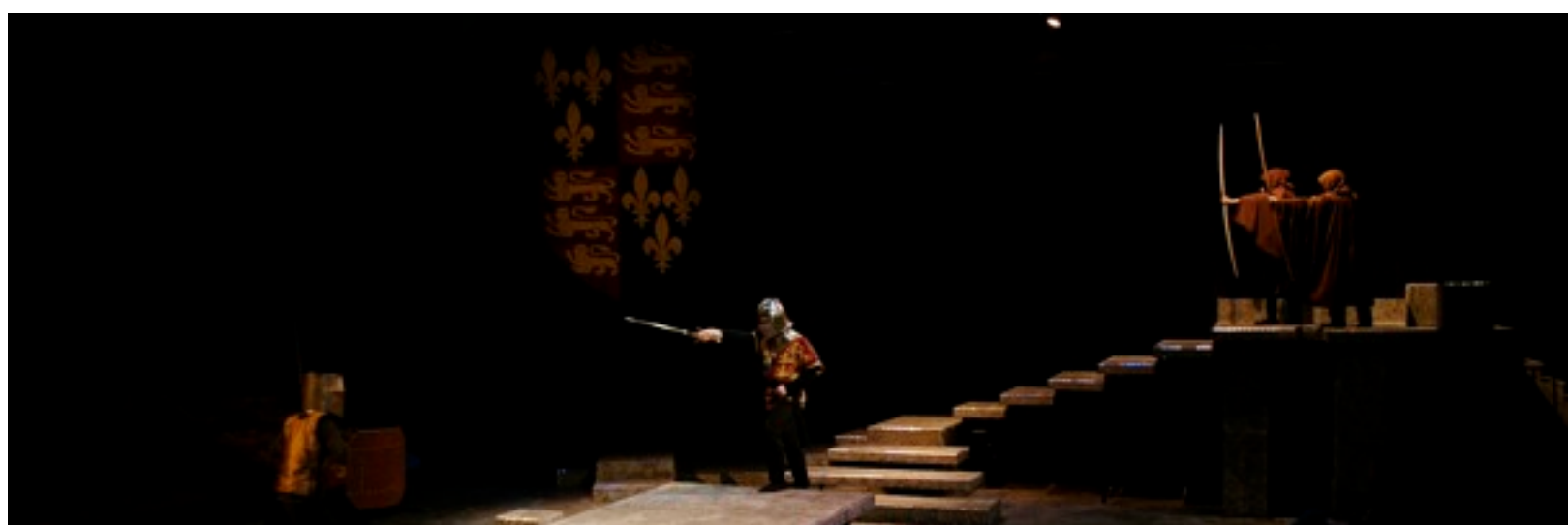


*Henry finishing off a soldier wounded by arrows
inspired by the historical battle of Agincourt.*

Adaption, Direction, Sound Design,
and Composition
by
Christopher Plummer

I chose to do Henry V to contrast our previous production of Much Ado About Nothing which was done in period dress on a recreation of the globe stage. I wanted a script that dealt clearly and directly with meta-theatrical themes and questions that we could stage in a more abstract and modern way.

This would provide an example of stylistic variety for our students and would allow me to use theatricality to clarify Shakespeare's script. Because the concept of sets and costumes was so integral to my directing of this show I have detailed them here.



