



Richard the Third

by Thomas Larque. Written on 2010-12-17. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Richard III (2010, Love & Madness, International).

LOVE & MADNESS BEGIN THEIR TOURING PRODUCTION OF *RICHARD III* WITH A DRUNKEN OFFICE party. The smartly and expensively dressed partygoers (both men and women in business suits) might be Conservative Central Office workers celebrating an election win, or City bankers celebrating a particularly large bonus, but instead they are King Edward and the Yorkists celebrating a victory in the War of the Roses. As they stumble and mingle, Iarla McGowan's Richard moves from person to person, subtly working the room, the opening section of his great first soliloquy transformed into a congratulatory speech. Unafraid of mocking himself, Richard sits in the lap of Edward IV to embrace "this son of York", imitates the charging "barbed steeds" of War, and finally blows a long blast on a party-horn to demonstrate the "lascivious pleasing of a lute". At this moment the lighting changes, the partygoers freeze, and Richard turns to the audience to express his secret desires.

Wheedling and ingratiating rather than charming, McGowan's Richard underlines the great paradox of Shakespeare's play. How does a man whose reputation and actions are so transparently vile inspire the trust or loyalty of so many people within the play? For Joe Wredde's smooth and prosperous Buckingham, the answer is clearly self-interest. Hoping to rise with Richard, he is delighted to become his public relations advisor, smilingly delivering his lines into the microphone of an attendant journalist as he seeks to persuade the gullible mayor and citizenry to support Richard's coronation. Aimee Parkes's female Catesby, by contrast, is Richard's committed personal assistant, constantly wrestling with the documents and administrative work created by killing and war; Richard's only supporter in the final scenes, she has evidently stayed up to collate the news of the two armies, seated at the boardroom table at which Edward's court met in 2.1. Tyrell, who takes the part of all guards, murderers, and executioners is troubled by conscience, but still commits every bloody deed on command. Most puzzling in this production is the acquiescence of Lady Anne, who cannot possibly believe this Richard's blatantly dishonest protestations of love, and seems to accept him as her husband with a fatalistic shrug, welcoming her impending death, her hatred unabated. She is bullied

rather than tricked into taking Richard's ring, and seems to have no appetite for vengeance: Richard's offer of a blade does not seem the extreme gamble that it has sometimes been in other productions, as she never shows any willingness to use it.

With a cast of eight, and only moderate doubling, the production is heavily cut and characters amalgamated. It is a pity to miss Clarence's drowning in a malmsey-butt, which should make his premonitory dream of being drowned at Richard's hand a prophecy, and David Hughes – who plays Rivers and Tyrell – is forced to lead himself to execution, alternating between kneeling prisoner and standing executioner. Otherwise, the cutting and editing is judiciously done, and the production flows smoothly, with the narrative appearing consistent and complete. Nicholas Kempsey is particularly impressive in shifting between his three roles, making the geekish bespectacled mayor completely different from his clean-cut Richmond, and giving a *tour de force* as Queen Margaret – bent double and rendered masculine by age and bitterness, but still convincingly an old woman, clutching a bottle and spitting a cloud of purple liquor at her enemies, an eerily inhuman and suitably ominous prophet of doom and despair.

The climactic scenes are impressively directed and choreographed. Richmond's camp is crowded with every actor except Richard, while Richard's lonely encampment is inhabited solely by himself and Catesby. As Richard tries to sleep, the ghosts mill randomly around him, all speaking fragments of their curses at once, endlessly repeating and echoing themselves until Richard screams for a horse. As they prepare for the battle, Richard and Richmond alternately speak sections from their orations. The battle is represented by abstract movement, with the cast, excepting Richard and Richmond, standing in a formation and each in turn miming being struck, and stumbling or falling backwards. Richard walks confusedly between their milling bodies, seeking Richmond, while Richmond stalks him from behind, dogging his heels until Richard collapses to his knees, and Richmond symbolically removes Richard's red tie, and fixes it around his own neck, representing the crown that transfers between the two monarchs.

Although travelling light (touring Britain and Ireland with *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* until April 2011), this production is an effective and entertaining *Richard III*, which makes a virtue of the necessities of small cast and modern costume. While the production is not always as accessible to inexperienced audiences as the company might hope (the presentation of the ghosts and the battle in the last scenes require prior knowledge of the play to be fully comprehensible), this is a welcome opportunity to see Shakespeare seriously performed in towns, such as Chatham, where straight drama for adults is relatively infrequent.