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Theater review: 'Richard III' at Theatricum Botanicum

By Charlotte Stoudt

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Watch your neck: A bottled spider reaching for the British crown roams Topanga Canyon, beheading with glee, in director Ellen Geer's fast-paced take on "Richard III." With a huge cast and lavish Elizabethan costumes by Perry Bret Ash, this Theatricum Botanicum production serves up old-fashioned Shakespeare with scale and confidence. If the show doesn't fully mine the richness of the text, it's still a bracing look at theater's most lethal spin-doctor.

With lank dark hair, pale skin and glittering black robes, Chad Jason Scheppner's Richard is a smirking Goth tactician whose self-disgust drives his disdain for others. (Scheppner alternates the title role with Melora Marshall.) This usurper moves hapless royals around like chess pieces. Kings, widowed queens, innocent princes? They're pawns to him.

Despite the Cassandra-like warnings of the deposed Queen Margaret (a powerful but one-note Earnestine Phillips), Richard and his sidekick, the Duke of Buckingham (the capable Christopher W. Jones), manage to depopulate most of the court.

Like the best political operatives, Richard has a genius for turning an unlikely tactic into a winning move: Was there ever a more outrageous (and weirdly convincing) love scene than Richard putting the moves on Lady Anne (Willow Geer), just inches away from the bloody corpse of her husband, slaughtered by Richard himself. Outcasts are experts in human weakness, and the play's best moments occur when this hunchbacked would-be king infects others with the poison of self-doubt. Scheppner may twirl his mustache one too many times--it's a hazard of the role--but he understands Richard's curdled heart.

From our comfortable seats, we get the inside scoop on Richard's murderous plans; we feel superior as courtiers fall for his flattery. Of course they are us—anyone—who follows a leader because it's easier than taking responsibility.

Focused more on the play's politicking than its bloodshed, the evening lacks the creeping horror we should feel as Richard twists the kingdom into his own dark image. His nightmare before the final battle happens on the far right edge of the stage, minimizing its effect. His big sword fight feels unequal to his force of ambition. And never mind the famous lost horse Richard calls for during the climax--the real blow has already been dealt by his cursing mother, the Duchess of York (Marshall, alternating with Cindy Kania-Guastafarro). It's tough to defend your crown knowing your mom hopes you die.

Is this crippled king bad to the bone, or was he warped into a bully through humiliation and prejudice? That question has kept "Richard III" alive for 400 years and remains worth pondering on a summer night in Topanga Canyon.

Photo by Ian Flanders