



Richard II (dir. Gregory Doran) by the Royal Shakespeare Company

by Kevin Quarmby. Written on 2014-01-01. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Richard II (2013, Royal Shakespeare Company, UK).

A COFFIN DRAPED IN BLACK RESTS OMINOUSLY CENTRE STAGE, A BLACK STOOL BY ITS SIDE. LYING in state, the unseen body of the Duke of Gloucester silently prologues a murderous heritage for the unfolding drama. Behind the coffin in trompe l'oeil verisimilitude, the vaulted nave of Westminster Abbey recedes like an architectural ghost into the far distance. Stage right and stage left, steel platforms offer staired entrances and exits. A woman, dressed in black, is escorted to the coffin. In obvious despair, she drapes herself over the casket as a trio of



Figure 1: David Tennant as Richard II, photograph by Kwame Lestrade.

sopranos chant medieval choral music, their voices hanging in the air long after notes have left their lips. We are in medieval England. All is grey and black and sombre. With none of the trappings of anachronistic merriness or nostalgic glee, this medieval England is a dark and dangerous site of politics, whose intrigue is punctuated with internecine feuding and sycophantic self-interest. This is the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Richard II*.

Despite the sombreness of the funerary occasion, the opening quarrel between the belligerent Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray preludes the comical gauntlet throwing one-upmanship of later scenes. There is, though, a seriousness to this alpha male posturing. The apportionment of blame for the death of Gloucester, a death for which King Richard himself is implicated. Factions scurry for royal favour. King Richard presides over all, an effete and seemingly ineffective monarch surrounded by a posse of whispering advisors. Only after consulting them, huddled together like an annoying clique of gossiping schoolboys, does the King offer his devastating pronouncements. Only then does his Machiavellianism and petulant malice shine forth. There is little sympathy for this champion of vanity. The usurpation of this affected self-absorbed monarch, no matter how politically volatile, seems eminently reasonable.

Political usurpation, civil unrest, and an atmospheric evocation of medievalism in its purest sense, are the hallmarks of Gregory Doran's stunning production. Combine Doran's insightful direction with the designs of Stephen Brimson Lewis and the result is theatre of the magnificent. An aural and visual feast that makes full use of the Barbican space, even though the transition to a near proscenium arch setting must pose problems for the reinvented RSC. The RSC Stratford home has long banished such framed theatre in favour of the boldly thrust stage. Now productions must be reconfigured as they return to the Barbican, which last saw an RSC production over a decade before. The RSC's tentative return is nevertheless a triumph both for Stratford and for the City of London.

Everything hinges, of course, on the relationship between King Richard and Henry Bolingbroke. In the hands of David Tennant and Nigel Lindsay, this relationship is clearly defined. Tennant's Richard glides about the stage, his ridiculously long hair, like a pre-Raphaelite beauty, wafting elegantly in his wake. Tennant's king is the divine monarch writ large, his ego so massive that there is every chance he considers himself a Christ to his people. Even his royal robes smack of biblical imagery, and when, in the abdication scene, Richard appears in front of his usurping victors, he does so in a simple white gown, a cross hanging from his neck, and his hair loose.

At other times, Richard descends from the heavens on a central platform bathed in a golden glow. Like a Sun King, Richard spreads the rays of his munificence, while keeping close at hand his prattling advisers. No wonder Bolingbroke seeks to overthrow this childish malevolent

creature. No wonder Bolingbroke returns from exile to avenge Gloucester's death and seize the throne. Nigel Lindsay's Bolingbroke is not effete, is not vain, does not gaze at himself admiringly in mirrors. Lindsay's Bolingbroke is a rugged warrior, a plain-spoken aristocrat whose manliness speaks volumes to his chosen people, and whose wariness guarantees his quick-witted success. Tennant and Lindsay spar brilliantly with each other. Mental sparks fly between the two.

Elsewhere, the stage is populated with so many noteworthy performances. Michael Pennington gives a definitive John of Gaunt, whose 'sceptred isle' speech manifests not as the reminiscence of a dying patriarch, but the angry remonstrance of a frustrated old politician eager to influence the future before his death. No wonder King Richard is so eager to see the old man die. Likewise, Oliver Ford Davies is superb as the Duke of York. Ford Davies's York is a whining bombast, part Malvolio and part Polonius, whose self-righteous pomposity almost leads to the death of his only son. York's wife, the Duchess played by Marty Cruikshank, is a worthy foil to her husband. As she pleads with Bolingbroke for her son's life, Cruikshank's duchess still manages to put her husband firmly in his place. The family tragedy veers so close to comedy that it seems little wonder that a pardon is granted.

Jane Lapotaire makes a welcome return as the widowed Duchess of Gloucester. The death of her husband has obviously tipped this elderly wife into near dementia. We hear the grief-stricken outbursts of a lost and troubled woman. As she struggles to regain composure after a lifetime of dignified aloofness, Lapotaire's duchess spirals into depression. Her exit, slow and faltering, heralds the announcement of her death. It comes as no surprise to hear of her demise, so poignant is her departure from the scene.

Oliver Rix's Duke of Aumerle, the easily manipulated son of the Duke of York and intimate confidant of the king, invites a glimpse of Richard's charismatic power. When, in a vulnerable moment of fear and regret, Tennant's king steals a tentative kiss from his young charge, the extent of the king's need and Aumerle's subsequent betrayal becomes clear. In Doran's production, Exton is replaced by Aumerle. As the young duke slowly drives his dagger into Richard's back, we recognize the narrative appeal of Aumerle proving his manhood, and his service to the new King Henry IV. Bitterly rejected and banished for the murder, Aumerle sneaks offstage like a medieval Judas as Bolingbroke invokes his own Pontius Pilate imagery.

Gregory Doran has returned the RSC to its long-neglected London base at the Barbican. His *Richard II*, with the obvious star appeal of David Tennant, is the perfect vehicle to publicize the collaborative venture and the venue for a new audience. As theatre, this production excels on all levels. Visually and musically stunning, impeccably acted, and clear in its complex

political intent, the RSC's *Richard II* offers an intellectual alternative to the traditional Christmas fare of London's winter season. Hauntingly beautiful from beginning to end.



Figure 2: Nigel Lindsay as Henry Bolingbroke and David Tennant as Richard II in *Richard II*, photograph by Kwame Lestrade.