

illuminations



A guide to the 2020 plays

○ | Oregon Shakespeare Festival

BRING DOWN THE HOUSE

Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy performed in two parts



Bring Down the House

Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy
performed in two parts
Adapted by Rosa Joshi and
Kate Wisniewski
Produced in association with
upstart crow collective
Directed by Rosa Joshi

Notes by Hailey Bachrach

Who's Who

Joan la Pucelle: A prophetess who inspires the French army to impossible victories.

Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester: King Henry VI's uncle and Lord Protector over the child king. Though beloved by the people, he finds himself in fierce conflict with Beaufort and racks up an impressive list of enemies who envy his power and position.

Beaufort: A bishop, a relative of King Henry, and Humphrey's greatest rival in the court. He is determined to bring down his enemies—especially Humphrey—and consolidate power for himself by any means necessary.

Duke of Somerset: A staunch supporter of King Henry and enemy of the Duke of York.

King Henry VI: Crowned King of England as an infant, Henry is pious and indecisive. His well-intentioned and moral view of right and wrong is at odds with his opportunistic court.

Queen Margaret: The daughter of an impoverished king, she becomes Henry's bride despite her lack of a dowry. Disappointed by her husband's weakness, she sets about to defend the crown and its power against anyone who would threaten it.

Richard, Duke of York: Richard regains the title that was stripped from his family for his father's treason, but sets his sights higher: the York family's claim to the throne of England.

Duke of Suffolk: A soldier and aristocrat who takes the future Queen Margaret captive during the wars in France, then brokers her marriage with King Henry. He becomes her devoted ally and lover, helping her seek to empower King Henry and, by extension, herself.

Jack Cade: A Kentish commoner whom the Duke of York persuades to claim to be the long-lost heir to the throne. He leads a working-class uprising.

Earl of Warwick: A powerful ally known as "the Kingmaker."

Edward: The Duke of York's eldest son. He inherits his father's claim to both the dukedom of York and the throne of England.

George: The Duke of York's second son.

Richard: The Duke of York's third son. A fierce, hot-tempered fighter who does not hesitate to talk his way around traditional codes of honor.

Far from being the products of a solitary genius, early modern English plays were designed for and highly responsive to the companies that performed them.

The Story

Part One

King Henry VI, son of the beloved war hero Henry V, is crowned at 9 months old. Henry V's famed conquest of France immediately falls to ruin as a peasant girl who claims to be guided by God rises to the head of France's military and leads them to success in battle. Meanwhile, the English commanders hasten their own defeat through personal ambition and continual squabbling. In France, the Duke of Suffolk finds for Henry a beautiful but politically disadvantageous bride in Margaret of Anjou. Margaret refuses to be content with life as the consort of, as she sees it, a puppet king, and joins a plot to dislodge Henry VI's Lord Protector, his uncle Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Unbeknownst to all of them, the Duke of York has his eye on his family's claim to the throne.

Part Two

While the aristocrats of England fight amongst themselves, the commons rise up under the leadership of Jack Cade, and tensions between the House of York and King Henry's family, the House of Lancaster, mount as well. Crashing from one threatened civil war to another, the Duke of York and his three sons take up arms against the King, while Margaret bears the standard for Lancaster in defiance of her mild husband's efforts to reconcile the two families. From the conflict rises a new generation of leaders who will be forever marked by the bloody cost of their victory.



