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Richard III

William Shakespeare

Young Vic

(2001)

In this, the final production in the Royal Shakespeare Companys 27 hours of history plays, Michael Boyd and Aidan McArdle provide a heavily psychological insight into the life of Richard III.

Richard is a very complex character even by Shakespeares standards. He is passionate, self-seeking, incredibly ambitious and ultimately more ruthless even than that other anti-hero Iago. He is also a short, crippled man who is very bitter and blames many of his misfortunes on his physical deformity. While this may be correct up to a point as McArdle ably demonstrates, his unpleasant personality counts for far more.

The play starts with the ambitious Richard a very long way from the Crown. However the kind of obstacles that would prevent a lesser man - for example, the murder of most of his own family - does not seem to be any kind of block to Richard. He is one of those people with a kind of manufactured charm that he can turn on or off at will. He is a devious plotter and great dissembler who will always get his way.

It is never easy to see why the lady Anne who is, after all, both the wife and daughter-in-law of victims of Richard, should change from cursing him to marrying him almost instantly. The mysteries of love are never easy to understand and this match does not follow any kind of logic.

The scene where Henry VI's body is brought onto stage and Richard dips his fingers into the blood says an awful lot about the "bottled spider".

We see more signs of the love and hatred that Richard can generate in his relationships with the Queen Margaret - the woman that described him as a bottled spider and hates him with an unmatched venom. This is contrasted with his brother Clarence who, while haunted by dreams of his own sins, has a firm belief that Richard loves him and when his murderers appear at Richards behest, asks them to go to Richard who will pay them off. It is a very painful moment for this doomed man when they explain that they are in the pay of his beloved brother.

King Edward fares little better, but he at least dies a natural death. This leaves his elder son as King and his younger one next in line. The tiny Richard with the support of the massive Buckingham who gives him extra weight does not mess about at this point. They send his two young nephews to the Tower of London from which they will never emerge.

Aidan McArdle is particularly good at switching from charm to anger and back again. It is common to see people who behave like this but few of them have quite the ruthlessness or the power of Richard.

As a result of the four recent deaths in his family, Richard is reluctantly "persuaded" by his people that he must take on the throne of England. In fact on this occasion he does so to very limited

public acclaim.

Perhaps the best comparison that one can make for Richard is that he is reminiscent of a 21st century politician. He will use charm and spin wherever possible but if this is not working, he will start working behind the scenes to ensure that he achieves his aims.

Once Richard becomes King he really comes into his own. He will not listen to any opposition and he strengthens his own position by condemning his former ally, Buckingham. He is cleverly portrayed by Boyd in an ill-fitting crown which symbolises his own uncertain position. Even his mother disowns this evil man.

The play ends at the Battle of Bosworth, where Richmond who will ultimately become Henry VII, launches an army against Richard. The night before the battle presents some interesting contrasts as Richard drinks to excess and throws stones onto the ground in a show of limited strength. By way of contrast, Henry VII makes a moving prayer to his death father.

Perhaps as a result, Richard is haunted by the ghosts of all of the people that he has murdered and enters a dreamy slow motion fight with them. His real battle the next day is equally unsuccessful.

The play and this wonderful season end fittingly with a father and son on stage. This is reminiscent of other fathers and son who have symbolised the civil war and the royal succession throughout the season.

It would be great shame if this excellent series of eight plays does not tour further after the season ends at the Young Vic. The experience of seeing all eight plays is very special both as a lesson about character and as a chance to really steep oneself in Shakespeare often at his very best.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)