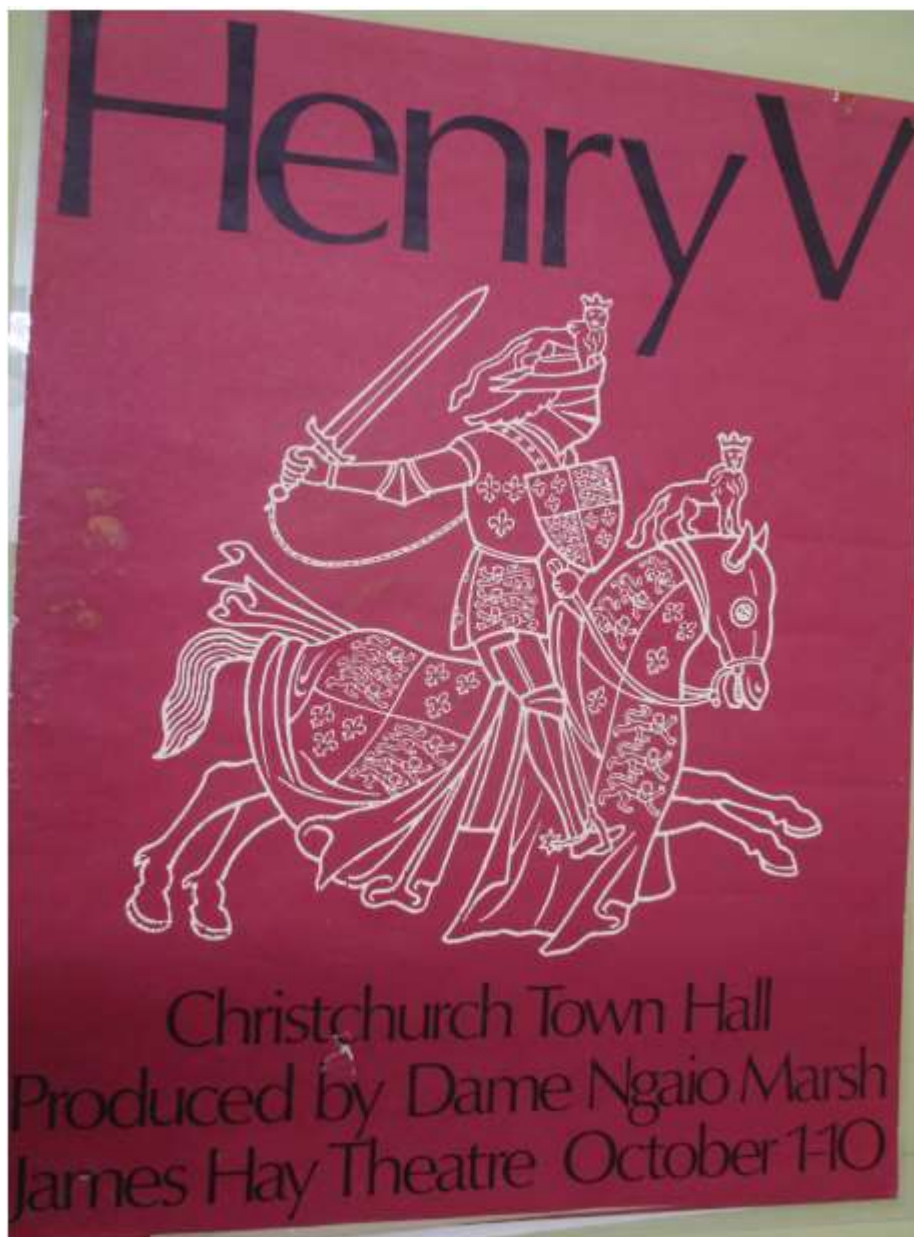


From Agincourt to the Avon: Ngaio Marsh's Henry V

Mark Houlahan University of Waikato

Paper for ALPPS Graduate Conf Nov 10 2021



Marsh Henry V 1972 Poster. Image Mark Houlahan

So the main aim of this talk is to describe Ngaio Marsh's 1972 production of Shakespeare's play *Henry the Fifth*. (1) I'll discuss the documentary evidence that allows us to grasp this

production, and suggest some of the ways, 49 years later, the production might be of interest.

