

**Richard III, directed by Michael Grandage  
at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, 13 March-10 April 2002  
(seen on the 23 March)**

Cast: Mark Bonnar (Tyrrel), Kenneth Branagh (Richard), Robert Demeger (Derby), Richard Durden (Edward IV/Bishop of Ely), Avril Elgar (Duchess of York), Robert East (Rivers/Lord Mayor), Andy Hockley (Brackenbury), Gerard Horan (Clarence), Elliot Jeffcock/John Tierney (Duke of York), Barbara Jefford (Margaret), Michael Jenn (Catesby), Phyllis Logan (Queen Elizabeth), Jonathan McGuinness (Lovel), Tom Mullion (Ratcliffe), Claire Price (Lady Ann), William Rycroft (Dorset), Ryan Sampson (Prince Edwards), Gideon Turner (Grey/Richmond), Danny Webb (Buckingham), Jimmy Yuill (Hastings). Designed by Christopher Oram. Lighting by Tim Mitchell. Music by Julian Philips.

Michael Grandage's production of *Richard III* opened on the 13 March 2002 at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield (an unfashionable, regional city in northern England), for a sell-out run of one month. Richard of Gloucester is played by screen actor and director Kenneth Branagh, who returns to the stage ten years after his RSC *Hamlet*.

The Crucible Theatre features a thrust stage in what is – for its seating capacity – an intimate space. No seat is very far from the stage. The production, which juxtaposes medieval and modern costuming, is very high-paced and lasts only 2 hours and 40 minutes. Yet, very few scenes are cut in their entirety. Only Act II, scene ii (in which Clarence's children ask the Duchess of York whether their father is dead) and Act III, scene iii (in which Rivers, Grey and Vaughan are done to death) are missing. The textual cuts are, in fact, subtly and inconspicuously executed within the different scenes.

The position of the interval at the end of Act III clearly emphasizes the two phases of the play, the rise of Richard (for 1 hour and 40 minutes) and then his downfall (for 1 hour). This is a character-based interpretation, one that urges the audience to focus on the singular phenomenon that is Richard's driving ambition. This is determined from the very outset of the production. Richard's famous opening speech is delivered directly to the audience: immediately, we are given an insight into the thinking of Richard as constructed by Grandage and Branagh. After the interval, the production dramatically reopens with Gloucester's coronation. Richard kneels front-stage, dressed in a red satin cloak. Above the throne, a banner features the dark shape of a gigantic boar. The enormous hog's aggressive

takeover of the stage decor shrewdly reflects the dominating imprint of Richard on this version of the play.

Aside from a minimum of stage furniture (throne and rostra), the stage remains bare through the whole production, thus allowing for quick changes of scenes. Edward, and later the two young Princes, always appear through a door at the back, centre stage. On the contrary, Richard usually comes from the right of the stage, out of an open trap. Centred and legitimate, Edward and his offspring are privileged with the most prestigious entry; Richard emerges from the workman's (or even hellish) entrance.

Christopher Oram's set design consists of looming, monumental stone pillars and a transparent curtain, both at the back of the stage. These columns provide an appropriate setting for the citizens to meet (II.iii) in a chiaroscuro atmosphere of secrecy reminiscent of a *film noir*. Their phallic robustness of the architecture represented also serves to lend an impression of apparent power and stability to the court scenes. The transparent curtain is used most effectively to separate Margaret from the other characters on stage before she bursts in with her flow of insults. Richard, flanked by two clergymen in a cloud of incense, also appears behind the curtain when the Lord Mayor is invited to the palace (III.7). Behind the curtain, then, is a place where characters can gather thoughts and plan for the stage business that lies immediately ahead. The transparency of the curtain is a meta-theatrical conceit: it symbolises the manner in which this production facilitates the audience to retain an illusion that it is privy to the thoughts of fully-rounded, individualistic persons.

The production achieves a high pace. This is, in part, because of Julian Philips's non-melodic, percussive music. It punctuates each exit of Richard and every start of court meetings. Richard's death is underscored by the striking, repetitive sound of a wheeled engine. At the end of II.iii and II.vi, a loud, continuous siren dissolves into the sound of ominous bells, creating a sense of doom and fate. The violin is used only at the beginning of the play, giving birth to some ominous music for Gloucester's first appearance. Musical crescendos anticipate upcoming swings of fortune for Richard; when the percussive beats speed exponentially, it is evident that a major change of fortunes will occur. Ultimately, the music enhances the sense of the inevitable – it is a register of tragedy that Grandage and Branagh find so articulately in a play that can be read, alternatively, as historical.

