

ACTORS' ROUNDTABLE

ACTING SHAKESPEARE A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2009 Production of *Henry V*

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Featuring: J. R. Sullivan (Director), Brian Vaughn (King Henry V), Corliss Preston (Chorus), Phil Hubbard (Exeter), Rick Peeples (Fluellen), Will Zahn (Pistol), Emily Trask (Katharine), and Ben Cherry (The Dauphin)

F*lachmann:* Welcome to the culminating event in our Wooden O Symposium, the Actors' Roundtable Discussion on *Henry V*. I'd like to begin with a question for Mr. Sullivan, and then move on to the actors for their opinions on the same topic. The primary criticism levied against history plays is that they are often boring recreations of mundane historical details, but anyone who has seen your brilliant production of *Henry V* would certainly disagree with this statement. So I'd like to know your secret for making this play so accessible, so immediate, and so alive.

Sullivan: It's like what happened in school, isn't it? If you had a history class that was simply dates and battles and the important reigns of kings or presidents or prime ministers, it could be awfully dull. But if it's a *story*, as history really is, then you are talking about an entirely different situation. Of course, in the theater storytelling is what we're about. Shakespeare's histories are not so much recitations of history as they are stories about human behavior in crisis.

Flachmann: So these plays are really about people and what they must do to survive.

Sullivan: Absolutely. Shakespeare certainly gives us a national impression about Henry the Fifth, something that was received by his audience from generations before. We have the same in that we

as a nation have received impressions about Abraham Lincoln, for example, or George Washington or Amelia Earhart. People may not know the whole story about these heroes, but they usually know something about them: a picture of the person or a notion of that person's character, a sense of his or her impact on the planet. History is always subjective. It's never the whole story; it never can be.

Flachmann: Thank you, Jim. Brian?

Vaughn: For me, the main goal, the main objective in doing these plays, is to try and find as many of the human connections to the characters as possible so the audience can relate to them as people. History plays are more like a big family drama than a boring history lesson, a recital of kings and monarchs. Jim's vision was to make the play as human and as visceral as possible so the audience could strongly identify with these characters. The beauty of playing Henry is that you have three other plays in which he is mentioned or he appears, so you definitely get a thorough back story for his character in the *Henry IV* plays. In *Henry V*, however, he's a different man; he's turned away from his former self and become a king. I loved the journey of trying to find the heart of this guy, of discovering who he is as a ruler, as a king, as a lover. There's lots of theatrical language in the play about becoming one person and then putting on a mask to be an entirely different character, and I think that's the journey for Henry. He plays the politician in the first scene, then the defiant ruler punishing the traitors, then the angry soldier, then the trickster, and finally the lover. So the challenge is in discovering who he is beneath all these personae, which is his own spiritual journey of finding himself in the play. Much of this culminates in the prayer scene before the Battle of Agincourt, when he discovers that all these different aspects lie within himself. After this pivotal moment in the play, he is no longer concerned with trying to play all these different roles. He can be the "role" itself.

Flachmann: Thanks, Brian. Corliss?

Preston: At the first readthrough, Jim told us that this is a play about language, about the ability to communicate or miscommunicate, and it's also very muscular. So all of a sudden he gave me two things that helped me greatly as the Chorus. I knew instinctively that I could move around, that I didn't have to stand there and just say the words. I was given freedom to "embody" the action, and that made a lot of sense to me personally. I also know that you and Jim broke up some of the speeches, which allowed me as Chorus to remain present throughout the entire play. I love

watching the action on stage, which keeps me connected to the play. I invite the audience into a world of imagination that I truly believe in. And it's not easy language; there's a density to it. We really tried to make it accessible to the audience. I also immediately identified with the war effort in this play because I had just finished working with returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the stories these soldiers told gave me a strong emotional connection to Shakespeare's script. This role is sometimes divided into an ensemble, with many people doing it. I knew we didn't have time for that here. Choral work takes an enormous amount of rehearsal time to do it well. What I found playing the role as one person was that I felt emotionally connected to the characters on stage, which was a wonderful surprise for me.

Flachmann: Thank you, Corliss. Phil?

