

Richard III at Theatricum Botanicum Review - A Production of Many Delights



Richard (**Chad Jason Scheppner**) charms Queen Elizabeth (**Abby Craden**) in *Richard III*

Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Richard III* at The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, is worth taking in. Directed by **Ellen Geer**, the current production alternates its casting of the lead character of Richard, a deformed, power-hungry and fascinating anti-hero, between two unlikely actors: the handsome, tall and lithe **Chad Jason Scheppner**, and the veteran actress-director **Melora Marshall**. On opening night, we enjoyed Scheppner's interpretation, while Marshall fulfilled another important role of his mother, the Duchess of York. (How can she keep so many lines in her head???) The show has

great directing, many thrilling highlights, although the intensity of its performers tends to be uneven at times. It is one of Shakespeare's most popular and ambitious pieces, as it jumps into the middle of a very complex and intriguing period of England's history.

King Richard III of England is both arch-villain and protagonist in this epic Shakespeare drama. Unlike Macbeth and King Lear, Richard was a real historical character, and Elizabethan audiences were familiar with his story. His brief reign and defeat at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 ended the thirty-years-long Wars of the Roses, during which the royal families of the Plantagenet houses of York and Lancaster alternately took the British throne. Depicted as an ugly hunchback with the left side of his body crippled and deformed from birth, Richard, when he was still Duke of Gloucester, vows he'll become king by whatever means necessary. As his relative King Edward lies on his deathbed, Richard plots to kill the other heirs who could rightfully claim the crown. Richard does indeed kill his way to the top, both by wielding the knife himself and by enticing, manipulating and hiring various assassins. He kills pretender kings, women and children. In the end, he dies in a swordfight with the Earl of Richmond (Henry Tudor), whose army disembarks from a flotilla of ships on a mission to restore honor and justice to the kingdom after decades of corrupt leadership.

Before Shakespeare wrote *Richard III*, he had done just three comedies and two other history plays. This one is said to have secured his reputation. Richard was a character the groundlings loved to hate, and his ruthless rise was as understandable as it was simple in concept. He vows he will be a perfect villain. Then he kills, and kills, and kills, surprised and even amused at how many murders become necessary. On the eve of his final battle, his dead relatives and friends file past him as damning ghosts, and he laments that even a villain cannot escape guilt and remorse. Here is a lesson in what it takes to gain power, and then to keep it.

The drama runs just short of three hours including a 15-minute intermission. The theater's cofounder Ellen Geer directs a huge cast appearing in full period dress on the celebrated open-air wooden stage under the stars in Topanga.

Scheppner's Richard is a rather modernistic take on the character. Rather than maniacal, he is more psychopathic, droll, almost laidback. He has a small "hump" on his back and a metal brace on the lower part of one of his long legs, and yet he still has a quite young, attractive and athletic appearance, which detracts from his evilness. Or perhaps one could say he doesn't have to work as hard in his manipulations and wooing of women and crowds. Although interesting to watch, it lacked an intensity that one might expect from such a character. Given the psychopathic interpretation, greater moments of glee in what he was perpetrating would show more character. Everything was a bit too easy for him.

Still, the modern portrait of Richard as a psychopath strikes us as totally L.A. Isn't it the stereotype of the charming young studio exec who can stab you in the back while smiling in your face and offering a chilled bottle of designer water?

Language is another factor. Perhaps we are all too familiar with British actors doing Shakespeare, and when Americans perform, it is mandatory that they speak crisply to capture Shakespeare's poetry. All the actors were clear in their interpretations, and those who spoke more crisply had an advantage. Especially remarkable were the performances of **Willow Geer** as Lady Anne, **William Dennis Hunt** as King Edward IV, and **Melora Marshall** as the Duchess of York. They mastered the verse as well as the passion of their characters. Also, noteworthy is **Earnestine Phillips** for her intense and resounding performance as the furious and horribly wronged Queen Margaret. Notable is **Abby Craden** when she bemoans the loss of her children, and **Thad Geer** when he delivers a monologue before his death and later appears in a different voice as Lord Mayor. His two humorous murderers were witty and fun to watch, played by **Tyer Tanner** and **Dylan Booth Vigus**. **Kabin Thomas** is quite accomplished as Sir Robert Brackenbury.



Scheppper and **Melora Marshall** alternate in the title role. When he's on, she plays is mother, Duchess of York

Productions at Botanicum are often classical. Perhaps this helps their repertory, as they must have a huge supply of period costumes, stage-fight choreographers, directors used to the huge space and a great handle on Shakespeare. All of these excellent elements add to the adventure tremendously.

If you've never been to a production at Theatricum Botanicum, this should be in the guidebooks as a must-do for every Los Angeleno and visitor to town. Just six miles up from Pacific Coast Highway and you are in another world completely. Good theater puts you in another world to start with, and then you get to experience it in a fairy-tale beautiful nature setting ensconced in nature. It's a magical evening in the cool night air of the canyon. The seeds of Theatricum Botanicum were planted in the early 1950s when Will Geer, one of many actors victimized by the McCarthy Era blacklisting, built a performance space on his Topanga property as a refuge for other blacklisted artists. The nonprofit corporation, The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum formed in 1973, and over the past 38 years has expanded to offer an annual repertory season of plays, music performances and entertainment for children, as well as extensive educational programs serving more than 20,000 schoolchildren a year through field trips and classroom enrichment activities.

Ellen Geer directs many of the pieces and is accomplished to the point of experimentation with the classics. We can't wait to see their signature piece, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* that they perform every year.

Photos by Ian Flanders

Richard III by William Shakespeare

July 2 - July 24, Saturdays and Sundays; July 31, August 7, 14, 19, 28, Sept 4, 11, 17, 18, 24, 25, Oct 2 (see list below for curtain times)