On the bare stage, Tim Mitchell's lighting is used to produce atmospheric spaces. Bosworth's battlefield, for instance, bathes in a bloody and misty red light. It also distinguishes different levels of fiction: we move from Richard's dream to

reality with a brisk change from white to orange light. It serves, at one point, to create two distinct locations on the limited space of the stage: Richmond's camp bed is front stage, lit in a warm, divine-like orange light coming directly from above; in contradistinction to this warm-coloured ambience, Richard's lies backstage in a crude, cold, white light. Richmond, the future Tudor, Henry VII, is lit up with cosy, effusive colour. He is, quite literally, the golden boy, the promising boy wonder whose positive destiny contrasts vividly with the harsh fate that awaits the unflatteringly-lit Richard.

As far as delivery is concerned, the production argues that the art of speaking can be exploited to give an impression of genuine naturalness and straightforwardness. Gerard Horan's Clarence seeks to retain the energy and dignity of a warrior in the grip of death. Barbara Jefford brings the grandeur of a prophetess to the part of Margaret, as she uncoils her limbs to physically-supplement the energy of her orally-impressive lamentations. Avril Elgar's Duchess of York regularly beats her womb as if it was the only responsible source of all the present miseries. Buckingham is played as Richard's odd-job man who is more practical and resourceful on the spot than Richard. When the young Prince of York arrives and asserts stridently that 'they [his uncles] were none [false friends]', Branagh's Richard doesn't know how to answer any more. He noisily clears his throat with embarrassment, and says 'My Lord, the Mayor of London comes to greet you' – bereft of a speedy response, he manoeuvres to quickly change the subject. All of the Prince's questions regarding the Tower are addressed to Richard who forwards them with quick hand gestures to Buckingham, who is apparently more apt to come up with immediate lies. Buckingham, in short, acts as Richard's spin-doctor, answering awkward questions on behalf of the executive government that Richard personifies.

Richard is played not so much as an inherently evil character, but rather as a man who is amazed to see all his plans succeed. He frequently addresses himself to the audience like a sharp-witted comedian. To the other characters on stage, he appears warm, honest and concerned, knowing perfectly how to counterfeit good humour, affability, piety and humility. In II.i, Richard joins the assembled court with a smooth and pious voice. 'I thank God for my humility' is said as he crosses himself. The wooing of Ann is played very sincerely and seriously, punctuated by several meaningful silences. It is a scene that rather parodies the heartbeat-raising rhythms of courtly wooing. The speed of delivery becomes quicker and quicker as Richard approaches his devious goal.

A master of exploiting the possibilities of enjambment in iambic verse, Branagh works to make his delivery appear natural and unaffected. This effect is often achieved by transforming the neutral imperatives 'what' or 'why' into real questions. Branagh notably used this technique in his 1993 screen adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Instead of delivering the line 'Love me? Why, it must be requited' as written, Branagh would say 'Love me? WHY? It must be requited', turning the statement into a comic, bewildered question. As Richard, Branagh introduces the wooing of Lady Ann with 'WHAT? Though I killed her father and husband?' as two distinct, natural questions instead of mere rehearsals of facts. This interrogation goes in tandem with the decision to play Richard as a character who is constantly surprised by his own luck and skills.

Branagh also uses another means to achieve natural delivery. He cuts up the rhythm of a sentence, often to comic, ironic and contrasting effects. After warmly greeting Hastings for the first time, the sudden, cold, dismissing 'He cannot live' is followed by a silence before continuing with 'I hope', full of actorish comedy. Branagh gets his biggest laugh in III.v. Here, Richard tells Buckingham the reasons why the rumours of Edward's bastardy should not reach his mother's ears. The sentence 'Because, my Lord, you know my mother lives' becomes 'Because, my Lord, you kneooow..., my mother lives', thus adding an embarrassed, comical note. Branagh's register includes the frustration of a capricious child ('And did they soooo?'), when asking Buckingham if the people wished him to become king). The cold scansion of cruel commands ('Shall I be plain? I wish... the bastards... dead'), as well as the slow, mocking delivery to Stanley of 'Is the chair empty? Is the sword unsway'd?' give the impression that complicated, lethal deeds are spoken of in simplistic ways. It is as if Richard is crudely summarising his schemes to some perplexed, uncomprehending bystander.

Contrary to the other characters, who generally retain a consistent tone of speech, Branagh's Richard excels in those unexpected changes in intonation which are the source of comic reliefs or gasps of astonishment among the privy audience. After greeting the two hired murderers very warmly, he suddenly grabs them by the hair and boots them in their stomachs. The assaulted men fall to the ground, grimacing in pain. Yet again, Branagh's Richard changes tone as he tells them in a sitcom-like naturalness: 'I like you, lads'. When presented with Hastings' head, his sorrowful delivery of 'So dear I lov'd the man' is simultaneously undercut as he throws the head to Buckingham as if it were a base football. Buckingham, although Richard's closest ally during most of the play, is the most physically-harassed character. He gets violently beaten when he fails to bring back the Mayor with

sufficient expedience after Gloucester's fake refusal to become King. In IV.iii, wishing to get away from Buckingham's repeated reminders of his early promise, Richard kneels near the throne and pretends to be fainting. Buckingham, who rushes to his rescue, is suddenly hurled to the ground with tremendous strength. 'I ... am... not... in... the... vein' is ejaculated with exacerbated loudness.