Where it helps, I'll fill in the plot points for you, and I promise you no online test follows.

But first I'll share a series of acknowledgements.

First, the shirt I am wearing today and which hopefully you can see in the slide (2), is based on a design made by a Northern Territory artist, Juliet Nakkammara Morris. The pattern is called *bush tomato dreaming*. The description with the shirt assures me that some of the profit from the use of the design will accrue (as in the Trade Aid model) to Ms. Morris herself.

Second, the Faculty (now the Division) has been running this interdisciplinary conference for postgrad researchers since 2005. This would not be possible without the time and energy administrators put in for the event. Currently, Justine Kingsbury and Jeanie Richards manage this superbly, carrying forward the efforts of Postgrad Deans and administrators over the last 16 years. Sharing over zoom is very different from sharing in physical space, but it is still an important way, if you like, of leaving our study cells while remaining inside them. So I acknowledge all present and former staff who have made this event a rolling success.

Thirdly I would like to thank all the students presenting and watching the presentations.

When the first call went out in 2005 students around the country responded with fascinating talks, and that has continued to be the case. If students across all our many subjects and programmes did not see the value in shaping their research in this way, the conference would never be viable. As someone who has helped organise this event in the past and observed so many of the papers over these years, I am grateful that emergent researchers take the time out of their thesis schedules to craft provocative, passionate and accessible presentations. I hope,

in turn you derive a good deal from the event. So that is my opening prologue or threshold section. I will now pass over to the main body of my talk and tell you about Marsh's *Henry V*.

Some time after 7.30pm on Sunday, October 1, 1972, the opening production in the James Hay Theatre (the smaller 1308 seat theatre within the new Christchurch town hall complex) began¹: for several minutes the safety curtain refused to open. When it did, on a rampart raised high, silhouetted in blue light on the cyclorama draping the rear wall of the theatre, could be seen a familiar figure, orating the opening of *Henry V*: "Oh for a muse of fire...". Here the Chorus begins the role of narrating and guiding the audience back in time to the reign of Henry V, 200 years before the play was first staged in the Globe theatre, London in 1599. "He sets the scene; he fans the flames" notes Marsh (at I.3 of her version). The popular imaginary of late medieval history in the play is something like the version of the Napoleonic wars in Europe you get in writers like Bernard Cornwell, Patrick O'Brian and C.S.Forester.

Many in that first sold-out audience would have known that the Chorus was being played by Jonathan Elsom, a locally trained actor who had been working since the late 1950s as a professional performer in London. Dame Ngaio Marsh², the show's director, had carefully guarded the secret that Elsom would appear to be Shakespeare himself, garbed in the clothing seen in the famous Droeshout engraving, and with the unmistakably iconic receding hairline,

¹ For several minutes the safety curtain refused to open. The theatre is a companion to the larger Concert Hall. Both halls were extensively damaged in the February, 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch and have been restored and recently reopened (see Lochhead).

² New Zealand uses a modified version of the English honours system, so this was an actual title, conferred some years earlier. Dame is the equivalent of a knighthood.

moustache and goatee with a stiffened Elizabethan style ruff collar below. In this slide (3) you can see Elsom in profile alongside the image of Shakespeare; this shows the careful simulation of the costume and makeup. In her programme note for the show Marsh entertained the charming (though not confirmable) conceit that Shakespeare himself may have played this part: “In the character of Chorus, Shakespeare himself speaks to us. He was an actor member of his company and may even have been cast for this role” (Marsh, qtd McNaughton). Elsom’s performance was greeted with acclaim, “a masterpiece of elegance, clarity and style” Bruce Mason wrote (Mason 13), with Elsom’s verse-speaking skills burnished after his years on the London stage. Howard McNaughton, another reviewer, also praised Elsom, but noted an irony separating him from the rest of the cast: “Mr Elsom gives a superb performance, the polish of which is seen to best advantage in isolation, where it does not draw comparison with the rest of the cast”, where, presumably, the comparison would have been invidious. His performance then assured the evening began, and ended, with panache, as the Chorus closes the play, and points towards the reign of Henry V’s son, the much less successful king, Henry VI.