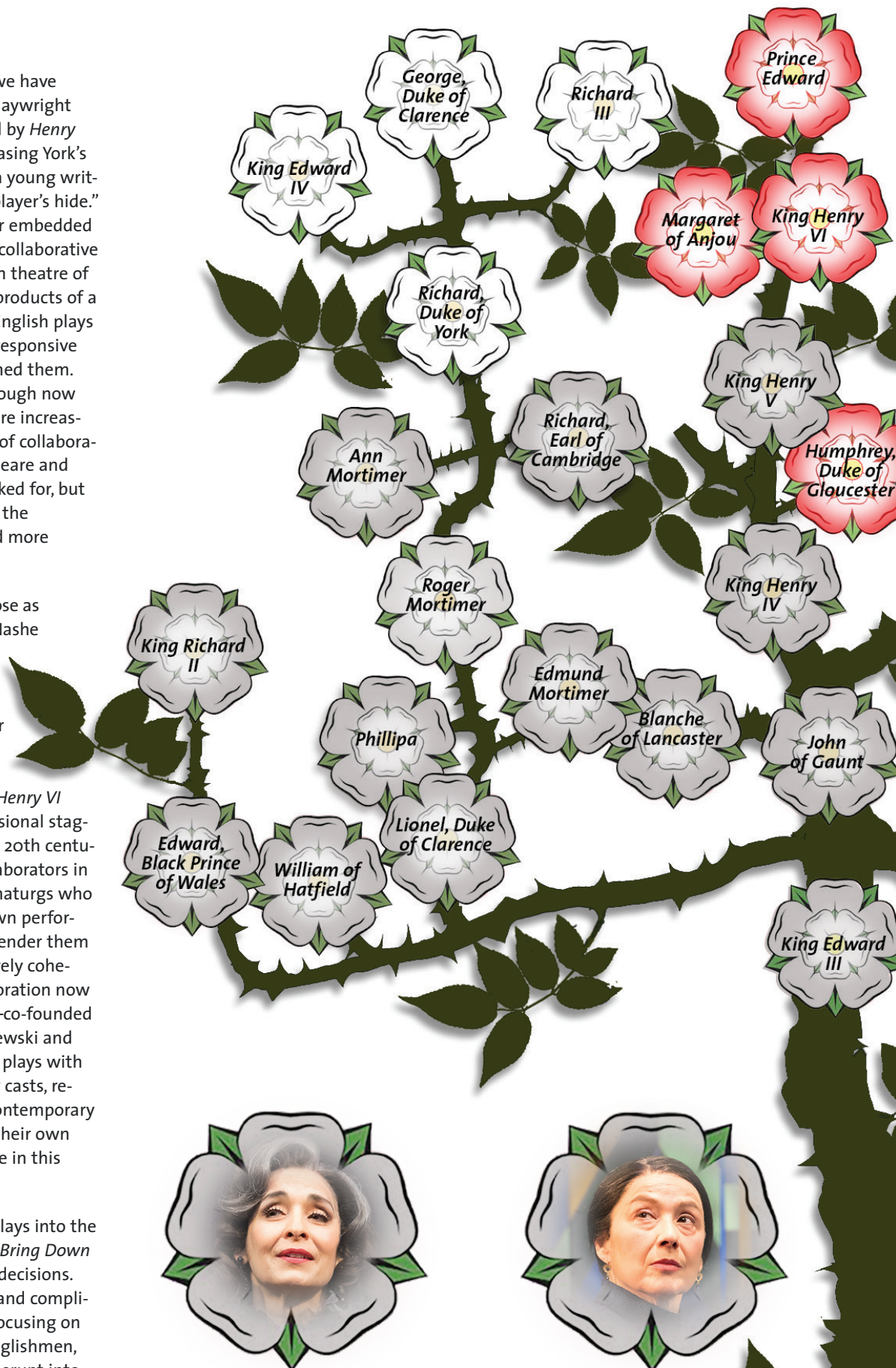
The closing moments of 2018's *Henry V*, also directed by Rosa Joshi, previewed the bloody battles to come in the *Henry VI* plays. Pictured: Shaun Taylor-Corbett, Robert Vincent Frank, Moses Villarama and Shyla Lefner. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Collaboration

