

['Richard III' Returns to the Limelight](#)

BY NATALIE SACKS

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Hamlet Isn't Dead reinigorates the classic Shakespeare play through puppetry.

On Sunday, the world said good-bye to one of Britain's most famous, or infamous, monarchs, as the rediscovered remains of Richard III were laid to rest for the final time. It's fitting, then, that new Shakespeare company Hamlet Isn't Dead came to this piece in the Bard's repertoire now in their mission to perform all of Shakespeare's works in the order that they were written. We covered their production of all three *Henry VI* plays last year, but how does the more well-known *Richard III* hold up? Directed by Brian Gillespie, the theme of this performance is control and manipulation, which the cast accomplishes masterfully through a wide variety of styles of puppetry. From the hilarious opening hand puppet show summarizing the events of *Henry VI* to the Japanese bunraku-style figures and surreal shadow puppet dream sequences, it becomes clear by the end that everyone, in fact, is a puppet in a larger scheme. At the point where *Richard III* begins, we are near the end of the War of the Roses, with the House of Lancaster fully routed and York reinstated on the English throne in the form of Richard's older brother, King Edward. Edward's marriage to Queen Elizabeth has resulted in two sons, securing the new heirs to the throne, and the family honor has finally been restored. But is this enough for the power-hungry middle son continuing his father's crusade for dominance?

Of course not. And what we discover instead is an intricate nest of plots upon plots, as Richard seeks to take down his brothers, nephews and the Queen's allies to become the victorious Richard III, no matter the cost. We as the audience follow Richard Duke of Gloucester throughout the play, with frequent soliloquies giving us clues as to what schemes he will cook up next and *almost* convincing us that his path is the true and just one, rather than simply a naked grab for power.

This production does a great job telling a clear and engaging story in Shakespearean verse, though some of the minor characters may be difficult to keep track of if you are not familiar with the *Henry VI* trilogy. This is due in large part to Jarret Kerr's extraordinary acting as Richard, from his consistent and off-putting performance of the character's famous disfigurement to his seeming honesty and rhetorical skill at all times even as he weaves the most sickening deceptions.

With most of the other actors playing multiple roles, this small cast performance of *Richard III* has the effect of feeling more like an intimate, personal drama than an epic of nations. It also, due to the strong and gripping performances of Samantha Maurice as Queen Elizabeth and Laura Iris Hill as the former Queen Margaret, manages to come across as a play as much about the few women of Edward's court as the men.

This production makes no attempt at any sort of set or realistic weaponry, instead leaving the stage open to let the acting and puppetry shine. And though the lack of technical abilities such as true theatrical lighting is at times distracting, what we get instead is an innovative use of puppetry that creates a world all its own for the play to take place in. Particularly memorable is the skillful shadow puppetry, which occurs throughout the play but always in a thoughtful manner, adding to the story in the form of dream sequences or surreal moments rather than distracting from the larger plot. The other styles of puppets we see are King Edward's young sons as bunraku figures, curiously lifelike and yet artificial at the same time, and Richard's brother Clarence and the Mayor of London as human-arm puppets. It is telling that the most "innocent" characters are those depicted solely as puppets, with the gullible Mayor's construction particularly caricatured, and even more so when many of the other characters show up as shadow puppets later on as they fall into Richard's web. And with just those features and modern costumes, heavy on the leather jackets and dark colors, we are in the dark fantasy world of the War of the Roses.

It is important to remember, of course, that William Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* for the Tudor monarchy, whose ancestors were the enemies of Richard's Plantagenet clan, and it was in everyone's best interest to depict them as bloodthirsty savages. Thus, if the staggering number of murders in this play are perhaps not treated seriously enough, losing their effect early on, it serves a political purpose as well as a theatrical one. And that those deaths do come back to haunt Richard in the end perhaps makes up for some of those forgettable assassinations.

Arguably one of Shakespeare's best plays, *Richard III* is always an entertaining and engaging play. What *Hamlet Isn't Dead* brings to this production, then, is an innovative look at how puppetry and theatrics can sometimes tell a story with more truth than strict realism can. It is always exciting when a classical theater company finds themselves telling a new tale, and that is what this performance has done.

Richard III plays at the Westbeth Community Center through April 4. And for the best theater tickets at the best price, check CHARGED!

CATEGORIES: None

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

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