



NSF brings 'Henry V' home with Civil War setting

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Amy Stumpfl, For The Tennessean

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(Photo: Jeff Frazier)

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For many, Shakespeare's iconic historical drama "Henry V" will always be inextricably linked to World War II — thanks to Stephen E. Ambrose's critically acclaimed "Band of Brothers," which takes its title from the young king's impassioned St. Crispin's Day speech.

But when it came to staging this summer's production of "Henry V," Nashville Shakespeare Festival looked a little closer to home for inspiration.

"I was talking with [author and historical preservationist] Robert Hicks, who wrote 'The Widow of the South' and 'A Separate Country,'" says director Nat McIntyre, who has appeared onstage in a number of NSF productions. "We were talking about lessons learned from the Civil War — we've made progress in many areas, but not all. He said if we could somehow go back to that time, maybe we could finally move forward as a nation. That got me thinking about 'Henry V,' and how it might translate to the American Civil War."

In researching the project, McIntyre found plenty of parallels — not only in the text and themes, but in the characters themselves.

"I started looking at personalities in the story and found interesting counterpoints within the leadership of the Confederacy. And we know that Shakespeare was widely performed and read during that time period. Politicians often quoted him in their speeches, soldiers quoted him in their letters home — it just seemed a good fit."

And McIntyre says that Nashville provides a natural backdrop for the piece, which imagines Confederate and Union soldiers coming together on the eve of battle to enact Shakespeare's play about a charismatic young king.

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"Tennessee was one of the most divided states in the Union, with brothers fighting brothers. We've set the action toward the end of the war, so these powerful words become more about what's going to happen after the conflict. The band of brothers becomes the North and South, coming together to reflect and reconcile."

As always, music will play an integral part in the production. The Princely Players — an African-American a cappella group that started out in Nashville in 1967, will draw from its considerable repertoire to galvanize the story.

"They really provide the moral spirit of the piece," McIntyre says. "They're mostly in the background, but their spirit drives us forward."

Nashville native James Albert Brown, an original member of The Princely Players, says he is delighted to be part of the city's annual Shakespeare in the Park.

"It's been interesting to see the story take shape as we've gotten into rehearsals," he says. "We have about a dozen songs that will intertwine with the action — many are familiar spirituals, such as 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' and 'I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned.' I think it's going to add a real dramatic component to the play."

If you go

What: Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents "Henry V"

When: Aug. 13-Sept. 13. Performances at 7:30 p.m., Thursdays-Sundays (plus Labor Day Monday), with pre-show entertainment at 6:30 p.m.

Where: The Bandshell at Centennial Park, 2600 West End Ave.

Tickets: \$10 suggested donation (A limited number of "Royal and Noble" seating packages are available, including ringside seats and gourmet picnic dinners.)

Info: Blankets/lawn chairs welcome, with bleacher seating available. Food/drink vendors available on-site, or bring your own picnic.

Contact: www.nashvilleshakes.org