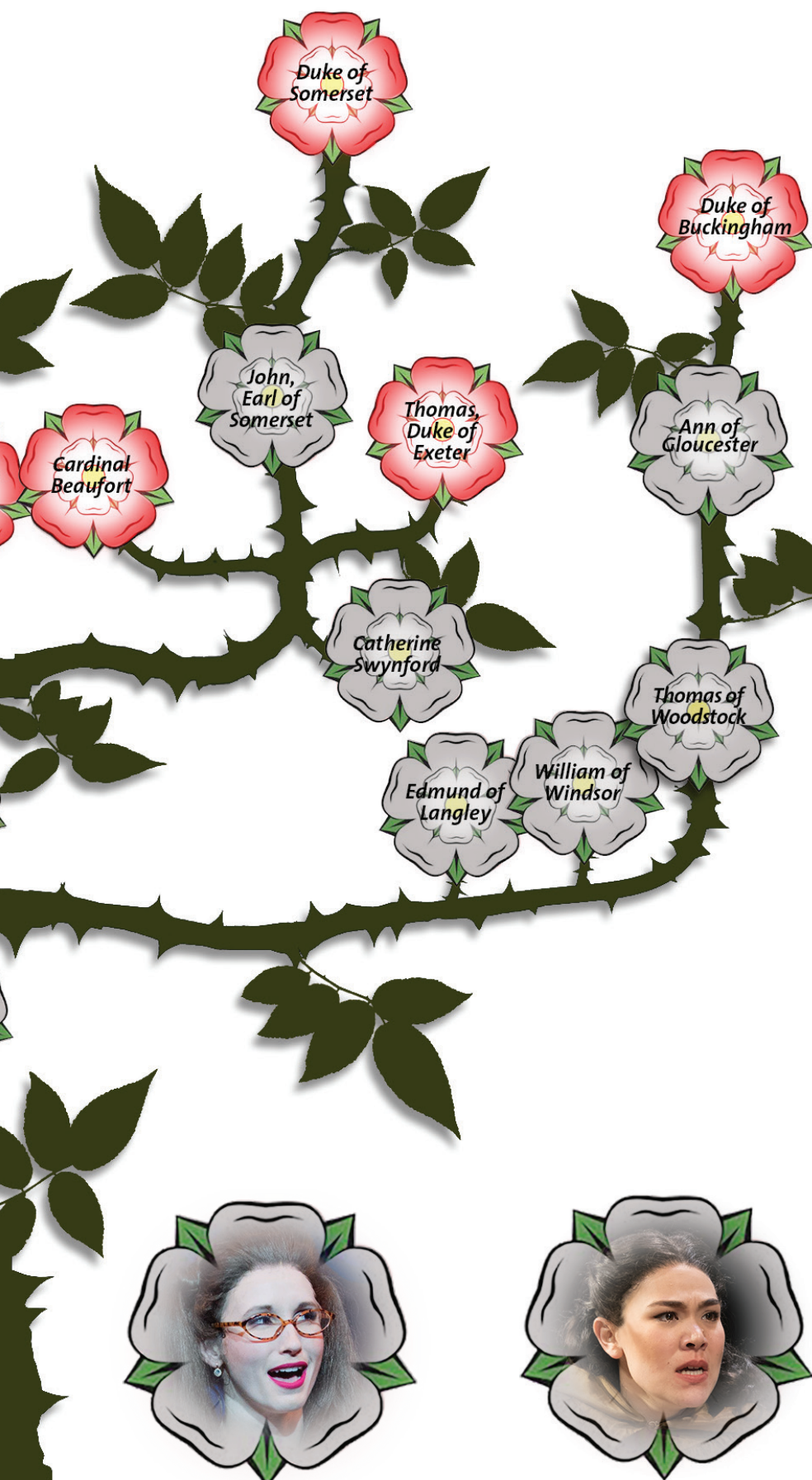
The earliest reference we have to Shakespeare as a playwright appears to be inspired by *Henry VI, Part 3*: a pamphlet, paraphrasing York's description of Margaret, calls a young writer a "tiger's heart wrap'd in a player's hide." Shakespeare's work as an actor embedded him in the heart of the highly collaborative enterprise that was the English theatre of the 1500s. Far from being the products of a solitary genius, early modern English plays were designed for and highly responsive to the companies that performed them. The three parts of *Henry VI*, though now known as Shakespeare plays, are increasingly believed to be the result of collaboration not just between Shakespeare and the playing companies he worked for, but between Shakespeare, then at the dawn of his writing career, and more experienced playwrights.

The writers who scholars propose as collaborators include Thomas Nashe and Christopher Marlowe. The nature of their collaboration is debated—perhaps they split the plays scene by scene, or perhaps the texts we have are Shakespeare's revisions of the other writers' older work. The *Henry VI* plays disappeared from professional stages almost completely until the 20th century, when they gained new collaborators in the form of directors and dramaturgs who reworked the texts for their own performance needs, often trying to render them more streamlined and narratively cohesive. Into this history of collaboration now enter upstart crew collective—co-founded by Betsy Schwartz, Kate Wisniewski and Rosa Joshi to produce classical plays with diverse female and non-binary casts, re-imagining these works for a contemporary audience—who have created their own collaboration with Shakespeare in this original adaptation.

Compressing three very long plays into the two moderately sized parts of *Bring Down the House* demanded difficult decisions. Much of Joan of Arc's strange and complicated storyline is removed, refocusing on the conflict between fellow Englishmen, the seeds of dissent that soon erupt into all-out civil war. Contemporary political



Among the cast members for both parts of *Bring Down the House* are Vilma Silva (pictured in 2019's *All's Well That Ends Well*), Sheila Tousey (pictured in 2019's *As You Like It*), ...



