

Lost Nation gives Shakespeare's *Henry V* a very human touch

By Jim Lowe

MONTPELIER — "Henry V" has a lot in common with the propaganda films of World War II, though that was certainly a far more just war than Henry's. Shakespeare's historical drama is full of adventure and the passion of patriotism, with bits of humor and romance.

Lost Nation Theater opened an impressive production of "Henry V," Friday at City Hall Arts Center, that enjoyed all the excitement and fun of this classic.

The young Henry V of England is convinced by his advisers that he should invade France, using an obscure ancestral claim to the country. If that wasn't enough, uncovering a French plot to assassinate him does. Henry and his army attack France, and are slowed by losses and disease. His soldiers are tiring of the war and, in one of the most famous scenes in the play, a disguised Henry goes among his troops to get a feel for the situation. What he finds is that they believe that if they begin losing, Henry will ransom his way out and leave his troops to die. But Henry personally leads his troops into battle and is ultimately victorious. One of the spoils of war is Katherine, daughter of the defeated Charles VI of France. Henry feels the need to court her, and it results in one of the funniest and most touching scenes in the play. The play, like most of Shakespeare's works, has its commedia dell'arte element as well.

In short, Shakespeare's "Henry V" has everything.

Lost Nation's professional production, directed by Sally Wood, is fast-paced, largely well-cast and entertaining. Much of its success comes from Paul Molnar's stellar performance as Henry. At Friday's opening night performance, Molnar successfully made the young king heroic as well as vulnerable, romantic and funny—in short, very human. This production used 15 actors to play 33 roles, and—almost surprisingly—it was seldom confusing. There were certainly some excellent portrayals. Anna Soloway made a romantic Katherine, funny and real, complemented by Dee Byrd's witty Alice, Katherine's attendant. Byrd is also Nell Quickly, who, with Mark Roberts' Nym, Chris O'Carroll's Bardolph and Ethan Herz as the boy, the late Sir John Falstaff's cronies, made up the comedy team. Their slapstick antics and rapid-fire delivery add up to some hilarious moments.

Particularly impressive are David DiLegio as Fluellen, the Welsh captain so conscious of military tradition, and Patrick Pope as his buddy, the English captain. They don't represent a lot in terms of plot, but their interaction explains a lot and proved quite riveting at Friday's performance.

Jim Hogue, one of the area's most reputable actors, delivered a very regal but fully dimensional French king. Another, John D. Alexander, played a variety of roles, convincingly with expertise. Simon Chaussé, better known as an operatic baritone, was convincing in a variety of French roles, lending them a Gallic authenticity. (He also coached the French.)

Donna Stafford and Kim Bent's staging is ultra-simple, focusing attention on the action, allowing a most expressive Bent to set the scene as the one-man chorus. (It's written this way.) Largely the language is easy to understand, though occasional yelling makes it difficult. Some of the lesser characters are a bit stick-like, and the production's posturing and "pomp and ceremony" moments come across as a bit silly, rather than dramatic. This is a quite realistic play.

Colorful period costumes by Beckie Sheloske, dramatic lighting by Jeffrey Salzberg and evocative sound design by Tim Tavcar helped make this a very attractive production.

With "Henry V," Lost Nation Theater has created a fine Shakespeare experience.