Hubbard: I play the Duke of Exeter, which is a lovely supporting role. He's a bit of a father figure, I think, to the King, a confidant to the King, a huge fan and supporter to the King. In a supporting role like this, what's important is finding out where my character fits into the story. It's easy to admire Brian, because he's a friend of mine and I love his work, so it's easy to play Exeter for that reason. I played Cominius in *Coriolanus* a few years ago, who is also a huge supporter of the key figure in the play. I tend to play roles like that. [laughter] Exeter is also somewhat ambassadorial. The scenes with the French are a little bit like United Nations meetings—well, we've talked about Colin Powell bringing those satellite photos to the UN and proving why we should go to war. That aspect of Exeter is in there, too. He's like a Secretary of State.

Flachmann: That's excellent. Rick, how about Fluellen?

Peeples: He's been a problematic character in productions because he's really hard to understand and often gets cut a lot. [laughter] I had the experience as a younger actor of being in a couple of different productions of *Henry V* and almost feeling sorry for the poor actor playing Fluellen. I could never understand what he was saying, and neither could anybody else. So I was resolved coming into this production that my main goal was to make Fluellen understandable and accessible, so that the language was at least clear. After that, if he was funny or engaging or interesting, that was just going to be gravy. [laughter] Fluellen's a clown, obviously, but he has his serious side, too, because he's kind of like Lear's Fool. He's also like a new Falstaff. It's really interesting, in fact, that Falstaff dies early in this play without ever having his name mentioned. So we had some discussions about

whether Fluellen is a reincarnation of Falstaff for Henry, who needs a new common man to be a reference point for him. I'm fascinated with how Fluellen has these hilarious scenes and then turns on a dime when we're counting the French and English dead. It's really an intriguing role for me to play. I'm having a lot of fun doing it.

Flachmann: Thanks, Rick. We've got Will down there who, as Pistol, is our working class representative.

Zabrn: Yes, but I think Pistol and his Boar's Head buddies are even lower than working class. [laughter] They won't work! [laughter]

Flachmann: They're the "stealing class." [laughter]

Zabrn: That's right, the stealing class. Nym, Bardolph, the Boy, and I go to France to steal. We're like mercenary soldiers who are going over there to glean what we can off whomever happens to be dead or dying or not looking. [laughter] When we started working on the Boor's Head scenes in rehearsals, Jim Sullivan equated us with the three Stooges, and we kept shifting who was Moe and Larry and Curly. [laughter] But I feel really special because this is my second season in Utah and this is my second Shakespeare play, and my GI bill ran out before I got to the third year at the Goodman School of Drama, and that's when you learn Shakespeare! [laughter and applause]. So it's taken me a while to figure out what we're talking about. [laughter] It's a joy at this late date for me to get to work on the real stuff. I'm in hog heaven! [applause]

Flachmann: Thank you, Will. Now let's move down to the French characters, who are already giving me trouble for having marginalized them on the dais. [laughter] I apologize. Emily, talk to us about the beautiful Katharine, please.

Trask: The word "beautiful" is a good introduction to Katharine. I have the pleasure of providing a dash of estrogen in a very testosterone-heavy play. [laughter] It's certainly only a dash, but I think it's a very potent dash. When I approach a history play, I see it first as a story involving real people and real lives. I feel like there's a greater charge to it, a greater sense of responsibility, almost an amplification of life, especially since these people have actually lived and breathed historically. So I think the story is especially alive, and that's the way I've tried to approach Katharine. It's a lovely, lovely challenge. French is such a beautiful language, and I think it's perfect for the separation between the men and women in this play. Like Henry, Katharine is also coming of age through the play, and so her journey through those two scenes kind of mirrors Henry's through the feminine aspect.

Flachmann: That's excellent, and if I might ask while you have the microphone, Emily, you had some prior experience with speaking French, isn't that correct?

