

British Theatre Guide

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

Richard III

William Shakespeare

Propeller

Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield, and touring
(2011)

Richard III accompanies [The Comedy of Errors](#) on Propeller's 2011 tour of British and international venues. The company is committed to clear, fast moving, imaginative re-interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, which mix 'a rigorous approach to the text with a modern physical aesthetic' (Ed Hall, Artistic Director).

In this all male production Hall deliberately distances himself from traditional performances of the text. His Richard, played by Richard Clothier, is tall, handsome, upright and minimally disabled. The text is severely edited, so that the murders of the first half come thick and fast, almost too fast for us to grasp who is being executed and for what reason. Richard's final cry, 'A horse, a horse' is not the howl of a baited animal, but the dying emanation of one that has already received its death wound.

At any one time most of the cast is masked, except for those currently playing key figures. This has the effect of creating a chorus of anonymous watchers (very Greek) who participate in the murders, remove dead bodies from the stage, shift furniture and sing beautifully harmonised versions of Elizabethan songs. The set is simple and adaptable with a central upstage death chamber, where the murders take place, curtained off by vertical plastic strips. A second, long plastic strip curtain draws to subdivide the whole acting area. The operating theatre analogy is continued in the use (or overuse) of hospital screens to mask entries and exits. Much blood is squirted and then mopped up.

This is a production in which there is too much going on: too much moving of screens which detracts from the singing; too much squirting of blood which is not horrifying and becomes tedious; too many symbolic hand props and not enough time to work out their significance. The production would benefit from simplification.

Richard Clothier's Duke of Gloucester is a revisionist version rather than one that reinforces the 'Tudor myth'. He is 'charming, sympathetic even' (programme note) and 'his candour about his aims lures the audience into complicity with him'. This is all very well, but it is much more fun for the audience to be lured into a complicity with evil.

As with *The Comedy of Errors* there are excellent performances from the whole cast. Jon Trenchard is a sensitive and dignified Lady Ann; Tony Bell a powerful and dominating Queen Margaret. John Dougall as the hapless Clarence and Chris Myles as Buckingham give strong and convincing performances. It was good to catch an occasional glimpse of the comic physicality that was such a pleasure in *Comedy* as the two Murderers Sam Swainsbury and Richard Frame provided welcome light relief. The music was a delight. How impressive that the company has such a range of musical skills and sings so well in harmony.

"Richard III" is at The Lyceum on Wed 26, Fri 28 and Sat 29 Jan. It then transfers to Theatre Royal, Newcastle, and continues on tour in UK and abroad until 23 July.

Sheila Connor [reviewed](#) this production at the Yvonne Arnaud, Guildford

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)