(4) Here is a blurry shot of what Elsom looked at the beginning of the show. This is the best image I could find in the Turnbull archives. (5) Here though is a clearer shot of the outside of the town hall, showing the Avon river flowing alongside (hence the Avon of my title today). And the next slide (6) is an image of the design of complex, with the larger concert venue/town hall space on the right and the James Hay Theatre on the left. From the design and the next two images from inside the theatre you can see its main design features. (7, 8) It has a modified proscenium arch, set back to allow for a stage that can thrust into towards the audience, bringing performers and audience closer together. You can see also that the seating is arranged in two angled bays so that nobody is too far from the stage, as they tend to be in

box shaped 19th century style theatres, like the first performance venues built in New Zealand towns.

The theatre has been restored after extensive damage in the earthquake of February, 2011, but as far as possible has stuck to the original award-winning Miles Warren design. Earlier this year I went to a Marlon Williams concert here, and Williams used the openness of the space to constantly link to the audience. That was my first time in this space, but I overheard several people who clearly knew the venue well comment on how much like the pre-quake theatre it was.



*Elsom as Chorus Opening Tableau*³ Image: Mark Houlahan

³ The image is of a blurry photo in the Marsh papers. It must have been taken in performance. I have included it to give the general idea of the initial impact.



Elsom as Shakespeare/Chorus October 1972. Image Mark Houlahan

Initially the plan was to open with Tyrone Guthrie's celebrated production of the medieval play *Everyman*, Guthrie was a famous English director, who had pioneered theatres using this kind of dynamic thrust staging space; but his show could not travel to New Zealand. In March, 1972 Ngaio Marsh then agreed instead to mount a Shakespeare. She was the obvious choice of director/producer, as, since 1943, her regular productions of Shakespeare plays had become famous in Christchurch and throughout New Zealand. Her company travelled to Wellington and Auckland and to Sydney, setting a post-war benchmark in New Zealand for large-cast Shakespearean theatre.

Marsh was also of course renowned as one of the 20th century so-called “Queens of Crime”, alongside Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, expert since the early 1930s in the classical form of the English “whodunnit”, what Marsh fondly described as her “teccery”. Many of her detective stories use a Shakespeare frame, such as *Hand in Glove* (1962), where a murder is committed to acquire a calfskin glove bought, purportedly, for Shakespeare’s son Hamnet. *Vintage Murder* (1937) traces the misadventures of a travelling Shakespeare company in the North Island of New Zealand, and the very last Marsh novel, published after her death, *Light Thickens* (1982) features the murder on stage of one of the actors in a production of *Macbeth*. The income from her detective novels allowed Marsh to travel to England frequently, taking in the highlights of post-World War II English theatre, the generation of Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud; and when the London Old Vic Theatre Company toured New Zealand in the late 1940s, Marsh entertained Olivier and his then wife, Vivien Leigh. Marsh’s financial success as an author also allowed her the considerable time she devoted to her Shakespeare productions, beginning with the 1943 production of *Hamlet*, the performance script of which Polly Hoskins has recently published.

There are two reasons for framing the ’72 *Henry V* as the pivot of this paper. Firstly there is no doubt that Marsh’s 30 years of Shakespeare established a crucial 20th century bench mark for sophisticated, fully achieved Shakespeares in New Zealand, a key point in the ongoing history of the reception/adaptation of Shakespeare to New Zealand conditions. Secondly these productions are very well documented, as Marsh took care to progressively lodge her papers during her lifetime with the Alexander Turnbull Library (the archive and manuscript division of the National Library of New Zealand). For the 72 *Henry* show the archive includes the stage manager’s promptbook, production stills, posters, reviews, and correspondence. The promptbook is where the stage manager has the performing text for a

show, including lighting and sound cues, and noting entries and actions of characters. In the Marsh archive there is a wealth of ancillary material illustrating her strategies for directing Shakespeare, including a promptbook for an earlier production of *Henry V* staged in 1957. Most of these materials are undigitized and Hoskins' edition of the *Hamlet* notwithstanding, (and a few earlier studies), the many promptbooks for Marsh's productions remain an underutilised resource for theatre histories of New Zealand. In January, in level 1 and again in our (brief) period of level 2 in September, I was lucky to be able to study the papers in person, and take most of the images I am sharing here today.