Trask: I took French starting in junior high through high school, but wasn't a very good student. To pass, I ended up having to do some extra credit, which was a French forensics competition. My French teacher asked if I would get a group of friends together to do a play, and we did a little five-minute farce. It was so much fun that we continued doing it every year until I was a senior in high school, when we put on a production of *Waiting for Godot* in French. We took Nationals, which sounds pretty impressive, but French forensics competition isn't too stiff. [laughter] That's actually how I got into theatre: doing extra credit for my French class. [applause]

Flachmann: Thank you, Emily. Ben, tell us about the Dauphin.

Cherry: Emily speaks beautifully in the show, by the way. I, on the other hand, got a "C" both times I took French in high school, so I apologize to you and everyone else who has to hear me speak French on stage. Often when this show is done, the Dauphin and the French court are very stylized, covered in pounds and pounds of frills and bows and lace, with really high heels, so the audience sees this masculine English court and these frou-frou French people, and it's obvious who's going to win. [laughter] Jim decided to stay away from that interpretation. He wanted the audience to see the French as equals to the English, though he certainly didn't take away their boastfulness. He also didn't want the Dauphin to be evil, but rather realistic just like all the other characters.

Flachmann: You're not evil; you're just misunderstood. [laughter]

Cherry: Totally misunderstood!

Flachmann: Lovely. So is this play pro-war or anti-war? That's a hot scholarly topic these days. I wonder if anyone has an opinion about that? Jim?

Sullivan: I don't think Shakespeare takes a political view on that. He just presents the situation as it is and lets his audiences respond to it. I think he gives us both sides of the question. Soldiers will go to war for a phrase. So that makes language powerful and also potentially dangerous. Some productions of *Henry V* explore Henry's Machiavellian nature and emphasize his manipulative side, but I don't see the play that way. These characters are all "actors" in life. Like Hamlet, he is the most observed of all observers. He has public speech and private speech. That was rather new for

Elizabethan drama, and that created the theater we have today. As Harold Bloom would argue, that created human beings, the consciousness of “self.” We all have an inner life that we can connect to the inner lives of the characters, while our outer lives are connecting to their outer lives as well.

Flachmann: Very good. Phil?

Hubbard: I think a play always resonates within the period in which it is performed. In other words, we are doing this play in 2009, so it’s appropriate for us to ask that question about our world now. Over the past few years in the United States, there’s been an anti-war sentiment about conflicts we’ve been involved in, so the topic of war is certainly on the minds of everyone who sees this production. I definitely think our show deals with the cost of war and whether war is ever justified. When Brian is speaking to the Mayor of Harfleur, what he says is really horrible, and that resonates within our anti-war sentiment today. We don’t want to go in there and do the things he is saying we will do if they don’t surrender. I wouldn’t personally classify it as an anti-war play, but this is certainly one of the voices we listen to and deal with when we perform the play.

Flachmann: Brian?

Vaughn: I agree with Phil completely. I think our production takes both sides of the question during the course of the play. One of the beauties of its dramatic structure is that all these contradictions are represented within the script, and the audience gets to walk away from it and ask themselves what they think. “Conscience” is a word that comes up frequently during the play. I think the cost of war is represented clearly. We found it much more interesting to portray Henry as a guy who has a great deal of trepidation of about going to war and a lot of guilt about making this fatal decision. That first scene with the Archbishop of Canterbury really has to set that up. After the Dauphin’s insult involving the tennis balls, Henry doesn’t have much choice but to attack France.

Flachmann: Corliss, would you like to weigh in on this question, too? You and I have talked a lot about how a female narrator influences the audience’s perception of the play.

Preston: Well, it certainly influences me personally. I believe the play is about the emotional and political necessity of having a leader, someone you can believe in and follow. That’s the journey I see. As a female watching all that testosterone on stage getting ready for war, I am acutely aware of our current conflicts around the globe, and I feel a profound responsibility to help the audience

connect to that awareness as well and buckle their seatbelts! [laughter]

Flachmann: The play is obsessed with war for such a long time, and then interestingly enough it veers near the end toward more comic scenes with the duping of Williams, Fluellen making Pistol eat the leek, and the wonderful wooing scene with Katharine. I wonder if I could get Brian and perhaps Emily to talk a little bit about that shift and especially the purpose of the wooing scene.

