



## Richard the Third at the Lyceum Theater

by Richard Wood. Written on 2011-12-14. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Richard III (2010, Propeller Theatre Company).

EDWARD HALL'S PRODUCTION OF *RICHARD III* FOR THE ALL-MALE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, Propeller, was Brechtian in that the mechanics of its staging were there for all to see, but it steered away from Epic theatre when it came to emotionally involving the audience; there was little scope for rational detachment in this portrait of England as a bloody slaughterhouse. The set (designed by Michael Pavelka) was a dangerous mixture of meat-processing plant and hospital ward, with plastic curtains, surgical screens and scaffolding, all manipulated by a menacing cast of citizen-stage-hands in masks and pale overcoats, concealing their dinner jackets beneath. Richard, Duke of Gloucester (Richard Clothier), by contrast, appeared all in black, with a prosthetic left hand and his left leg in callipers. His blonde, slicked-back hair was reminiscent of the Hamlets of Olivier and Branagh, but his sinister charm betokened the archetypal 'Vice' figure more often associated with this role. His offering of a ring to the front row of the audience, having chewed it off a dead finger, epitomised his mode of sadistic revelry. The male actors playing female roles wore conventional female costume, but there was no attempt, beyond this, by means of make-up or vocal delivery, to disguise the actors' gender. The authenticity of these performances was, nevertheless, undiminished. The princes, Edward, Prince of Wales, and Richard, Duke of York, were represented by puppets, manipulated and voiced by actors (Sam Swainsbury and Richard Frame, respectively), a choice that resonated with the production's overall concept.

As Richard's schemes to capture the crown proceeded, the masked orderlies performed his dirty work (beheading and disembowelment) behind translucent screens. Hastings (Thomas Padden) and the gloved Buckingham (Chris Myles) stalked the early scenes with the air of impatient undertakers. Nevertheless, as with all the main players, their impetuosity prefigured their own demise, trapped in the mechanism of the play's inexorable killing machine. The show must go on. Indeed, the pointed use of a mixture of traditional British folk songs, such as 'Down Among the Dead Men', and elements of the Requiem Mass, imbued the Lyceum theatre with the

atmosphere of a peculiarly macabre Music Hall throughout; the use of the ‘Dies Irae’ at Buckingham’s death was particularly chilling.

The sense of events advancing beyond the control of the chief protagonists was maintained by the increasingly, though always subtly (as subtle as one can be with a chainsaw), time-conscious masked men. As well as doing most of the killing, and appearing threateningly amongst the audience, these faceless villains also intervened to stop Queen Elizabeth (Dominic Tighe) from stabbing herself, part of a scene in which her violent grief for her lost sons was portrayed as an inconvenient delay in the deadly business of the stage. Chiming with the theme of the inescapability of time’s advance, Ratcliffe (Dugald Bruce-Lockhart) appeared as a dutiful timekeeper, and Tyrell (Wayne Cater) as a clockwork agent of death, who proved difficult to kill. Indeed, even Richard’s demise, eventually brought about by a second shot from Richmond’s gun, suggested, temporarily, the unstoppable motion of an evil marionette; King Richard himself, who, until that point had appeared to be the master of the puppets, succumbed to the terrible machinery of Propeller’s production.