

Thinking Theater NYC

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Hip to Hip Brings "Richard III" from Park to Park

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When we arrived at Gantry Plaza State Park in Long Island City, Queens for Hip to Hip Theatre Company's free outdoor production of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, actors were guiding a group of about ten young children through some rudimentary stage fighting reactions as part of the "Kids & the Classics" interactive workshops that precede Hip to Hip's summer repertory shows. Families (and to a lesser extent, picnickers) were a strong presence in the audience, and at the end of the workshop, the participants and other children in the audience were given a



"Bingo" sheet with stickers to be removed when corresponding events in the play occurred. This *Richard III*, playing in rep with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (directed by S.C. Lucier), is part of Hip to Hip's Free Shakespeare in the Parks tour, which covers all five boroughs, Southampton, and Jersey City (a complete performance schedule is included at the end of this review). On this particular night, director David Frederick Mold's fast-moving, entertaining *Richard III* unfolded against the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, recreating an Elizabethan-filtered patch of medieval England on the edge of Queens and implicitly juxtaposing London's singular Tower with the contemporary forest of elite towers situated on their own river.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* follows the titular Richard, Duke of Gloucester (Jason Marr) as he maneuvers his sometimes murderous way to the English crown and, after a short rule, is ultimately defeated and killed by the Welsh Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond (Colin Wulff), the first monarch in a Tudor dynasty that, through his marriage, brought an end to the civil wars between the Houses of York and Lancaster and extended until the heir-less Queen Elizabeth's death (when the Stuarts, another ruling line of non-English



origin, would succeed to the English throne). This production appends a prologue using material from Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3* and at least a few lines from the epilogue of his *Henry V* in order to give the audience some orienting context for the tangled politics of English succession leading up to Richard's bid for the kingship (while still coming in at under two hours, with no intermission). This decision also allows for some battles right off the bat (Leah Alfieri makes an immediate impression as Queen Margaret, leader of one faction in the conflict). It also allows for a different first impression of Richard himself. Mold, in the director's note, observes that Shakespeare's Richard was likely "so thoroughly vilified" at least partly for political purposes, to flatter the lineage of Tudor queen Elizabeth. His famous physical deformity is widely agreed to have been created or at least highly exaggerated, again for ideological purposes, by authors such as Sir Thomas More (most well-known today for *Utopia*).

Mold notes that others "murdered and rebelled to gain the throne," and, indeed, one has only to look back as far as Henry IV, who usurped the crown. In Henry V, we see that his son has some misgivings about this fact but hopes to erase any potential stain through military heroism in France. In addition to reframing Richard through his first appearances as part of a wider, violent struggle for the crown (one could contrast this opening with, for example, that of Olivier's film version), Hip to Hip cuts some of the lines about Richard's appearance, and Marr plays him with a subtle stoop rather than the "hunchback" that many might expect. He even seems sincere when he drops to his knees and crosses himself upon being informed of the death of his brother, King Edward IV (Anuj Parikh). Then again, Richard III is a play concerned with performance: the Duke of Buckingham (Tristan Land) makes this subtext explicit when he comments, in the course of aiding Richard, that he can act like a tragedian when necessary. Significantly, Marr's often ingratiating Richard does undergo a change for the worse in his demeanor after he has been crowned.

The cast as a whole keeps Shakespeare's text sounding natural while at the same time helping to make its meaning clear for the audience, which is especially useful when some spectators may be stumbling on the performance by chance. At the same time, Hip to Hip trusts the audience enough to avoid going overly broad, something that would be very easy to do with a play centered on a character popularly known as a villainous hunchback who orders the murders of his own nephews. This does not mean that there is no levity, as a scene with the Lord Mayor of London (Josh Miccio) following the execution, at Richard's order, of Lord Hastings (Kendall Devin Bell) proves. The outdoor setting also means that the numerous children in attendance got to see actual child actors as Richard's nephews, Edward, Prince of Wales (a very good Bree Marr) and Richard, Duke of York (Axel Marr), as well as that the actors can deliver asides, for example, to an audience separated from the performance area by nothing but a string several inches off the ground. Both Richard and Richmond deliver their pre-battle appeals directly to the audience, taking advantage of this intimacy to good effect.



Wulff is excellent as Richmond, and he also figures, as Clarence, in another memorably staged scene, in which one of the murderers sent by Richard (Sophia Parola and Rebecca Wei Hsieh), in a nice detail, prematurely pulls out a dagger, removing their element of surprise and prompting his line that questions if they are there "To murder me?". Richard's attempts to win Lady Anne (the also excellent Sophia Parola) over the corpse of King Henry VI (Josh Miccio) is similarly well staged, as she comes close more than once to following through on his exhortations to kill him as he wears down her resistance with his seeming sincerity (a couple of moments of more clearly theatrical tears excepted). Richard's ominous, ghost-riddled dream near the climax of the play offers a further example of noteworthy staging, with all of the spirits ultimately arrayed on Richmond's side of the compact castle set designed by Robert Dutiliel creating a visual emblem of Richard's isolation.

These same ghosts, in another nice touch, watch over Richard's final defeat on the field of battle. While they might be disappointed to know that the last king from the House of York will shortly walk the fields again, audiences should embrace Hip to Hip's fun, free, family-friendly revival of a Shakespearean hybrid of history and tragedy before this (glorious?) summer comes to a close.

-John R. Ziegler and Leah Richards