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Theater Review | 'Henry V' * (Highly Recommended)

Two Islands Are a Stage, and All Are Actors

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Members of the cast of New York Classical Theater's production of Shakespeare's "Henry V," which is being performed on Governors Island.

There are actors around spitting out Shakespeare, but the real star of the boisterous “Henry V” being staged outdoors by New York Classical Theater as part of the River to River Festival might be whatever’s on the feet of the audience members. A good pair of walking shoes is essential for this rollicking exercise in participatory theater, because the spectators turn into Henry’s army as he invades France, charging up hillsides and bellowing battle cries. Oh, and there’s a boat ride.

The play, which is free (though you can’t get on the boat without the wristband that comes with the program), starts at Castle Clinton in Battery Park. In a few succinct scenes staged at several locations — the audience follows the actors around the park — we see Henry (Justin Blanchard), a young king still trying to find a leadership style, decide to invade France over a questionable territorial claim.

Then everyone is herded onto a ferry for a trip to Governors Island, which, as a former military base, makes a perfect battlefield; the cannons are a particularly nice touch. The actors rouse the troops — that is, the audience members — for the clashes, and by the end of the war, everyone is suitably covered in sweat. And then it’s back to Castle Clinton for the concluding scenes of reconciliation.

The French lose the battle, but the real casualty here is the play. It’s noticeably abridged — the whole adventure lasts two and a half hours, and at least a third of that is taken up with crowd movement. But the sprawling main battle scene, staged on a hillside, is great stuff, and Henry’s motivational “band of brothers” speech is delivered admirably.

Maybe it’s just an accident of timing, what with the final “Harry Potter” movie to be released on Friday, but Mr. Blanchard’s facial expressions sometimes call to mind Daniel Radcliffe, who plays Harry in those films. It’s not a bad parallel: young men who start out carefree but discover the leader within and the hard choices that leadership requires.