Once Elsom launched the evening, according to Mason "the play marched along briskly and urgently" characterised by "that despatch and swiftness of attack that ... always marked [Marsh's] work" (Mason 13). The cast of over 100 was the largest Marsh had ever directed, and they were impressively well drilled in a fashion Marsh had crafted over thirty years of directing student and community actors. She often used rugby players from the University, and exhorted them using sports team analogies: the speaking a line of verse was like passing a rugby ball along the back line, for example.

The producer's script for the production shows some of the means by which this was achieved. There are prompt books or production scripts for eleven of Marsh's Shakespeares, and they share many common features. The *Henry V* script must originally have been kept in a ring binder (the punch holes are clearly visible). (9) Each two- page opening makes an A3 or Folio size space. The script has been taken from two broken up copies of the Pelican paperback Shakespeare, pasted onto the right side of the leaf. Cuts are physically marked with a strike through on the pages. These were quite extensive, and mirror the cuts marked in a script for the earlier production of the play. Marsh was keen never to wear out her audience,

so always cut vigorously.⁴ “Coaches at 10.30” was her maxim, that being the time when she knew her Christchurch audience would want to head home.

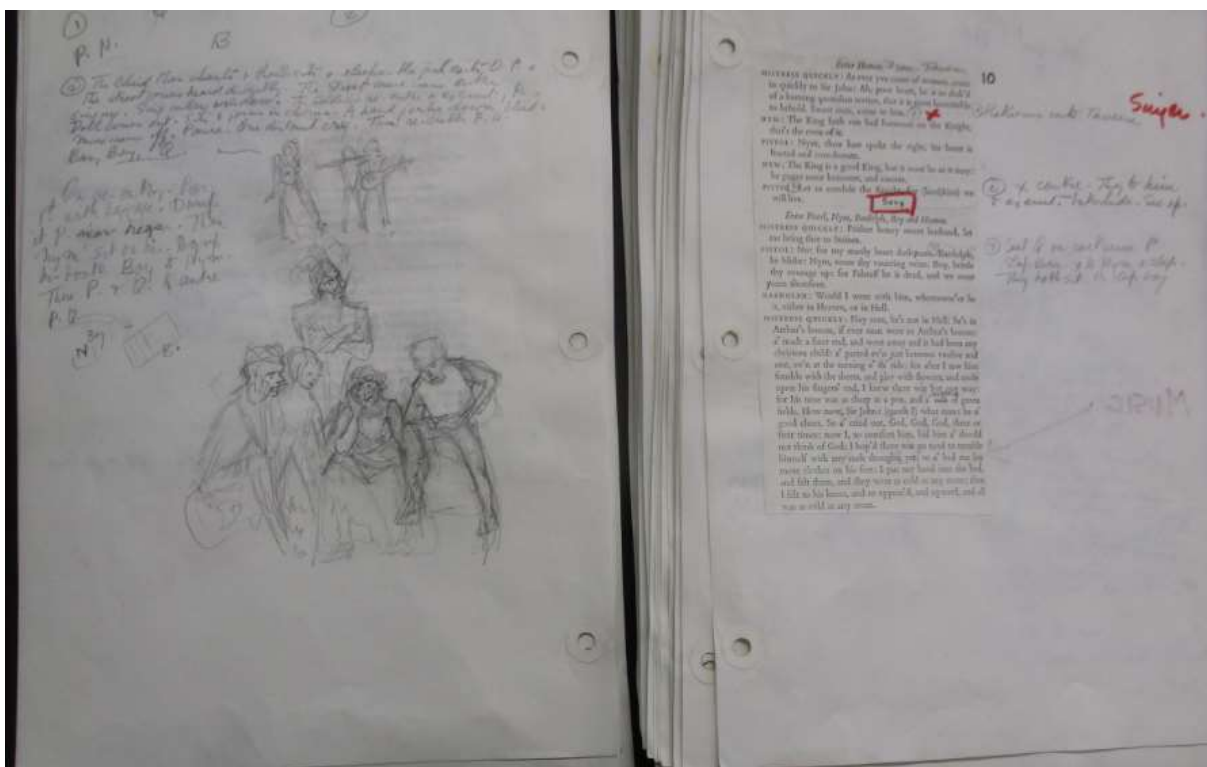
In her archive is a list of Shakespeare plays, noting the number of lines in each and the number Marsh felt she would need to trim to achieve a performance time of two hours and thirty minutes. In the case of *Henry V* this required the omission of just over a third of the play in performance.