Archers fire (with sound but no arrows) wounding the enemy before Henry's kill



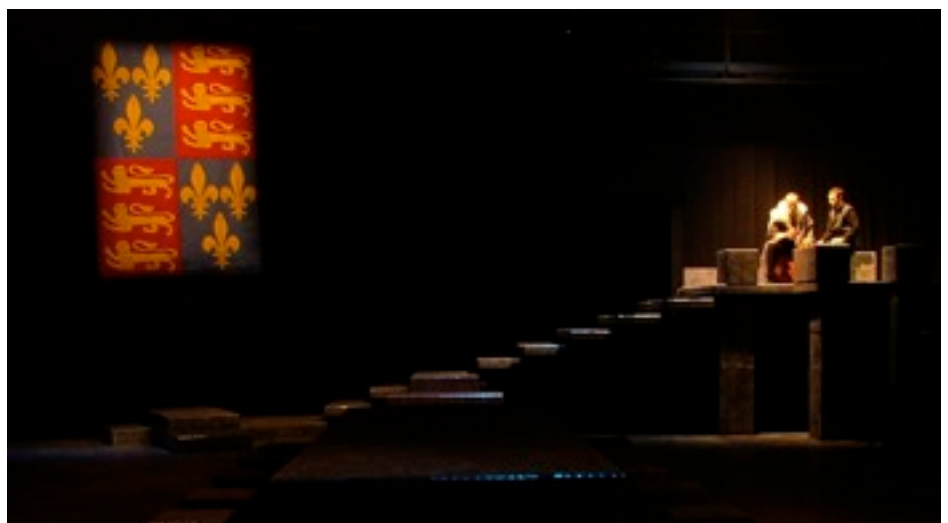
*The Chorus discussing the battle preparations
Act IV prologue, part 2*

My starting scenic concept had the following principles:

- The set should be strong contrasts of stone and steel vs. fabric
- The set should be very flexible and non-specific
- The set needed to have an above and below that related to the traditional Shakespearian stage
- The set needed strong levels to work with
- The set needed some stunning entrance points that were unexpected for the space
- The set needed to be dynamic - I wanted the sense of destruction and chaos contrasted with strength and control.



*Henry V meeting the French Harold, Act IV.iii
The table was only used in this way during battle.*



*Death of the King in the "above" area
scene taken from Henry IV part III*

The set we used:

- Had a massive table in the center that both French and English rulers sat at and that had a board room feel/inspiration to it.
- The large dark area in the pictures is traditionally a wall in our theatre but has a large door in it from the Banner to the platform that we were able to open. By hanging a black curtain behind the opening made an invisible massive entrance for the army in III.i at the top of the “Once more into the breach” speech.
- Was painted to look like stone with metal highlights and a huge tapestry.
- Had blocks that could be moved about to break-up and add chaos to the scene but started and ended in a strongly ordered arrangement.
- Had a tapestry that was ripped off and cast on the stage, revealing Henry’s war banner and added to the carnage on stage.
- The tapestry then rotated to reveal the elegant ending tapestry.
- All tapestry manipulation was done by the Chorus on specific lines.



*The Chorus rips down the tapestry, Act III prologue-
“And down goes all before them”*



*The Duke of Burgandy having avoided the war negotiates
the peace from a position of strength, Act V.ii*



*The King’s nod is the order for Bardolf’s execution-
Act III.vi*



The Chorus introduces the traitors, Act II.ii prologue



Dress Parade - The Army Prepares

My starting costume concept:

- All actors would wear a basic black dance outfit base.
- They would put on their costumes on-stage, clearly donning their roles.
- As characters are killed their costumes are ripped off and thrown on the stage to provide accumulating carnage.
- The actress playing Hostess would come out in her black base costume to escort the boy off in his blacks after he is killed upstage center.
- Henry would clearly progress through several roles.



The English Army encamped, Act IV.i



Saint Crispian Speech, Act IV.iii

Final Costumes:

- The basic black made the show far more affordable and made the building of the costumes possible.
- We ended up having only Henry change costumes on stage since that is where the playing of roles is important.
 - Henry started the play in his “Hal” outfit.
 - He changed to meet with his father
 - His father dies and he is crowned on stage
 - He then later changes for battle
 - His final costume is for the negotiations; political and matrimonial.



*The Crowning of Henry V
End of Act I.i.b*



*Falstaff & Prince Hal
Act I.i.a taken from Henry IV part 1*



The accumulation of dead costumes and dis-ordered set as the play progresses



The Death of the Boy

Dying:

- I originally wanted the ripping of the costumes to be very violent but because of the number of costumes and the strains our small department was under producing this show, the skill of the actors, the integration into the lighting and sound style, and the difficulty of how to clear the body away after the costume was ripped off it was better to stylize the killing.



