

## The King, All Grown Up and Ready to Wage Battle

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

A mocking gift of tennis balls and a bit of enforced leek-eating are not the usual takeaway moments from Shakespeare's "Henry V." The title character's rousing speech to his beleaguered band of brothers just before the battle at Agincourt is of course the play's most famous set piece. But those comic bookends were received with warm enjoyment over the weekend at the New Victory Theater, where children almost outnumbered adults at the Acting Company and Guthrie Theater's co-production.

To its credit, this solid if drab-looking staging, directed by Davis McCallum, does not slice and dice the text to make it more palatable for young audiences. Its running time is a full Shakespearean two and three-quarter hours, including an intermission. (But why no synopsis in the program — not uncommon for Shakespeare productions — so parents could familiarize children with the turns of the plot?)

Understandably, some of the younger viewers went missing in action before that climactic battle on French turf. But those who stayed were rewarded with the well-turned comic scenes that conclude the play, that leek duel between the Welsh officer Fluellen (William Sturdivant) and the rascally Pistol (Chris Thorn), and the king's comical courting of the French princess.

Unlike most Shakespeare plays, "Henry V" contains only one truly central character, the king himself. Fortunately, Matthew Amendt, who plays the role here, is a charismatic, skillful actor with a clarion baritone who gives the production a magnetic focus.

Handsome in a Tom Cruise kind of way, the square-jawed and youthful Mr. Amendt is a distinctly cool King Henry in whom a few traces of the former rebel — Prince Hal, the boon companion of Falstaff in the "Henry IV" plays — can be discerned.

This Henry has truly set aside the boisterous friends of his youth and scoured from his soul any traces of the spirit that frolicked in their company. Stern and commanding, he greets the news of Bardolph's execution with peremptory approval, and shows few signs of inner tumult when he sends a trio of lords to their deaths for treason. When he threatens the citizens of Harfleur with gruesome retribution if they do not yield to the English forces, his spine-chilling delivery shows signs of real relish.

Although his forceful leadership qualities are unquestionable, Henry is changed by his experience on the French battlefields. Mr. Amendt slowly peels off the steel-clad surface of the king to reveal the layers of doubt and anxiety that assail him in the bleak dawn before the big battle. The play's most moving scene is the king's incognito stroll among his soldiers, when he confronts both their weary pragmatism and their natural distaste for the grim business of war.

Henry's cool, almost haughty demeanor softens and shrinks to human dimensions in the company of these men, as the burden of leadership begins to weigh on his soul. The man who falls to his knees to pray for deliverance is not the same man who sailed with such supreme confidence across the English Channel, even if he can still call up the old gusto in the St. Crispin's Day speech, delivered with fine force by Mr. Amendt.

For all its pomp and pageantry, "Henry V" is not always compelling onstage. Mr. McCallum's production, with a bare wooden set by Neil Patel and mostly black and brown, zipper-bedecked costumes by Anita Yavich, does not go out of its way to add a lot of surface color to beguile young audiences.

The comic scenes are played in a mostly subdued manner, although Andy Grotelueschen makes the most of his



Matthew Amendt plays the title role in the Acting Company and Guthrie Theater production of "Henry V," at the New Victory Theater.

Photo: Ari Mintz for The New York Times.

moments as Bardolph, and Mr. Sturdivant brings lively invention to Fluellen through the rhythms and intonations of his speeches. As the Dauphin, Freddy Arsenault delights with his pompous peroration in praise of his beloved horse. (The play's more than 50 roles are portrayed by just a dozen actors.)

But the most enjoyable surprise of this production is the valedictory charm of the final scene, in which Henry woos his French bride to be, fumbling and bumbling, stymied by their lack of a mutual language. This playful encounter can seem a strange way to end a play mostly set among dueling armies, but Mr. McCallum's staging, which finds Henry chasing a demure Katherine (Kelley Curran) round and round a table, is both boldly comic and unexpectedly moving.

When Henry finally wins Katherine's grudging assent to his marriage proposal, Mr. Amendt raises his fist in triumph, eliciting delighted laughter from the youngsters in the audience, and the adults too. The calculating politician and the merciless warrior are momentarily banished as the witty, mocking Prince Hal is reborn before us.

**HENRY V** By William Shakespeare; directed by Davis McCallum. Presented by the Acting Company, Margot Harley, producing director; and the Guthrie Theater, Joe Dowling, director. At the New Victory Theater, 209 West 42nd Street, Manhattan, (646) 223-3010. Through March 8.