

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Richard III (Rickard III)*, presented by the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, 29
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Directed by Stefan Larsson. Scenography: Rufus Didwizus. With Jonas Karlsson (Richard, Duke of Gloucester/ Richard III), Rebecka Hemse (Lady Anne), Ingela Olsson (Elizabeth), Gunilla Nyroos (Margaret), Irene Lindh (Duchess of York), Björn Granath (Buckingham), Torkel Petersson (Clarence, Hastings, Young York, Lovell, Tyrrel, Messenger), Reuben Sallmander (Brakenbury, Edward IV, The Bishop, Catesby, Lord Cardinal), Danilo Bejarano (Rivers, Murderer, Messenger, Stanley, Lord Mayor, Richmond), Christopher Wagelin (Grey, Murderer, Messenger, Dorset, The Prince of Wales, Ratcliffe, Page boy).

By lucky chance, I queued up at just the right moment for returns for the Stockholm Royal Dramatic Theatre's Swedish language production of *Richard III*, sold out since it opened in February 2014. An excellent seat allowed me to enjoy a production that more than anything was an examination of performance, pretence, and acting. Already before the curtain rose, the game was on as Jonas Karlsson (Richard) sidled on stage, back towards audience, along the curtain, until he discovered us (and found himself discovered), thermos flask in hand. The hesitant stand-up show that followed gave us the first intimations about what was to come, with Karlsson hovering somewhere between acting himself—awkwardly small-talking with the audience, commenting on the coffee in the flask and what a nice Thursday evening it was, the last performance of the season—and slipping into the character of Richard, more and more attracted to the attention we gave him, returning for more when he had started to leave the stage, not quite able to give up his place in the spotlight. And Karlsson was already here in full command of the audience. This was only the first of many meta-theatrical references that kept breaking the illusion, drawing attention to the play as a play, and the actors as

players of parts. It was skilfully done, even if some of the moments risked stealing too much attention from whatever else was going on.

Another overt meta-theatrical moment that broke the illusion came early, when Henry VI's dead body started moving too soon, twice, and was told by Karlsson/Richard to keep lying for a little longer. This happened just before the wooing of Anne, and adversely affected this scene as the audience were not given time enough to re-focus and switch into a serious mood until much of the scene had been played out. Still, we had already understood that Anne (Rebecka Hemse) was distraught with grief to the point where her legs hardly supported her, and not capable of getting her defences up. A different but strong reminder of the theatrical situation was the constant presence on stage of the actors, who, when not involved in the action, took their places on simple black chairs on the turning section of the stage, slowly turning throughout the whole evening. At times they watched what went on in front of the turning stage, but sometimes they just sat, seemingly lost in their own thoughts. A brief text in the programme drew attention to a line in the play about the wheel of fortune, and the turning stage could, of course, represent that wheel. But the actors' movement between the raised turning section of the stage down onto the lower acting space was also a further comment on the uncertain line between fiction and reality, as the spaces for 'stage' and 'reality', or at least 'off-stage', seemed to have changed places.

As may be seen in the list of roles above, four of the actors took between five and seven parts each, yet another move that reminded us that we were in a theatre watching actors playing parts. The men all wore black trousers and white shirts, and most of the shifts from one character to another were made by simply changing voice and body language. For the young princes, the trouser legs were turned up. Hastings was played with glasses, providing another opportunity to break the illusion as the actor who played him, Torkel Petersson, also played Lovell and 'forgot' to remove the glasses when entering with Hastings's head in a bag. He noticed his mistake in a moment of stressed inter-collegial recognition that we were meant to see, and removed his glasses. One Swedish review complained that parts of the ensemble remained anonymous with this type of uniform modern dress, but surely that was intentional, the potential mixing up of actors as well as characters being on the one hand part of the play's exploration of performance, and on the other a comment on power and how we are all exchangeable before it. The women similarly all wore black, with one white dress for Anne's coronation, but still stood out against the multitude of interchangeable male characters. Margaret (Gunilla Nyroos) made the strongest impression in her long skirt and sturdy boots, reflecting her power and separating her from the younger women in elegant

dresses and high heels. To indicate a character's death, a film was projected onto an overhead screen where blood was poured over his or her head.

In this anatomy of acting, Richard was, hardly surprisingly, the shape-shifter par excellence. Karlsson's acting was subtle, understated, and therefore the more powerful and frightening in strong scenes where he flipped into a less controlled state. There was no hump, no twisted arm, but the actor was pale with hair combed back, a narrow jacket accentuating his thin frame. His pre-show stand-up act signalled a slippage between actor and part, but also the attraction to acting and skill at playing before and with an audience so central to Richard's character. A couple of early scenes may have indicated a personality disorder as Richard mimicked Clarence's gestures, adjusting his cuffs, buttoning already fastened buttons, as Clarence did the same, perhaps to gain the other man's confidence in more senses than one. In the reconciliation scene (2.1) Richard *became* Edward, or rather Edward's words, as he embodied the king's power, gesturing as if he, Richard, was giving the orders. Again, he mimicked in order to both flatter power, and to impersonate it, to take it on for himself and place himself on the same level as the king before the other characters. In the seduction scenes with Anne and Elizabeth—scenes that were played almost without any sexual tension—the cool, polished surface was maintained even in violent actions, as Richard twisted Anne's wrist or dragged Elizabeth across the floor. The result was chilling. Interestingly, Richard's brown jacket was the only garment in the production that was not black or white. This separated him from the rest of the group, perhaps indicating his outcast state, perhaps signalling that unlike the other characters, he was of a less clear-cut shade, prone to dissembling and shifts.

The programme was unusually clear in accounting for the inspiration behind the production, including bits of texts by Machiavelli on how it is better to be feared than loved and the importance of seeming and pretence; Jan Kott on the cycle or wheel of power built into the 'Grand Mechanism' of history, where the mechanism is stronger than the person who sets it spinning—another potential reference for the turning stage; Nicholas Brooke on Richard as an actor of a line of roles; and a text by Anders Olsson, professor of Comparative Literature at Stockholm University, on among other things René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and violence. All these texts are relevant for the play and for this production. The ending, however, could be taken to indicate a stop to the spinning of power, desire and pretence, as the lights went out after Richard's famous call for a horse and his face was projected overhead, blood pouring over him, before the curtain fell.