The Constable's stylized death moment.



The killing blow to The Constable of France by the Duke of Exeter



Working the lighting of Henry in battle.



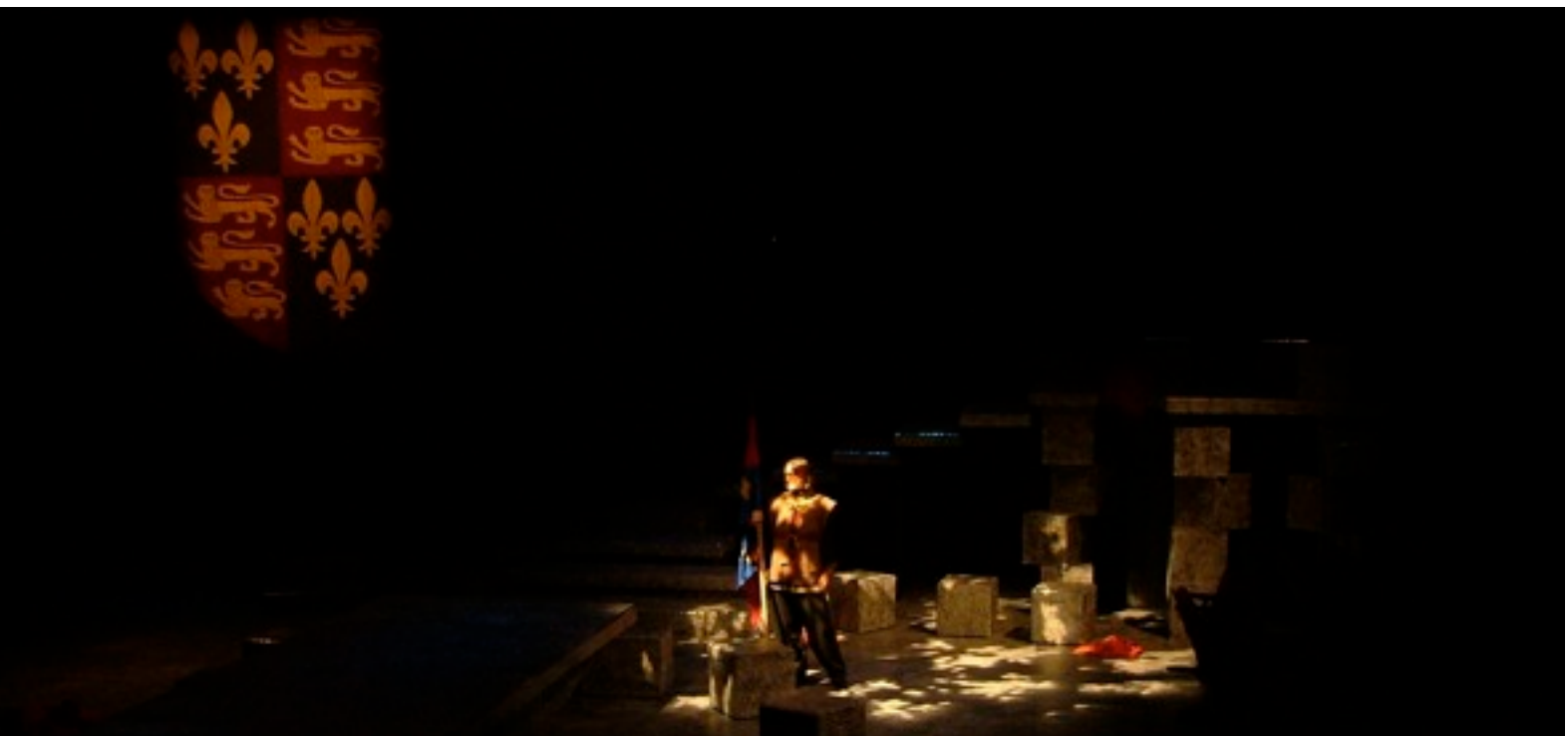
Working the lighting of Henry in battle.