To the right of the play text are performance notes, especially cues for sound and entries. At the top of 1.1, for example, are notes in red: “Dry Ice Discover. Chorus by Cyck [sic] as Chorus moves forward”, appearing as it were out of “the blue mists (of time)”, as Mason put it, the impressive volume of blue-tinged smoke being admired by all who commented on the play. The promptbook describes this several times as the “vision”, issuing in effect, out of a kind of idealised English past.

On the left side of each opening of the promptbook is crowded with arresting detail. Here are quick vivid sketches of stage groupings, often accompanied by meticulous numbering of the phases of action within each scene. These are such a common feature of Marsh’s promptbooks that I assume she herself must have sketched them. Her tendency was to block out each scene in advance of rehearsal; she had trained as a painter and always retained a strong visual sense, which is mark also of set pieces in her novels. (9) The image here shows the layout for 2.3, with Mistress Quickly downstage centre, surrounded in tableau by Nym, boy, Pistol and Bardolph. These are non-historical comic characters Shakespeare invented in

⁴ “Coaches at 10.30” was her maxim, that being the time when she knew her audience would want to head home.

the two plays before *Henry V*, *Henry IV I and II*. Not surprisingly, these describe the reign of Henry's father, Henry Bolingbroke, when Henry V was a time wasting, over-drinking rascal, like a student in a Cameron Rd. party flat. Shakespeare's idea was to fill out the picture of dynastic quarrels with glimpses of how the underclass coped with the politics of war. It makes the play world more human. The dynamism of the production Mason noted then arose out of the choreographic skill with which the large cast moved from one location to the next.



Producer's Script Henry V 1972, 2.3. Image Mark Houlahan

The James Hay stage was an ideal space for the pictorialism which is such a notable feature of all Marsh's promptbooks. As the inaugural production, Marsh was clearly keen to exploit as much of the new theatre's capacity as possible. The eloquence of the chorus notwithstanding, the audience did not need to rely entirely on its imaginary forces (the chorus in the play often exhorts the audience to see things that are not actually on stage). For example, in this next image (10) you can see the walls of Harfleur being finalised. In the play

the English besiege the town in Northern France, and its mayor surrenders. This is one of two key set pieces in the play, the other being the battle of Agincourt, a famous English victory, where the superior firing range of the English archers with their longbows defeated the larger French army.

The presence of the set building team at the base of the image of Harfleur gives a good sense of the size of this flat, towering 3-4 times higher than the people assembling it, and we can imagine the effort it would take to smoothly lower this into place. It's a clear indication of the kind of spectacle Marsh wanted to share with the audience.



Set for Walls of Harfleur. Image Mark Houlahan

The image usefully indicates another constant in Marsh's productions. There are towns in Aotearoa, of course, built by European settlers, and very often these towns had an English-style church or Cathedral in the centre. Christchurch itself is a very obvious example. But no

