

Merely Theatre Present Henry V and A Midsummer Night's Dream In Grantham

Merely Theatre Present Henry V and A Midsummer Night's Dream – Gender Blind Bard for 21st Century

As criticism mounts over opportunities for women in theatre, Merely Theatre use a company of five male and five female actors, producing gender-blind, five-hand Shakespeare productions touring the UK in 2016.

As 2015 drew to a close, [criticisms surfaced](#) over equality of opportunity for women in the arts in the UK. While the industry as a whole lags behind other sectors, the new generation of theatre companies is taking matters into its own hands. Merely Theatre hopes to start 2016 as it means to go on as it embarks on its first national tour: as the first gender-blind classical theatre company, and the first to use 50/50 casting.

This company will tour five-hand productions of Henry V and A Midsummer Night's Dream. These productions come to the Guildhall Arts Centre in Grantham next Wednesday 3rd February 2016. The tour is produced by [The Production Exchange](#) and supported using public funding by Arts Council England.

Shakespeare himself was [no role model](#) when it came to equality: only 16% of his characters are female. The largest female role is Rosalind, with just over seven hundred lines, while the largest male role, Hamlet, has over fifteen hundred.

One of the other major criticisms is that even when women are employed equally in number, they fall into subordinate roles; the kind that would fail the [Bechdel Test](#), where two women must speak to one another about a subject rather than a man in order to pass.

To overcome these challenges in the text, Merely Theatre's unique company is used in a unique way.

The company's five-hand productions of Henry V and A Midsummer Night's Dream utilise ten actors, composed of five men and five women. Male-female 'twins' rehearse the same parts as one another, so there is both a male and a female actor ready to play every role. From that cast of ten, five are selected for each performance, with the genders shifting fluidly. For example, some audiences will see a female Henry V, and others will see a male Titania. This role-sharing also creates an industry leading [progressive working environment](#) for the company moving forward.

The 50/50 male and female company will perform over forty shows in nearly twenty venues across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland early in 2016, produced by [The Production Exchange](#).

Associate Producer Emmy Rose explained;

"It's fantastic to be preparing our first national tour after working for years together in rep, honing our style. What we've created is modern, accessible and so exciting. We can't wait to connect with audiences across the country."

This approach has already yielded rewards, with a production of Henry V with four female actors (one of whom played Henry) and one male earning a [five-star review](#) from Everything Theatre, together with glowing [audience feedback](#). The company does not draw attention to the gender-blind conceit in the shows themselves.

Artistic Director Scott Ellis explained;

“We’re not doing this as a gimmick or because it’s politically correct. Our system of putting the actors into male-female pairs and the fact that every single character could be portrayed by an actor of either sex on any given night means that we are truly 100% gender blind. This allows us to address the gender inequality in British theatre without making any sort of statement with the production itself. We simply take gender out of the equation.”

Robert Myles, an actor working with the company, remarked;

“When Shakespeare was around, all actors were men and actors played all the parts. Now actors are men and women, and actors play all the parts. It’s got a clean logic to it, and it doesn’t affect how we tell the story.”

By making it a non-issue in their practice, it frees the creative team up to focus on perfecting what they see as the fundamentals of Shakespeare- clarity, focus, stakes, pace, sweat, and active choices.

About Merely Theatre: The actors, the audience, the text. Merely is characterised by playful use of space and audience interaction. Their dynamic, irreverent but focused use of text ensures modern audiences are as engaged and entertained as audiences were when the words were written. For more information please visit: <http://merelytheatre.co.uk/>