



Shakespeare Behind Bars's Richard the Third

by Jack Heller. Written on 2013-07-11. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Richard III (2013, Shakespeare Behind Bars, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

LAST WEEK, I ATTENDED THE PRODUCTION OF SHAKESPEARE'S *RICHARD III* AT THE LUTHER Luckett Correctional Complex in LaGrange, KY. When I tell people about Shakespeare Behind Bars, the question they ask me most frequently is, "Are they any good?" The related questions are, "Can they put on a good show?" "Do they understand the plays?" "Do they know how to act?" The answer to all of these questions is yes. However, I want to recast these questions to two which I have rarely been asked: What is the audience experience of attending a Shakespeare Behind Bars production, and how do its productions compare to other productions I've seen? I have seen a few hundred plays in the past 25 years, and nine plays so far in 2013. The shows I've attended have ranged from Royal Shakespeare and West End plays in England, numerous plays at the Stratford Festival in Canada, and professional theatre in Chicago to many community theatre productions in parks and churches and college and university productions. My experience with attending plays is probably atypical of most of the audience members who attend a SBB production, many of whom are there because they are the family and friends of the inmate actors. Other identifiable groups of the audience are prison staff members, social activists, sometimes a smattering of students who have previously taken a field trip to the prison, and a few academics like me and the two colleagues I attended with this year.

Attending a Shakespeare Behind Bars production begins with commitment. The Luther Luckett Correctional Complex limits the number of outside visitors to eighty per show for four shows. An interested person must request permission to attend no later than three weeks before the shows begin, and rather than buying a ticket, one must complete a form for a criminal background check. If more people request an opportunity to attend than the prison will accommodate, then the priority for attendance goes first to the inmates' family members, then those who support SBB financially, and then others as space permits. The commitment requires attending a play on a week night (Monday – Thursday), arriving at the prison in the late

afternoon, going through a security check, leaving your license and getting wrist-banded at the entrance, waiting up to 45 minutes in a visitors' area before entering the chapel where the play is performed, and following the prison's visitors dress code. There is also the commitment of getting to the prison itself. Relatives travel from hours away in Kentucky, my group traveled 4-5 hours to attend, and one inmate's sister attended from as far away as Texas. Nothing about attending a SBB play is typical.

The performance occurs in the prison's chapel, which has been used for the shows since the performance of *The Winter's Tale* in 2010. This is a different space from the visitors' room, which was used for performances before 2010, including for *The Tempest* in the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary. The chairs have been arranged to face the front of the chapel, which can be a disadvantage to an audience member if a scene is played close to the floor. During the performance of *Richard III*, Richard uncovers and looks upon the corpse of the dead King Henry, all of this below the line of sight for anyone sitting beyond the second row. However, the switch to the chapel has seemed more suitable to the nature of Shakespeare Behind Bars's work. The visitors' room had seemed a space between the inmates and the audience, an area of intersection of our lives. In the chapel, we enter into the prison, into the area of the sacred in the inmates' lives where the work of their souls is evident. The visitors' room felt institutional. While the chapel is also institutional, its space is designed to be more accommodating to the encounter of players and audience.

The Shakespeare Behind Bars men have been at it for 18 years. This would have some of the men performing more Shakespeare than most professional actors not associated with one of the repertory Shakespeare festivals. Jerry "Big G" Guenthner performed Richard, Duke of Gloucester as if he had been left the world for him to bustle in. His bustling was even more impressive as he worked without his left arm and hand which were costumed into a sling. When Lady Anne (performed by Hal Cobb) spit in Richard's face, he wiped his face and seemed to taste her spit. Then he removed the ring from his right hand with his mouth and placed it on Anne's finger to win her over. Spit for spit, nothing would seem to stop Richard from getting anything he wanted.

Many Richards are most concerned for establishing their authority. Guenthner found more of the humor possible in the role, disarming the audience's resistance to his villainy, not by winking and nodding at the audience, but by upping the outrageousness of his behavior. We are still startled with Buckingham when Richard tells him just to chop off Hastings's head if he won't go along with their plots. It turns macabre when Richard swings a bag with Hastings's

head around as if it were just happened to be holding while he was talking. Guenther's Richard knows that he operates like a villainous Falstaff.

For any particular play, a number of the SBB men may also be in their first or second productions. Last year, a colleague mentioned one performer, Christopher Lindauer, who did not seem to be in character in his scenes. This year, Lindauer played Queen Elizabeth, who has the job of winning a battle of wits with the wittier Richard. Elizabeth's outrage gives her a quicker wit than Lady Anne, who really should have known better than to trust Richard earlier in the play. One of the joys of attending SBB productions over a number of years is the opportunity to see several men grow in their abilities as performers and take responsibility for their own actions. Lindauer's Elizabeth recognized that what she does affected more than her daughter's future, but the future of the country. His was a serious and fully engaged performance.

