Written by Mike Schulz
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Here's one for fellow fans of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: You know how badly we wanted to see *The Two Towers* after *The Fellowship of the Ring*? That's how badly I want to see the Prenzie Players' *King Henry the Fourth* after Saturday night's production of *King Richard the Second*.

For those of you who *aren't Lord of the Rings* fans, I think you still get my meaning; *King Richard the Second* - the first installment in the Shakespeare troupe's three-part cycle of Henry plays, entitled *The Henriad* - is so thrillingly staged and sublimely well acted that the February continuation can't possibly come soon enough.

Yet I'm also referencing the *Lord of the Rings* series to suggest just how much *fun* this trilogy-opener is. *King Richard the Second*, which details the beginnings of Europe's Wars of the Roses, is rife with political intrigue and poetic introspection, and isn't exactly one of the Bard's more lighthearted works. (Almost perversely, Shakespeare saves his one overtly comedic scene - wherein the Duke and Duchess of York battle over the fate of their son, Edward - for Act *V*.) But considering the power and passion of *Richard*'s presentation here, I don't think I stopped smiling *once* while watching it; this show is so blisteringly alive that I left the production feeling rejuvenated and inspired, and hungry for more. From beginning to end, Prenzie's *King Richard the Second* isn't just smart and soulful - it's *joyous*.

It's even joyous *before* the beginning. Although the show officially starts (at Rock Island's Masonic Temple) at 8 p.m., you are advised to arrive well before that, as the preceding half-hour dramatizes the events that set the plot in motion - the imprisonment of the Duke of Gloucester (Matt Moody), the lamentations of his wife (Dee Canfield), the Duke's murder, and the carefree, carnal indulgences of Richard (Stephanie Burrough) before dressing for court. (I'd describe the casting of Burrough, and other women in male roles, as "unconventional" if the Prenzie Players did much that was conventional in the first place.) While this preamble isn't necessary for either enjoyment or understanding of *King Richard the Second*, it lends the opening sequence emotional context and visualizes Richard's temperament, and it also tips the audience off to the unapologetic, sometimes anachronistic liberties Prenzie will take - miss the opening half-hour, for instance, and you'll miss the reason that God invented the snooze button.

That prelude also gives you an early sense of how spectacularly well the Prenzie Players will utilize their stage space. With a large playing-area center, two locations suggesting bed chambers and prisons, five designated spots for entrances and exits, and a second-floor balcony, the variety of composition in *King Richard the Second* is truly extraordinary, and gives the performance a sense of grandeur that is, in itself, breathtaking - the show is a wonderful reminder that you don't need an epic-sized budget to create epic *scope*.

Designer Jennifer Kingry - a veteran of the Playcrafters and Richmond Hill Barn theatres - does wonders with the available lighting; the golden hues provide a romanticism that softens the frequent esotericism, and the blackout effects are sensational. (The sequences lit only by flashlight provide a giddy rush.) Add to Kingry's work the splendid, unfussy costumes designed by Cait Bodenbender and Anne Woolley, and the wonderful use of enormous white sheets as masking, and *King Richard the Second* stands as not just an acting treat - which was to be expected - but a *visual* one.

The visuals are enhanced, too, by the superb pacing - there isn't a dull scene in the show - and the fact that, every few minutes, there's something new and disarming to capture your attention: jousting matches, a pair of legitimately nerve-racking beheadings, unexpected moments of audience interaction. (Don't expect a sedentary experience with this *Richard* - when the king enters the court, you *stand*.) And it's overflowing with clever touches: When the Duke of York (John R. Turner) begins a lengthy screed, the king, anticipating tedium, has chairs brought in to make the tirade less exhausting; when Burrough, imprisoned, hears faraway music and delivers Richard's "Ha, ha, keep time! How sour sweet music is / When time is broke and no proportion kept!" it's because the CD is skipping. Your senses are always *awake* at this production. In the program, the show's direction is credited to J.C. Luxton, Jill Sullivan-Bennin, Tracy Skaggs, and the cast, so you have 15 people to thank for it looking and sounding so damned good.

Until now, I've held off on discussing the actors, because if I'd started earlier, I might not have gotten around to discussing anything *else*. *King Richard the Second* is shepherded by two honestly magisterial portrayals by Burrough and Jeremy Mahr (as the eventual King Henry IV). Burrough enacts Richard's self-serving glibness with underplayed wit and delicately morphs into a heartbreakingly affecting figure; Richard's prison soliloquy and reminiscence of the murdered kings before him are devastatingly moving. And Mahr is so forthright and emotionally connected to the material that you can't tear your eyes away from him. Burrough and Mahr play their entwined rulers with fierce conviction and extraordinary command of Shakespearean language; they reach levels of stage honesty that feel nearly *cleansing.*

In terms of performance, the show is an embarrassment of riches, made particularly apparent with the cast members who assay more than one role. Maggie Woolley's magnificently vehement turn as the Duke of Norfolk is matched by the transcendent ache of her Queen

Isabella. Canfield, so moving as the duchesses of Gloucester and York, shakes the rafters with her vocal power as the Bishop of Carlisle. Bryan Woods - who, with each new show, seems to get better and better and *better* - is an affecting John of Gaunt and (too briefly) a fiery Glendower.

Yet there isn't a cast member here who *isn't* in exquisite form. Turner, Moody, Luxton, Linnea Ridolfi, Aaron E. Sullivan, Jeff De Leon, Jessica Armentrout, Carrie Clark ... they've more than served Shakespeare and *Richard* well - they've served *theatre* well. At the climax of *King Richard the Second*, the stage is perfectly set for the Prenzie Players' *King Henry the Fourth* next winter. If I didn't have a job to get to in the mornings, I'd be happy to set up camp in the Masonic Temple and just *wait*.

For more information on the Prenzie Players' The Henriad*, visit (http://www.prenzieplayers.com).*