Vaughn: The wooing scene is almost a retelling of what Henry has been going through emotionally during the whole play. The last scene is a throughline for Henry. When he says to her, “Shall not thou and I, between St. Denis and St. George, compound a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard,” that’s the ultimate goal for Henry: future generations of England and France walking together in the realm. That to me is what Henry is ultimately trying to accomplish in this play. And I think this scene is a relief for the audience. They can see these people not as leaders involved in a bitter war, but as human beings pursuing love and peace. This is Henry’s discovery in the play at the end. From the prayer scene in 4.1, what Jim has called the “Gethsemane moment,” the play is about brotherhood. Henry never again mentions “conscience” after the victory at Agincourt. All of a sudden, he begins to delegate all these tasks to different people. He tells the French King and Exeter to go make the final decisions on the peace treaty. “I’m going to woo Katherine,” he says. [laughter]

Flachmann: Emily, Henry really doesn’t have to “woo” you. You are his principal demand, to which your father has already agreed. How do you see that wooing scene?

Trask: Well, Henry and I shift into prose in 5.2, which makes the scene all about communication. Perhaps he moves into prose because he’s more relaxed, but Katherine speaks in French prose, too. I love the fact that he doesn’t have to fight this battle, but he chooses to anyway. That he continues to say all these beautiful things, knowing full well that she doesn’t really understand him, is highly romantic. It’s a lovely release for all of us, I think, especially during the kiss. In some productions, she is played as a pawn, a pushover, but one line in there is quite wonderful. When she asks “Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemi* of France,” that takes some pretty serious guts for this little French princess to say to the King of England. I think it’s a meeting of the minds, even though the minds speak different languages.

Vaughn: Yes, she brings him down a peg, which is a stripping away of ceremony, of royalty, and reveals the core of these two lovely characters, which again is what makes a history play like this so “human” and “alive” for its audience.

Flachmann: I think you get a different type of love in the scene when Bardolph is being led off for execution. Pistol is the only one of the Boor’s Head crew who survives all of this. How painful is it for your character, Brian, to watch this?

Vaughn: It’s incredibly difficult, but also incredibly necessary. If Henry doesn’t have Bardolph killed, his army would be out looting and pillaging with no code of conduct at all. This is just as painful as saying goodbye to Falstaff at the end of *Henry, Part II*. Henry has to get people to see a new way of thinking, and Bardolph doesn’t inhabit that new world view. I’ve heard of productions where Henry just turns his back on Bardolph as he is led away with no emotional connection whatsoever, but I find that personally wrong.

Flachmann: Thank you. I’d like to get back down to Ben with a question about the difference between the “real” history upon which the play is based and Shakespeare’s dramatic, imaginative version of that historical past. For example, the Dauphin was actually dead at the end of the play, and yet Shakespeare has your character appear in the final scene. In the same fashion, your father in the script, played beautifully in this production by Mark Light-Orr, was mentally ill, but Shakespeare does not choose to bring that aspect of his life into the play.

Cherry: The French king was certainly mad. He believed he was made of glass. So we have taken that historical reality and used it to inform his scenes. Rather than being insane, he’s very sad and passive, as if he might break if he did anything too large or alarming. So we have taken all the research work Michael [Flachmann] has done for us and used it in our own way throughout the production.

Flachmann: Brian, another notable departure from historical reality involves the killing of the prisoners, which was strategically done to free up the soldiers because the French were massing together for another assault. Historically, and in Shakespeare’s play, the prisoners are killed before the massacre of the boys guarding the luggage. In our cutting of the script, however, the murder of the boys happens first, which so angers Henry that he orders all the French prisoners killed.

Vaughn: This was something that Jim and I talked about a lot before we began rehearsals. I was drawn to this new cutting because

I thought it made Henry a little more sympathetic. Killing the prisoners was a tactical move on Henry's part: He needed the men who had been guarding them because the French were regrouping, and the odds were still over five to one. This one decision has weakened Henry's historical reputation and made him seem more merciless, but it's just one of those orders made in the heat of battle. He had to protect his troops, and this was an action that saved many lives for him, which goes back to the role of conscience in warfare. I'm particularly fond of the way we've arranged these scenes, because I think it helps soften Henry's character a bit. It was just something he had to do.