Lighting Concept:

- Beyond basic principles of lighting I only wanted a red light that the dead actors could leave the stage in.
- I encouraged a sculpted architectural use of light

Students Provided

- Great focus
- Fabulous definition and confinement of space
- Sense of timing on the cueing



The Boy comes on stage



"Into the Breach" Henry's audience start cowering behind the set and slowly more of the group gets into the excitement of the speech and there cheering builds to the charge back onto the battlefield. Act III.i

Directing Foundation for Shakespeare

- Make sure actors know the meaning of every word and that they convey that meaning
- Make sure actors pay attention to scansion and punctuation
- Make sure actors make each word and every line count, Shakespeare's characters are passionate people
- Keep the action moving

Specific Directing Execution

- Recruit assistant directors to work one on one with every actor to ensure they know what their lines mean, have mapped out the scansion, and know their punctuation.
- Work with the Professor of French to recruit suitable French speaking actors and to work with actors on their accents.
- Plan macro blocking (entrances and exits, where key locations are, certain big moments) and do the real blocking as an exploration of the text. This makes every movement on stage motivated by the actor.
- Eliminate Act III.ii after line 53 because I knew we couldn't devote resources to the proper dialect training to make that scene work and it isn't necessary to the story.
- Do vocal exercises to free up and focus the voice at every rehearsal. A poorly positioned or articulated voice will kill the delivery.
- Spend time to get the reactions right. Other characters reactions are an essential component to the shaping of a speech or a characters power on stage. Especially in a play about public persona.



"Into the Breach" Act III.i

Handling the Script

Scholars, producers, directors, and government pundits have alternately interpreted Henry V as both pro- and anti-war. I wanted to directly engage that ambiguity and to be sure to pull out the ways in which Shakespeare was manipulating this paradox.

Shakespeare uses juxtaposition in this play to great effect. The chorus talks about how all England is ablaze and ready for war. But, in the next scene real Englishmen are talking about how they don't want to go to war, what a drag this all is, what they stand to lose, and finally their tearful good byes. Our production emphasized this by overlapping these scenes when possible. So, for example, when the Chorus is talking about how all England is on fire, Nym is making his entrance clearly not fired up to go to war. Our production pushed this its farthest at the end of the play when the Chorus is talking about Henry's triumphant return to England and the rest of the cast are picking up the carnage of dead costumes and disordered scenery.

By adding large battle scenes and dramatic music our production drew the audience into the excitement of the story, an excitement that encourages you to cheer for Henry. Against that back drop our production didn't soften any of Shakespeare's criticisms of the characters or action of the play. We were not out to make a pro- or anti-war play but to commit fully to the contradictions and complexities of the script. I feel that created a much more compelling and thought provoking experience than some of the more one-dimensional productions.

