

THE HOLLOW CROWN

2004

22-25 Sep. 2004

A royal show with much humour and a deal of sparkle

Richmond Drama Awards

Mark Aspen

ALL the juicy secrets of the royals! **The Hollow Crown** echoes to two millennia's worth of assorted gossip, diary snippets, speeches and tittle-tattle.

Lovely! If you are an avid royal-watcher, Teddington Theatre Club's latest offering was a must.

It also represents a departure (royal progress?) from the usual play genre into the realm of the rehearsed reading.

As such it had the feel at first of a Victorian parlour recital for the edification of the servants and children: indeed our readers were in white tie with polished patent pumps and the ladies in chocolate-box frocks, all beautifully dressed by Margaret Boulton.

But, no, it soon moved much more smoothly - on a regal red and blue velvet stage, heavily raked around the eponymous crown, spotlight on a pedestal.

The design, by co-directors, Jennifer Laney and Graham Sawyer, was plush, elegant, and very royal.

Shakespeare has Richard II say, "... within the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king, keeps Death his court" and in the opening readings we learned how uneasily lies that head: William Rufus (did he fall or was he pushed?) to Edward II's eye-watering end. The early

chroniclers offered the readers a range of early accents.

An adolescent Jane Austen's surprisingly bigoted ramble through history gave great opportunities for tongue-in-cheek humour, which were taken up with relish, whilst Heather Godley's skills as a comic actress came to the fore as scribe Ludwig writing with barely contained patience to Edward III's dictation of a love letter.

The special skills of reading, which concentrate only on voice, come with difficulty to most actors. Scripts get in the way and one felt that our cast were bursting to get out there and act. Their frustration kept them to a low key and it was not until after the interval that the readings really sparked into life.

James I's hearty *Counterblast to Tobacco* (a great propaganda piece for A.S.H.) was smoked by Val Wilding with more lady-like decorum.

Michael Godley's rich vintage port voice came into its own as Charles I defending himself at his trial, but his final "Sir, well" lost much of its poignancy. Barry Hill's spoken version of *The Vicar of Bray* was a gem, delivered with much gusto, and obvious enjoyment.

Although Tina Graham was clearly at home with the genre of a reading, many of the cast were not quite so comfortable. However, with so many fine actors and the directors' well-choreographed teamwork, *The Hollow Crown* gleamed handsomely.