New Zealand (or Australian) town has ever looked like this. Rather than transporting late medieval France to New Zealand, the aim here was clearly to transport New Zealanders back through the mists of time to the medieval, just as Olivier had done in the opening “storybook” sequences of his 1944 film. (11) In this next slide you can see the very colourful form of the medieval, complete with dreadful pudding bowl hair cut, that Olivier used. For film-goers in the 1940s and 1950s, Olivier’s films were the benchmarks for putting Shakespeare on screen. On October 4, 1972, Mason wrote to Marsh, expanding the praise for her stage spectacle he had not been allowed space for in his published review: “one seemed many times not to be in a theatre at all but in the midst of some endless unfolding panorama of life and history”. Days after witnessing the premiere, he was still rapt in awe at “the heraldic ebb and flow of it, and the sense of space and distance.” He was beglamoured by the evocation both of the Elizabethan and late medieval past. Mason’s comments are evocative, in the fulsome style with which he often hailed in print anything he considered a significant cultural event. He also knew Marsh very well, closing this letter: “I revere you, and I love you.”

Yet not everyone who saw the show was so awestruck. That year Herbert Bogart, an American literary scholar, was visiting Canterbury University on a Fulbright Fellowship. As the academic year in New Zealand begins in early March, he had been embedded in local culture for some months before taking in the show. The production clearly generated a great deal of palaver prior to first night; and Marsh had been associated with the University since 1943; and a campus theatre was named after her in 1967. Bogart clearly knew of her reputation and, most likely, had been briefed by many people who knew Marsh or had acted in her productions as to what to expect. In the December issue of *Islands*, then an avant-garde local literary magazine, Bogart had the chance to express his well-considered disappointment, framing the show in perspectives that the earliest reviews in magazines and newspapers could

not manage, as he would have had a longer time to frame his commentary. Bogart makes two main points against the show. First he says that, surely, Olivier's great film shows Henry V in action so well, so evocatively summoning the famous arrows in flight at Agincourt, that any mere representation on stage is made redundant. In the age of film, he says, mere stage spectacle could not compete. Secondly, as a sympathetic outsider (he was clearly looking forward to this big event), he astutely places for us the tenor of the evening and the production style he saw:

I loved the audience which applauded almost on cue after the famous speeches and laughed at the modern implications of the lines. But finally what I witnessed was a safe cultural event guaranteed to offend no one, put on by a sincere, hard working semi-amateurish company. I had hoped for a complex, thoughtful, artistic experience, professionally executed. (Bogart 168)

He brings to the fore an anxiety implicit in some of Mason's and McNaughton's comments, underneath their high praise: that the large company worked hard, worthy in itself, but not as effectively as you might hope. He accurately sets the level of the company, largely made up of volunteers. Most importantly he notes the paradox of this "significant" cultural event. On the one hand the production was part of the inaugurations for a world-class, cutting-edge performance venue, and on the other the production style cast a backward glance. This was a summation of Marsh's directorial practice: articulate, fast-paced, with evocative, panoramic sets, with the space of the stage often laden with impressive tableaux. Yet, as with her detective novels, once she had established her directing protocols, Marsh did not seek to alter them.

If the production was, in a sense, in flight from New Zealand, that is of a piece with Marsh's career long ambivalence around being a New Zealander. She worked hard to sustain "high" culture in New Zealand, along European lines. She hated the New Zealand accent, which she considered flat and nasal, grotesquely unsuited to the rhetorical demands of a major

Shakespearean text (her imitation of this in recorded lectures is very funny). She coaxed her actors out of their 'natural' voices, and gave public lectures on the subject.⁵ Elsom was a perfect fit to play Marsh's Chorus, as he was steeped in English stage vocal stylings. So a distinction I would make is that this was a largely successful production of *Henry V* in New Zealand but that, by design there was nothing *of* contemporary New Zealand on stage. By 1972 New Zealand soldiers had for several years been supporting American troops in Vietnam and throughout the country violent protests had been staged against this support for a foreign war. An opportunity was clearly lost to register this in Shakespeare's most war-soaked play, the one that evokes in the most detail a panoramic experience of war for combatants, followers, victors and the vanquished. Making such direct links from the Shakespeare text on stage to the world elsewhere outside the theatre was never Marsh's aim.

