

I am writing this sat on a ferry heading back from France, reflecting on what has been a remarkable couple of days. As part of my research for directing new play *The Road To Glory*, I’ve been lucky enough to travel with the Composer David Pearce to northern France. We’d organised to visit both Azincourt and the port town of Harfleur 600 years after the devastating Battle of Agincourt led by Henry V.

A director’s job is to help bring to life a world penned by a playwright and to do this it’s crucial to know in depth everything about the world of the play. I’d spent months delving into the wealth of literature that comes following a historic ‘victory’ such as the Battle of Agincourt, but my feelings are that you never really know a place until you have been there. The facts and figures, the accounts and records tell a story, but they never really bring something to life.

My sense of anticipation was sky-high as we headed nearer to Azincourt, following an indecisive SatNav across the beautiful countryside of northern France. On the approach to the town, the road is lined with dozens of painted cut-outs of both English and French soldiers; a clear sign that we were heading in the right direction. Continuing past houses and farms, the museum came into sight – a modern barn conversion, sensitively nuzzled into its rustic surroundings.



The museum itself and the exhibits it holds are fantastic, all framed around the events of Azincourt and the hundred years’ war but not exclusively about this; there is also reams of interactive displays and artefacts that look at Medieval warfare more generally as well as life as a knight.

Reading through the initial panels in the museum it strikes me that there is no sides here, the museum admits that the chronicles from the time in which the information is gleamed don’t agree on all the facts, and that the English chronicles are much more expansive and accurate, as is true of most war, it tends to be the victors that write about it. There was also a large section on the English fascination with the battle and some insight into the geography

in which it all took place.

The museum is divided into several rooms; the first set up to portray the two camps with two tents in opposite corners of the room representing the French and English armies respectively. The room is also home to two life-size models from Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, one of Henry V himself and the other of the Dauphin. The models are animated with a series of videos of actors performing excerpts from Shakespeare’s play, cleverly projected over their faces. I found myself interested as to why a French museum would use Shakespeare to introduce their audiences to the story of the Battle of Agincourt... something that would be answered as we moved through the museum’s spaces.

The next room in the museum was home to a life-size model of a knight looking over a large table onto which a series of graphics and images was projected to explain how the battle unfolded, helping me to appreciate the geography of the battle and to unravel the order of events.

Moving from here, we entered a small room with white walls onto which projected videos and graphics exploring how over time the British have held the Battle of Agincourt up as a source of pride and triumph. The museum also explores the notion that if it wasn’t for the mention of the Battle in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, then time would have seen this Battle fade in significance. The Museum’s literature also made me question the scale of this British “win” as they place it in to context as just one in a series of encounters between France and England known as the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453).

This stark reality left David and I in a mood of pensive reflection. Why is it that we put this moment of history on a pedestal? Why should we see the slaughtering of thousands of people as a victory?

The remainder of the museum houses a number of artefacts from the Battle, and the interactive exhibitions gave a real feel for the hardship of war and the difficulties faced on both sides. We were also lucky enough to speak to a few of the museum’s visitors; a boy no older than 12 who spoke to us of his sadness at the loss; and a local man who told us that he

hadn’t learnt much about the Battle at school but during the year of the 600<sup>th</sup> commemorations of the Battle, he felt it important to learn the history of his home. Some of the museum’s staff told us that the majority of their visitors were French, but that if it wasn’t for the English fascination with the events 600 years ago there would probably be no need for a museum and certainly not one of this scale.

After visiting the museum, we drove to a nearby memorial built on the edge of the site at which the Battle took place. A large simple stone monument sits overlooking the place of such devastation – a reminder of the destruction and death on both sides. As we looked over the fields that are as isolated today as they would have been 600 years ago, it’s easy to imagine how terrifying it would have been for those facing battle.



I left Azincourt stunned by the peaceful nature of its surroundings but with my mind full of how devastating the impact of war must have been. With these thoughts rattling, we headed north to Harfleur; the town where Henry V’s ships landed and the siege began.

*“I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur Till in her ashes she lie buried. The gates of mercy shall be all shut up, And the flesh’d soldier, rough and hard of heart, In liberty of bloody hand shall range With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass Your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants.”*

*Shakespeare, Henry V*

Harfleur is a suburb of [Le Havre](#), yet holds a unique feel. Much of the medieval town no longer exists but for the church in its centre. Again, I found myself choked and emotional thinking of the lives lost, the trauma and the pain of the town’s people. In all my research and planning for creating this large-scale production I hadn’t given myself the time to stop and think about the story that we are telling, its roots and the people who suffered. A sobering thought.

My trip has given me a huge appreciation of the human sacrifice and loss. It has been all too easy to look at the numbers and see them as just numbers, but they weren’t, they were people: Fathers, mothers, sons and daughters lost forever and to what end?

The Battle of Agincourt was a significant moment in our country’s history, but my overarching feeling from my time spent in France is one of humbled humility. We marvel at Henry V’s tactical accomplishment but, as with all wars, the individuals are neglected – what is their story and how do we honour them? Some wars are just, some are even necessary, yet I firmly believe that none should be celebrated. As long as we are killing humans we are destroying our humanity and that surely can never be right. As long as humans are killing other humans then we have lost...

My experience has left me determined to be true to the people of the Battle of Agincourt; to create a piece of theatre that honours those lost, their sacrifice and the little village in which it all took place.



Daniel Hill is the Drama Development Manager for The Point and The Berry Theatre and the director of new play [The Road To Glory](#) by Neil Duffield that is being staged at [The Berry Theatre](#) on October 30th and 31st.