Jenna Bainbridge (pictured in 2019's *Hairspray*) and Emily Ota (pictured in 2018's *Romeo and Juliet*). Photos by Jenny Graham.

resonances are teased out—precisely the kind of thing Shakespeare or other writers who were tasked with revising and updating an older play would often do in their own time. The play's ending is also slightly rearranged to cast focus on a character whose fame would soon outstrip all three plays, whose rise to popularity both within Shakespeare's future plays and within our culture casts a new light on all that came before. Such engagement with both Shakespeare's text and reputation is what makes such modern-day collaborations so exciting and illuminating, and entirely in the spirit of an era of playwrighting that was continually reworking old stories to make them new again.

The Henry VI Plays

Across three plays, Shakespeare weaves a complex and ever-shifting portrait of England and its people.

The characters' competing perspectives, interests, and strategies defy any straightforward line of narrative.

Look on Thy Country, Look on Fertile France

Beloved King Henry V conquered France, but with his death, the tide turns. Joan la Pucelle, a peasant maiden, claims she has been inspired by God to save France—and the French answer her calls. The English struggle to keep their grip on the country, and petty power plays between rival English lords Somerset and York threaten to sabotage the army's efforts. Unity at last brings England victory, as York captures Joan and the Duke of Suffolk seizes a French princess, Margaret, who he decides to present to Henry as a potential queen. But once again a woman loosens the English grip on France, as Suffolk negotiates the surrender of several important border counties as Margaret's dowry. The English lords see Henry V's legacy slipping away and blame Margaret for it.

Though anger over Margaret's dowry seems briefly to unify the volatile English court, they have soon fractured once again into squabbling rivalries and attempts to undermine one another. Politicking leads Somerset to be chosen as regent in France over York, and he soon returns with news of failure: All the English territories in

WHAT MAKES A KING?

With the loss of King Henry V, the court and citizens of England find their ideal vision of an English king. His memory begins the play, and in a certain sense, the characters spend the rest of the story in search of it. Who can be a king in Henry's image? Who will uphold his legacy of conquest, of glory, of—simply but most importantly—stability? It is a question that takes on a new dimension when the story is presented by this company of female and nonbinary actors, most of whom spend most of the play performing as characters whose gender does not match their own.

Even here on the stages of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, where patrons and artists alike have become accustomed to seeing women fill all manner of roles originally written for men, we have yet to see one of Shakespeare's famous English kings played by anyone but a cisgender man—until now. The echoes of past Henry Vs that our minds may supply when the characters urge us to imagine him are all men. The characters of the play likewise insist on gender as one of the key definitions of a proper king: Both Margaret and Eleanor recognize that their sex is what disqualifies them from the power they crave. But the ideal of kingship is not unattainable because the actors of this company are not men; rather, this apparent dissonance in casting amplifies the impossibility of a dream that was already unachievable. No one can or ever will be the perfect king in the vein of Henry V... who himself only became perfect once he was gone.



Bring Down the House director and co-adaptor Rosa Joshi. Photo by John Ullman.

France—all the remnants of King Henry V's conquest—are lost.

Raise Aloft the Milk-White Rose

The Duke of York believes he is the rightful heir to the English throne due to his descent from King Edward III's third son, whereas King Henry descends from the fourth. This claim strikes at the legitimacy of Henry's entire line, including his powerful and popular father... but the new King Henry's youth and inexperience make this shocking challenge seem newly possible.

Debating his rights with Somerset, York bids his partisans to pick and wear a white



RICHARD
JENNA BAINBRIDGE

Sketch by costume designer Christine Tschirgi.

rose as a sign of their loyalty to the House of York; Somerset's followers choose red, the color King Henry soon adopts. York's arguments win over Salisbury and his son Warwick, powerful northern lords, but he decides to wait until the moment is right and the deep divisions already splitting the court tear it apart for him. Once his enemies have destroyed each other, he'll step into the fray.

Good Duke Humphrey

Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, is the youngest and only surviving brother of King Henry V. He is also Lord Protector of the young king, a title his many enemies—Beaufort most prominent among them—deeply resent. His wife Eleanor, on the other hand, sees his position of power as a stepping-stone to the throne, a threat that Margaret and Suffolk clearly discern. But Humphrey's mounting list of enemies also recognize Eleanor's ambition as a crack in the upright Duke's strength, a tool to bring Humphrey down. Luring Eleanor into a trap, they discredit both her and Humphrey: She is shamed and sent to prison, and Humphrey at last is forced to surrender the title of Lord Protector. His enemies try to seize the opportunity to force Humphrey out of power entirely, but Henry remains trusting and loyal to his uncle.

