

ARTS

THEATRE

Henry IV Parts 1 and 2
Barbican, London

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- 1 There is no shortage of corpulent, white-whiskered old chaps around in December, but the twinkly gent now in residence at the Barbican is no Santa Claus. And his twinkle is deceptive. This is Antony Sher giving a magnificent and exquisitely pitched performance as Falstaff at the centre of Gregory Doran's *Henry IV* productions. Sher's Falstaff, short of breath and broad of girth, is a masterpiece of venal, duplicitous charm – untroubled by conscience at the heart of a drama in which anguished conscience drives the action.



- 2 And Doran's fluent Royal Shakespeare Company staging rolls the contrasting worlds through one another, with court scenes bleeding into the Eastcheap tavern, so emphasising Shakespeare's masterly evocation of a whole country, thrumming with life, but riven and restless.
- 3 Doran's production is studded with sympathetic, rounded performances and revels in the famous comic scenes, such as the mock interview between Prince Hal and his father, with Falstaff playing the king enthroned on a bar stool. But it also draws out their place in the bigger picture. Falstaff's glee at playing the monarch contrasts sharply with the palpable agony of Jasper Britton's actual king, tormented by guilt, fearful that he has failed to quell the very disorder that impelled him to usurp the throne and given to volcanic rage.
- 4 There are dull stretches and a few flat notes, particularly as the tone grows more sombre. But this is a mature and beautifully detailed production, through which rebellion and turmoil roll as individuals and country grope towards a sort of stability.

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