

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Richard III

William Shakespeare, adapted by Barrie Rutter

Part III of the Wars of the Roses trilogy

Northern Broadsides Theatre Royal, Newcastle, and touring
(2006)

Unlike Maria in *The Sound of Music*, Northern Broadsides have chosen not to "start at the very beginning/A very good place to start" but to begin their three-part *Wars of the Roses* at Newcastle's Theatre Royal with the final part, *Richard III*. I suspect that, since they have only five evenings and Saturday evening is the culmination of a full day of the trilogy, they had to have an extra performance of one of the plays, and what better than the best known of them all?

Northern Broadsides does not normally play in what director Barrie Rutter calls "velvet theatres" (see our [report](#) on his *C P Taylor Lecture*) and is more used to playing in non-theatrical spaces (even the Tour of London on one occasion) but this production is, in fact, touring to a number of "velvet theatres" - and few come more "velvet" than the Theatre Royal.

It did seem to me that it would have had much more impact in one of their more usual non-theatre spaces than in the 1,300-seater Royal where the size of the auditorium encourages the audience to watch a spectacle rather than being drawn in to the world of the play. The cast have no problems in getting their voices right to the back of the large auditorium and their movement and body language are also perfectly suited to the space, but somehow the audience is not quite fully engaged.

It is hard to say why. Conrad Nelson certainly makes effective contact with the audience as Richard. He is rather more restrained than Henry Goodman's delightfully melodramatic [Richard](#) for the RSC three years ago, but his "nods and winks" to the audience make their mark effectively, and we have a powerful Elizabeth in Kate Williamson.

Although generally Rutter's cuts are well done, his almost slashing of Margaret's "I called thee then" speech, culminating in "These English woes will make me smile in France", did diminish this piece of bitter triumphalism and this gives us a bit of a clue, perhaps, to the problem: technically the company is more than equal to the demands of the space but it did feel as if they were underplaying in a way more suited to a smaller venue. *Richard III* is one of Shakespeare's most melodramatic plays and this production is just a tad too restrained.

We all approach Shakespeare's plays with preconceptions and for me the keywords which best describe the emotional atmosphere of *Richard III* are greed, of course, but in particular hatred and venom - between Yorkists and Lancastrians, between the nobles and the Greys, Lady Anne for Richard, Margaret for her successors, and Richard for the whole world: where - in Shakespeare or elsewhere - is there a more biting venomous opening speech than Richard's? Venom and hatred simmer beneath the surface in almost every scene, occasionally bursting out in such scenes as the confrontation between Lady Anne and Richard and in Margaret's outpourings.

This production did not, I felt, quite plumb the depths of these destructive emotions - they weren't quite big enough for the space.

<< [Henry VI](#)

<< [Edward IV](#)

J D Atkinson [reviewed](#) the trilogy at the West Yorkshire Playhouse

Touring to Glasgow and Halifax

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)