

British Theatre Guide

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The Robbers

Friederich Schiller

The Faction

New Diorama Theatre

25 January–22 February 2014

The Robbers (*Die Räuber*) is a sensational drama of intrigue and violence and the Faction's passionate production, directed by Mark Leipacher, doesn't pull any punches.

It is Schiller's first play and he wrote it while still in his teens. Published in 1781, it was first performed early the following January when its author was just 22 so it is hardly surprising that it shows the fiery enthusiasm of youth.

It is essentially the story of two brothers, sons of the aristocrat Count Maximilian von Moor. The first to be encountered, when the audience enters, is younger brother Franz, already on stage perusing the top of a large, table-like structure on one side of the stage, oblivious of the figures lying hunched on the floor in the opposite corner.

It is part of Faction's style that characters remain on stage, unlit and immobile through scenes of which they are not part. Sometimes, for an exit they may not go off stage but run into a wall and remain there pressed against it, their backs to the audience.

Such stylisation is rapidly assimilated, so too is the quirk that, when Franz's father appears in a wheelchair with his nurse and Franz announces the receipt of a letter from "our man in Leipzig" he proceeds to read it from what turns out to be chalked writing on the top of the table and then rapidly rubs out in the equivalent of tearing it up.

Chalk writing on stage walls or floor is a gimmick that is used not just for letters but to represent certain props, to create a "wanted" poster and a tombstone and replaces the presentation of multiple killings in a battle with the rapid marking of crossed-through chalk strokes by the killers as the numbers mount up.

There is no set as such, just a couple of bare bulbs that glow on for some scenes and evocative lighting (by Matt Graham and Chris Withers) and costume that is modern, like rehearsal dress though matched to character. All this adds great speed to the action and corresponding weightiness when the rushing is halted, especially when characters address the audience.

Schiller is known to have been an admirer of Shakespeare, and perhaps even this early he knew *Richard III*. This production points up the similarities between the Crookback Yorkist and Karl, who asks in an early soliloquy in this version by the director and Daniel Millar, "Why am I deformed and unfinished?... Like I'd been spawned from something on Nature's compost heap."

Andrew Chevalier, with a clenched-fist and a rigid arm like Richard of Gloucester, may at first seem somewhat overacting as Franz, fussing around his father and reading the supposed Leipzig letter which reports his student elder brother running up debts, raping a girl, murdering her lover and fled

justice to join a gang—but it all makes perfect sense when it becomes clear that it is all a performance to delude his father and defame his elder brother Karl.

It works, though in another scene (that seems to echo that between Richard and Lady Anne in Shakespeare's play) he proves less successful in its attempts at wooing Karl's sweetheart.

Meanwhile Karl (Tom Radford, who embodies his naivety along with his passion) has got involved with a band of anarchic students. However, when one of them, Speigelberg (Cary Crankson), suggests they go off to the Bohemian forest and turn highwayman to raise the cash to pay their debts, he stays aloof until receiving a letter from Franz (which we have seen him write through the preceding scene) informing him that his are a mixture of egalitarianism and viciousness, the comparative innocence of Karl set against the violence and greed of Spielberg as well as evil Franz. (And, incidentally, the good and bad brothers and their father's misjudgement are another Shakespearean echo: of Edmund and Edgar and the King and Gloucester in *King Lear*.)

Damien Lynch and Alastair Kirton give Schweizer and Schwarz strong personalities among the robber gang and there is a powerful performance from Kate Sawyer as Amalia, Karl's devoted lover. Alexander Guiney's ailing Count Max von Moor makes a striking contrast to their energy and the Jeryl Burgess, in cross-gender casting, is a still centre for a momentary hiatus as a cleric offering the robbers an amnesty as well as doubling a terrified servant ordered to commit murder.

In *The Robbers*, Schiller offers a questioning of moral values and social inequalities and a distancing from church and state with an emphasis on codes of honour. With a final submission to the law when the stage is littered with even more dead than in *Hamlet*, this is all highly melodramatic. It caused a sensation when first staged in Mannheim and its idealistic revolutionary elements led to Schiller being made an honorary member of the French Republic.

It is perhaps too overblown for contemporary taste but, despite its *Sturm und Drang* excesses, this fast-moving production holds the attention with its theatricality, its very modern language and the company's trademark physicality including a slo-mo advance by the robbers coming to invade Franz's castle through a scene where he turns madly to prayer.

The Robbers plays in repertory with *Thebes* and *Hamlet*.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)