Flachmann: Will, I think you lose two hundred crowns when you're forced to kill your prisoner.

Zabrn: Yes, it's a bittersweet moment for me. That's more money than I could make in a lifetime.

Flachmann: That's a lot of pockets to pick! [laughter] How do you think the Adams Theatre lends itself to a show like this? Corliss, you've got a particularly acrobatic role going up and down those ladders. How do you feel about that?

Preston: Well, of course, it's a joy. If you're going to do the Chorus in *Henry V*, it's nice to have a Wooden O to do it in! [laughter]

Vaughn: I believe the play was written for the newly rebuilt Globe Theatre. It was the first play presented there. So performing this show in a replica of Shakespeare's theatre really presents us with some wonderful opportunities. When you see the play on film, it takes away all the audience's imagination, and that's the beauty of Corliss' role as the Chorus: painting a picture so the audience can see the proud hoofs, the receiving earth, the magnificent horses. For a war play, there is actually very little fighting in this production. You principally see the after effects of the battles. The only actual fighting you see is the Pistol scene with the French soldier. The scene with the archers above is not in the original script. We put that in our production because the English longbow was so crucial in winning the battle. That and the rain, of course!

Flachmann: Rick, there are so many different kinds of language use in this play. We have aristocratic language; we've got working-class or tavern language; and we've also got Welsh, French, Scottish, and Irish. What does such linguistic profusion say about bringing this country together?

Peebles: One of the main themes of the play is how Henry is going to unite not only France and England, but all of these separate nationalities within England. Remember the hilarious scene between

Captains Jamy, Macmorris, and Fluellen? They can't even understand each other. Henry's most important job is to unite all these people, which he does by the end of the play.

Sullivan: Absolutely right. It's interesting to me that at the conclusion of our part one, Henry's soldiers have just held the bridge. I think that's a poetic idea in the play and a metaphor for connecting two different points of view. Henry rouses his soldiers to magnificent deeds simply by helping them understand that their mortal bodies carry a profound, deep, and enduring spirit. Because of what they are going to do that day, they will live forever. His ability to connect to his people is extraordinary, but the whole play is really about people connecting with each other. Henry has to build a bridge to Katharine by virtue of his own character and his mind. That scene in our production is staged around a simple wooden table, which is, in effect, a "bridge" between nations. Even the scenes involving Pistol and the Eastcheap gang help deepen this important theme in the play. They have a very colorful vernacular, and their scenes are filled, particularly for Mistress Quickly, with the misuse of language. Thematically, Shakespeare is exploring the use of language in every scene in the play.

Flachmann: What about the relationship between religion and history in the script. Do you feel manipulated by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the outset of the play, Brian?

Vaughn: I don't see Henry as being manipulated by the Archbishop; rather, I see them manipulating each other. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours. If you fund this war for me, I'll forget about the tax. This political maneuvering helps both their agendas. That's why the first scene is so public: He wants support from all the constituents in the kingdom. There was a massive snowstorm during Henry's coronation, which is a wonderful metaphor for this guy. He comes out of this storm and makes a personal journey of self-discovery throughout the play. During the prayer scene, he realizes that he doesn't have to live in the past and continue paying for the mistake his father made in seizing the throne from Richard. He realizes that success lies within him, which is very Christ-like. He's very much like Hamlet, who goes to England and comes back a changed person.

Flachmann: What a brilliant, articulate, thoughtful panel this morning! Don't you all think so? [applause] As you can tell, we only hire really smart actors here at the Festival. [laughter and applause] Before we come to a close, I want to thank Mr. Sullivan and the actors for spending so much time with us this morning. What a thrill to have them all to ourselves. I also want to thank

Michael Barr, Matt Nickerson, Jessica Tvordi, Scott Phillips, Fred Adams, everyone responsible for the Wooden O Symposium, and everybody who supports these roundtable discussions. And thanks especially to our wonderful audience. We couldn't do any of this without you! [applause]