A Shakespeare Behind Bars production makes the best of the circumstances of its space. In the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary, Ryan Graham observes that if he were playing Ariel on a professional stage, he would be attached to a wire and flown over the audience. The story presentation in Shakespeare Behind Bars productions is straightforward, not given to the idiosyncratic whimsy of the director, but to the connection to the inmates' own lives. (1) In 2010's production of *The Winter's Tale*, the appearance of the allegorized time in the second act gave the men an opportunity to engage the audience with the time that they have served behind bars. In *Richard III*, Tyrell, acted by Mario Mitchell, served as Richard's designated assassin. Productions today typically have Tyrell be one of the unnamed murderers of Clarence and of Hastings, so when Tyrell spoke killing the princes—"The tyrannous and bloody deed is done. / The most arch of piteous massacre / That ever yet this land was guilty of"—Mitchell represented a simultaneous remorse and fear of discovery of his remorse by Richard, who in his misplaced contentment would reward Tyrell for the deeds Tyrell would regret. Moments such as this are the point of connection between the plays and these performers.

This year, the men performed before a photographic image of the Tower of London, so clear as to seem tactile to the audience. As we went to the chapel, we had to pass the segregated housing unit, often referred to as "the hole," with windows as narrow as those we saw in the image of the tower. The plays operate in the space where the men live.

Shakespeare Behind Bars productions have some innate limitations based on where they are done. The inmates must wear their costumes over their prison khakis. It is no big deal that the women roles are played by men, as we know that Shakespeare's women roles were originally

play by males. However, an audience member may have to suspend some disbelief when a Portia needs a closer shave or a Juliet is in his late 30s. The level of talent does vary somewhat within the company. Occasionally a performer will slip out of his character or rush his speech too much. However, the men work hard to choose roles that enhance their personal growth and develop their acting abilities. They rehearse around two hundred hours per play. The totality of the shows has been equal to the best productions I've seen of college and community theatre productions. In 2014, those who can should make every effort to attend Shakespeare Behind Bars's next production, *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Notes

(1) I can't help thinking here of Robert Falls's "daring" professional production of *Measure for Measure* at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, which, against any indication of the play text itself, ended with Barnardine killing the heroine Isabella. No such follies occur in a Shakespeare Behind Bars production.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Richard III
<i>Year</i>	2013
<i>Theater Company</i>	Shakespeare Behind Bars
<i>Theaters</i>	Luther Luckett Correctional Complex (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2013-07
<i>End Date</i>	2013-07

Cast

KING EDWARD IV	DAVID HARDING
PRINCE EDWARD	CHARLES YOUNG
DUKE RICHARD OF YORK	JOHN SHEESLEY
DUKE GEORGE OF CLARENCE	GARY COHEN
DUKE RICHARD OF GLOUCESTER	JERRY GUENTHNER
EARL HENRY	JAMES PRICHARD
JOHN MORTON	KYLE BAUGH
DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM	JOHN SNYDER
DUKE OF NORFOLK	KYLE BAUGH

EARL OF SURREY
EARL RIVERS
EARL OF OXFORD
LORD HASTINGS
LORD STANLEY
SIR THOMAS VAUGHAN
SIR WILLIAM CATESBY
SIR JAMES TYRREL
SIR JAMES BLUNT
SIR WALTER HERBERT
SIR WILLIAM BRANDON
SIR ROBERT BRAKENBURY
LORD MAYOR OF LONDON
QUEEN ELIZABETH
QUEEN MARGARET
DUCHESS OF YORK
LADY ANNE
MURDERER

GENE VAUGHN
JOSEPH FORD
GENE VAUGHN
STEPHEN MARSHALL
ERROLL ROGERS
STEPHEN HAYNES
CLIFFORD STOUP
MARIO MITCHELL
STEPHEN RIDDLE
JEREMY DEVERS
WILLIAM WHITEHOUSE
CHARLES YOUNG
STEPHEN HAYNES
CHRISTOPHER LINDAUER
WILLIAM WHITEHOUSE
GENE VAUGHN
HAL COBB
JAMES PRICHARD

Creatives

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
DIRECTOR
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
COSTUME DESIGNER
MUSIC/SOUND
MUSIC/SOUND
STAFF SPONSOR
DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS
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MATT WALLACE
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