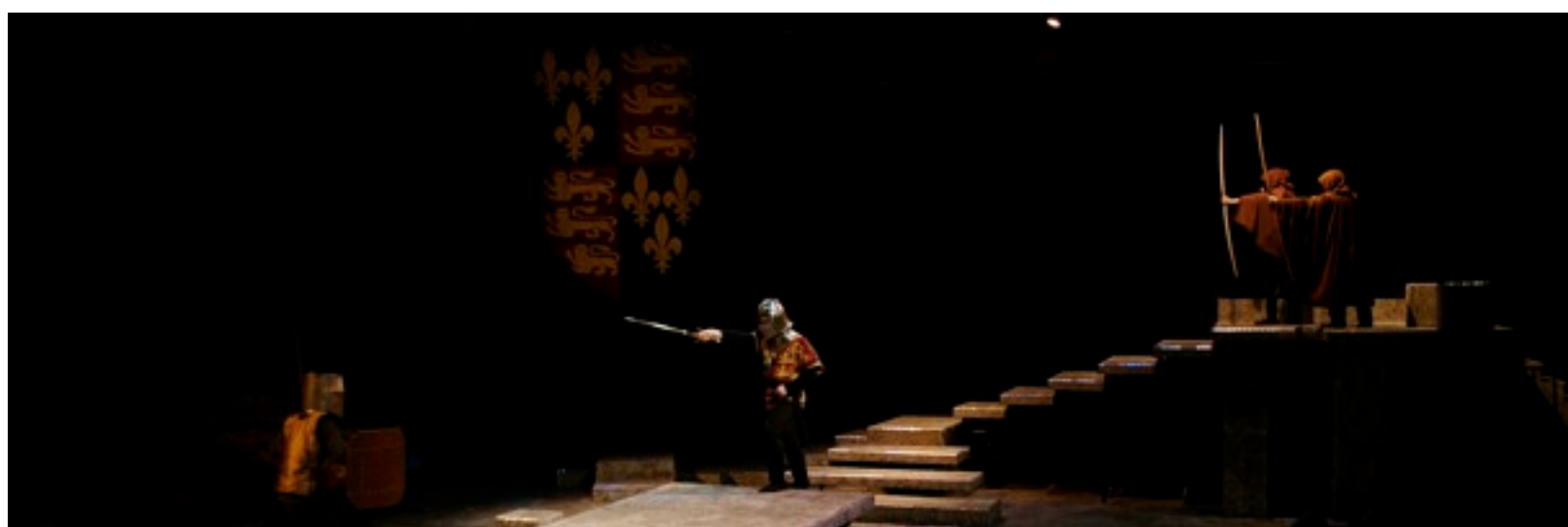
Shakespeare has Henry order to kill all prisoners before right before he learns that the luggage boys have been killed by the French. Many productions move the death of the boys to before Henry's command to kill all the prisoners to soften Henry's most brutal moment. Our production chose not to change the order.

The execution of Bardolf is a very powerful scene if you know the Henry series of plays. It is also important in understanding the full situation and weight of Henry's choices. In order to properly set the audience up for this moment we started our production with a scene from Henry IV, part I with prince Henry, Falstaff, and Bardolf to setup the relationship. We also make Henry clearly give a visual order to kill Bardolf and we move his death on stage in front of Henry. This extra scene also helps solidify the personas that Henry takes on and the resulting consequences and themes in Henry V.

To further emphasize how tenuous Henry's claim to the throne was I included the death of Henry IV from Henry IV, part II, and followed it with a ceremonial crowning scene.

The Sound

- Filled the space
- The only special sound was the flight of two arrows timed to the music (and thus the fighters) to fly from stage-right archers to the stage-left victims.
- All fights were choreographed to the music.
- Fights were rehearsed at safe speeds by playing the midi orchestrations at slower tempos.
- I sampled some of my own instruments to get the sounds I wanted. The most notable is the bass drum.



Archers fire (with sound but no arrows) wounding the enemy before Henry's kill

Sound Track Comments

- Many cues contain significant low frequency content and you should play them back at conservative levels if you are not using subwoofers.
- We used a number of sudden hard hits that were matched by action on stage by the actors and lighting. The sound added a great deal of impact to the visual, making it felt rather than just observed.
- Drum rolls were recorded as drum rolls not sampled MIDI to get the right accumulation of drum rumble.
- The Bardolf killing sound along with the lighting change made the beheading sword stroke very striking. On its own the stage business was very tame, if not laughable. With the sound it was visceral.
- Many of the sound cues are underscoring choreographed action and as the show progresses there are greater numbers of combatants wielding weapons very close to the audience. Complicated sound is not needed just enough to fill in and flesh out.
- None of these sound cues are composed to hold their own rather their purpose is to make the stage action real. They did this extremely well during the battle scenes that we interjected between scenes.



"Once more into the breach" Act III.i