And yet: what would such a production feel like? A student show I saw in the year 2000 provided some early 21st century hints. This was directed at Auckland University by Sam Trubridge, now a professional director with a strong propensity for site specific performance events. Since 1963, a summer Shakespeare on the Auckland campus had often been set against a pastoral background of mature trees, beneath a neo-gothic clocktower from the 1930s. Trubridge used instead the landing bay at the back of the School of Architecture, a forbiddingly contemporary, concreted edifice. The seating looked out at the dumpsters for the building's trash. From a caravan on site burst a demented looking, ranting dub poet, chanting the chorus's lines in a rocking, intense beat. The sound was deliberately distorted, as if the opening speech was so much Shakespeare yadda-yadda to be gotten out of the way. Here the kings of England and France were dressed as leaders of rival punk street gangs. They drove large noisy cars, painted over with the union jack and the fleur-de-lys respectively. In the

⁵ In the recording of the lectures, her imitation of a New Zealand voice is very funny.

play the Dauphin-the heir to the French throne-has a horse, his “cheval”, of which he is very proud. In Trubridge’s show this became a large and beautiful motorcycle which the Dauphin constantly stroked for pleasure. The emphasis was on the violent assertion of nationalist claims. There is a scene where a Welshman forces a boastful Englishman to eat a leek. Here the large raw leek was violently shoved down the throat, visceral and highly discomfoting to watch.

Then, when King Henry wooed the Princess Katherine to be Queen of England , he pursued her through and over his large, swaggery car. At the point where he held her body prone over the bonnet, the King of France and his retinue returned to endorse the marriage and prevent a rape. These production elements were derivative in some ways, and likely Trubridge was influenced by the wild energy of the cycle of the history plays for the English Shakespeare Company, directed by Michael Bogdanov and starring an anguished Michael Pennington as Henry. These were grounded against the sour, narrow triumph of the English defeat of Argentina in the Falklands War in the early 1980s, and alert as well to the paranoid inter-class and inter-racial conflicts within Britain that the Thatcher government so gleefully exploited. Like Bogdanov’s, though, Trubridge’s production was arresting, violent and profane. It made you sit up and take notice, bringing familiar cadences to life. That’s what I hope Shakespeare productions would always do.

I saw this production a second time a few months later at a mini festival in Stratford, Taranaki, where “all the streets are named for Shakespeare.” (12) This time the show was at dawn, in and around the Malone Gates, the town’s memorial to William Malone who led troops so heroically at Gallipoli. Again the young actors brought furious passion and anguish into their depiction of war. They risked their own safety to bring the play to life. There is an

argument for putting Shakespeare aside now , and focusing instead on using theatre to make stories directly from our 21st century world. But when it a show is this good, this visceral, I feel the idea of still thinking about, performing and studying Shakespeare in Aotearoa is worth our time.

Bibliography

- Agee, James. "Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*." *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now*, edited by James Shapiro, Library of America, 2014, pp. 459-474.
- Bogart, Herbert. "O for a Muse of Film," *Islands*, Vol 1, no. 2 Summer 1972, 166-169
- Flaherty, Kate. "Lest We Remember: Henry V and the Play of Commemorative Rhetoric on the Australian Stage." *Antipodal Shakespeare: Remembering and Forgetting in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, 1916-2016*, edited by Gordon McMullan and Philip Mead, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 145–73.
- Hoskins, Polly, editor. *Ngaio Marsh's Hamlet: The 1943 Production Script*. Christchurch, NZ: Canterbury UP, 2019.
- Lochhead, Ian. Editor. *The Christchurch Town Hall 1965-2019: a Dream Renewed*. Christchurch, NZ: Canterbury UP, 2020.
- Mason, Bruce. Review of *Henry V*, dir. Ngaio Marsh, *New Zealand Listener*, October 23 , 1972, 13.
- McNaughton, Howard. Review of *Henry V*, dir. Ngaio Marsh, *Christchurch Star* Monday October 2, 1972.

Norwich, John Julius. *Shakespeare's Kings: the Great Plays and the History of England in the Middle Ages: 1337-1485*. Scribner: 1999.

Sacco, Peter. *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama*. Oxford UP, 1977.

Silverstone, Catherine. *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance*. Routledge: 2011.