

## Henri v - william shakespeare in the open-air, 24 august wassenaar

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STET, the English Theatre in the Netherlands, has brought the Illyria open air theatre company back to the Netherlands to perform Henry V in a variety of outdoor venues this summer. Illyria are an experienced, well schooled band of travelling professional actors who specialise in Shakespeare's first folio works, widely regarded as the most authoritative version of the Bard's work. The group has the reputation of providing some of the most authentically Elizabethan styles. As a company, they have been entertaining and educating audiences for over twenty years, presenting fast-paced, physical performances turned in by a company of just 5 players. Without using amplification, this imaginative, high energy, whirlwind troupe of players are as hard-working and professional as any you are likely to find in such an environment. Raadhuis de Paauw is a wonderful

setting in which to stage a Shakespearian play. In Wassenaar, the superb grounds and the lake make a great vista in which to picnic before settling down for the performance. It's the sort of place that whatever is put on, it's worth going for the setting itself. With the right weather, it's idyllic. With the rain of this summer, it's more challenging but beautiful nonetheless. Henry V tells the story of a reckless and feckless young prince turning into one of the great characters of English history (as told by Shakespeare). It's a play often associated with patriotic fervour, much pageantry, and the glories of war (particularly war with the French). But it is more than that. The play also asks searching questions about the nature of war, who the victors and vanquished really are, and whether wars' heavy costs in lives and limbs can be justified. As a play, it contains some of the greatest soliloquies and set pieces in Shakespeare's cannon. And, as with so much of his work, Shakespeare asks eternal questions directly, confronting and challenging not only our understandings of the past, but our narratives in the present. The whole piece is acted with great enthusiasm and energy by a cast of just five who are skilled and practised in encouraging and enabling an audience to feel involved in a much bigger production. It's at its best when delivering the slapstick parts of the play. The endless costume changes, movements between characters, and switches of gender, as well as class, make for high energy fun and frolics, all played out in the grounds of a sixteenth century historical estate. But where the play was less successful was in the casting of the lead to play Henry. Such a part demands someone who looks and can feel regal and authoritative. Someone who can speak such great soliloquies with real meaning and intent. The whole performance turns on the central character being believable. Sadly, for me, this was not the case. Henry's set-pieces felt gabbled and undigested, giving the audience both on and off the stage little time to absorb, to think, to consider. And while the rest of the players (including Henry when he wasn't being Henry) worked long and hard to entertain with much success, the central weakness was seldom far away. But don't let this put you off going if you get the chance. A good evening's entertainment, notwithstanding the downpours and a less effective Henry. Open air performances of Shakespeare in such historical settings are a real treat, and STET, the English-speaking theatre promoter, deserves our thanks and full and continuing support for so doing. mike fitzgerald

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