This violence is part of the production's main directorial choice: the emphasis on the physical ventilates further the exposed illusion that we are witnessing real persons engaging in life-determining actions. Richard is presented as both a manipulator of bodies and a prisoner of his own tortured physique. At the start of the play, before he delivers his 'discontent' soliloquy to us, Richard, naked but for white underpants, is wheeled onstage, strapped into a kind of rack-like traction device. It stretches his four limbs in what is an optimistic attempt to tame the character's bodily deformities, making him resemble a mixture of Da Vinci's Homo Vitruvius, Christ on the cross and a mental patient enduring electro-convulsion treatment. The image of crucifixion is also very reminiscent of the position of Frankenstein's creature, just before it is brought to life, in Branagh's 1994 film. For the director Michael Grandage, the idea was to present Richard's handicap as a form of scoliosis, which was treated by traction and stretching in earlier days.<sup>1</sup> On the ground, Richard must dress up with a huge effort. He eventually manages to buckle his chest in a breastplate-like corset over a pair of black leather trousers, and to encase his right leg in an iron calliper. This leg remains stiff through the whole show, obliging Richard to limp. He uses his right arm to move animatedly on the stage, as the left arm remains bound and impotent. During the first soliloquy, Branagh highlights Richard's handicap not only physically but also vocally. He deliberately puts the stress on two words, 'lame' and 'deformity', both of which are spoken loudly and furiously. The image of the torture bed comes back at the end of the play. At the eve of the battle, Richard lies once more in his traction machine. He begins to dream. The ghosts emerge from behind the pillars, as percussion music and rolling drums imitate the sound of thunder. The ghosts push the wheeled-bed back and forth, spinning it around, taking advantage of Richard's captive state. The two Princes even climb onto the bed, and swing on it like on monkey bars. Richard is transformed into a kind of toy. After playing with the other characters, he is being played at. Ambition and drive can only animate the

---

<sup>1</sup> Information given at a Questions & Answer session with Branagh, Grandage et al, Crucible Theatre, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002.

fortunes of Richard to a certain extent. All great men are prey to forces that transcend the efforts of even the most-motivated ego.

Richard's bodily vulnerability is especially revealed in Act III during his encounter with his nephews. The two little Princes first run playfully after their uncle. They make him fall down, prevent him from moving, climb upon him and begin to strip him of his corset. The Prince of York then sits insensitively on his spine, making Richard yelp with pain. Suddenly, realising what they have just done, the Princes jump back in fear and guilt. Without his corset, Richard walks with his upper body hanging forward, like an ape. For a while the incapacitated Richard is rendered unable to walk or even speaking. A great man's agency is compromised by even apparently-innocuous incidents.

Though physically disabled, Branagh's Richard manages to use his body not only to be extremely violent but also to seduce Lady Ann and Queen Elizabeth. During his wooing of Ann, he draws her body against him and brings her down onto the boards with him. Her 'Arise, dissembler' is, thus, addressed to a man not simply kneeling in front of her, but wrestling on the floor with her. Richard's 'Tis figured in my tongue' is then made into a direct reference to the kiss that he has just given her. His question, addressed to the audience, 'Was ever woman in this humour wooed?', becomes a cry of wonder that such a misshapen and wretched figure could win such a beautiful and emotionally-unwilling woman. Later, when trying to convince Elizabeth, he crawls and writhes painfully on the ground, using his infirmity as a means of searching for sympathy. He ends the discussion weeping with his head nestled in her lap. She tenderly caresses his hair as if he is the adored deity in a Pieta tableau. If Richard conquered Ann by physically posturing as a potential lover, he now tries to win Elizabeth by appealing to her motherly instincts. In both cases, he presents himself as a substitute for the two sons that he has just killed.

During the final battle, both Richard's vulnerability and violence find an echo in his war costume. Striking and heavily-armoured, the gear is padded with red cloth that looks like a garish representation of bountiful flesh and muscle, and which features a white prickly spine at the back. The spinal shape puts Richard's handicap to the fore, while being very reminiscent of the bristled ridge of his emblem, the wild and threatening boar shown on the banner during the coronation. In this production, Richard literally becomes a boar, a hunted beast who has already been skinned. Richmond's soldiers rush upon him, drag him down and plant their spears into his body. From great manipulator, Branagh's Richard becomes a mere creature. It is as if Dr Frankenstein had transformed into his own monster.