Eleanor tries to warn Humphrey of the danger posed by the courtiers, but he is steadfast: Like Henry, he believes that loyalty, justice and honesty will win the day. Suffolk, York, Beaufort and Margaret know better than to trust the rule of law, and hatch a plot to secretly murder Humphrey. Though the scheme succeeds, they cannot reap the benefits, as the commons rise in fury at the news of Humphrey's murder and blast their alliance apart. Beaufort dies consumed by guilt, Suffolk is exiled to his death, York is dispatched to fight a war in Ireland and Margaret is left alone.

Inspired with the Spirit of Putting Down Kings

The Duke of York bribes a Kentish commoner, Jack Cade, to claim to be a long-lost heir to the throne and spark an uprising. Cade and his army of working men battle their way to London, tearing apart the men who have used their wealth and education to oppress the commons. This blaze

of fury from below is soon suppressed, but the instability it causes provides the perfect opening for York to assert his claim.

She-Wolf of France

From the moment of her arrival in England, Margaret has sought the fulfillment of Suffolk's first promise to her: that she will be a queen, crowned and powerful. Allied first with Suffolk, then standing strong beside Somerset, Margaret truly comes into her own when fighting for the right of her son, Prince Edward. Threatened with his disinheritance, she raises an army and takes to the field against the House of York.

The House of York sees her as an unnatural fury, a tiger, a foreign monster. Her allies in the House of Lancaster admire her courage and determination, the unwavering strength that her kingly husband could never muster. She cannot be deterred: When the tide of the war turns against her, she travels to France to beg for foreign aid and returns not only with soldiers, but with Warwick as a new ally, bolstered by a confident son that the Lancastrian lords praise as the true heir of the beloved King Henry V.

The Red Rose and the White

York's moment has come. With the help of his four sons, Edward, George, Richard and Rutland, he takes to the field to claim his right. Warwick and Salisbury abandon King Henry to fight for York; King Henry finds new allies in the Cliffords. Generations splinter as the old—Salisbury, Old Clifford—die in battle and give way to sons who vow unswerving vengeance on their enemies; commoners are conscripted into both armies, where sons kill fathers, fathers sons. King Henry disinherits his son Edward in hopes of bringing peace; York's sons persuade him that the only path to peace is through war.

The desire for personal revenge spurs the war's greatest acts of cruelty: Clifford stabs York's youngest son, and he and Margaret taunt the dying York with a handkerchief bathed in the boy's blood. The scene reverses as the war draws to a close, and it is Margaret who must watch as her own son is killed. With Prince Edward's death, King Henry's capture and imprisonment, the Lancastrian cause is irrevocably lost.

Three Suns

Standing together in the aftermath—though they don't know it yet—of their father's death, the three sons of the Duke of York see a vision: three suns in the sky. It is a symbol, Edward proclaims, of the unity of the three sons of the Duke of York, all of whom soon vow to help Edward take up their father's claim to the throne. Edward swiftly claims the crown that eluded his father, but the brothers soon find that winning a throne is simpler than holding it.

Without an enemy to unite them, the dissonant personalities of three men raised for and by war begin to break through. Confident Edward is ruled by his lust for women, to the point of impulsively

breaking off a planned French marriage in favor of pursuing a Lancastrian widow, Lady Elizabeth Grey. George is annoyed by his brother's impolitic decisions. And under the mask of unswerving loyalty to King Edward, Richard begins to reveal that watching his brother wear the crown will not satisfy his ambitions.

The brothers find unity once more in battle, gathering to exult over the ultimate prize: the capture of Margaret and her son, Prince Edward of Lancaster. They act as one, all stabbing Edward, all refusing to grant Margaret the mercy of death that she begs for. In the midst of this, however, Richard slips away. There is one duty left that only he can perform: to kill the imprisoned King Henry, thus ensuring his family's grip on the throne.

Here Begins Our Lasting Joy

Throughout the story, King Henry reminds us again and again that he was only a child when he took the throne. Tossed to and fro by self-interested lords and quarrelling advisors, Henry never succeeds in asserting his mild, hopeful vision for the country and his rule. Sitting alone in the midst of battle, he laments a fate he never chose, the blood spilled over quarrels between cousins, an unwished war fought in his name.

At play's end, he sits alone again, now in prison. Like so many of Shakespeare's prisoner-kings, he sees his fate clearly . . . and the fate of the man who will bring it about. Confronted by Richard in the Tower, Henry prophesies sorrow, bloodshed and

death. Seated on his throne, surrounded by his family, the new King Edward IV speaks hopefully of prosperity and peace. But the cost of his crown, and the darkness unleashed within the souls of those who helped him claim it, will not be easily forgotten.



Bring Down the House co-adaptor Kate Wisniewski also portrays Warwick.

Further Reading

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