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Ivy Jong

Emily Boynton

Caroline Craighead

Mina Gibbs

Mary Lawrence

*See next page for additional authors*

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# The Making of a Tyrant: Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crowd collective's Richard III

## **Authors**

Ivy Jong, Emily Boynton, Caroline Craighead, Mina Gibbs, Mary Lawrence, Sydney Haas, and Emily Brown

## **The Making of a Tyrant: Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crowd collective's *Richard III***

Directed by Rosa Joshi  
Leo K. Theatre, Seattle, WA  
Performance Dates: September 12-October 7, 2018

Reviewed by IVY JONG, EMILY BOYNTON, CAROLINE CRAIGHEAD, MINA GIBBS, MARY LAWRENCE, SYDNEY HAAS, and EMILY BROWN

### **Tyranny and Complicity in *Richard III***

Seattle Shakespeare Company and the upstart crowd collective's *Richard III* reveals citizens' complicity in enabling a tyrant's rise to power. Whereas Shakespeare's play opens with Richard's famous soliloquy, Joshi's production begins with Sarah Harlett's Richard center stage, surrounded by the rest of the cast—initially unidentifiable to the audience—all dressed in black. These individuals swarm around an immobile Harlett. The other characters pick up her legs, making her step forward in a slow progression as they contort her arms and back in a robotic march towards the audience. Harlett does not propel herself forward, but instead her body is manipulated, hands moving her forward while also touching her face and moving her head. The nondescript, black costuming of the cast calls into question whether they are individuals, or rather a mass of humanity working over and constructing Harlett's body.

This scene emphasizes the collective effort that enables Richard to become king. It physically requires the entire cast to deliver Richard to his opening position—one where he will declare his role as the villain. This communal labor establishes how the other characters turn a blind eye to and reinforce Richard's schemes throughout the play, before a single word is uttered. This extratextual scene shocks viewers familiar with the play, drawing them into the spectacle and production of a tyrant and commanding audiences to grapple with their own complicity in oppression.

The production's all-black costumes, inspired by dictatorial military uniforms, highlight how Richard's tyrannical reign resembles those of historical fascist leaders. According to director Joshi, the play begins as the feuding families emerge "out of civil war," informing us that "we are now in an authoritarian fascist world" (Program A-3).<sup>1</sup> Program materials state that Christine Tschirgi's costumes use "the aesthetics of twentieth century authoritarian regimes...to create an abstract world that hovers outside of any specific time or location in history" (Program A-3). This lack of temporal and geographical specificity allows the play's themes to be applied to our current socio-political culture. Joshi notes that "history

## Reviews

plays are really cautionary tales. We go back to them to look at the dark, dangerous things that have happened in the past and think about how we might be more mindful about how to avoid these things in our present and our future” (Program A-3). The intentional choice of authoritarian-inspired garments and the visual link to the “rise of the tyrant” narrative that opens the play pointedly emphasize the production’s contemporary relevance.



*Figure 1: Mari Nelson, Sarah Harlett, Meme Garcia, and Sunam Ellis in Richard III presented by Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crew collective. Photo by HMMM Productions.*

Costume design also illustrates how women were both particularly restricted in fifteenth-century society and were also the victims who received the brunt of oppression. The un-encumbering outfits of the male characters of the play, including pants and boots that allow for easy movement, action, and fighting, express the social freedom of men, a point underscored by the femme bodies of the actors. Meanwhile, the female characters’ heavy veils and confining floor-length dresses illustrate their societal immobility. In funeral-like garb, the women of the play are always in mourning for husbands and sons murdered at the hands of the men around them. Yet these costumes also at times emphasize the female characters’ power. Their dark, flowing robes and cowls make them appear witch-like and foreboding, while their curses entrap all they are aimed at and strike fear into even the male characters of the play. For example, Kate Wisniewski’s Margaret uses the copious fabric of her black widow’s gown as a weapon that directs her curses at her Yorkist enemies in Act 1, Scene 3. These curses are physically performed and efficacious: they lock cursed characters, including

## Reviews

Richard, in place until Margaret's raised, black and lace-clad arms are lowered. The women's costumes convey loss as well as female power and revenge for their oppression, illustrating that they are not merely victims under male tyranny, but individuals with agency of their own.

Richmond's all-white costume provides a stark contrast to both other characters and the set, painting him as a savior bringing light to the play's dark, oppressive world. This choice highlights his status as an angel of deliverance for those suffering under Richard's rule. Yet there is an ominous threat in the choice of the production's final line, ("What traitor hears me and says not 'Amen?'"), a choice which also eliminates the text's emphasis on the royal marriage of Richmond and Elizabeth and its promise of future "smooth-faced peace" (5.5.22 and 33).<sup>2</sup> It is delivered while he is shrouded in darkness, in the same way the play reveals Richard at his most devious and cold-hearted, suggesting that Richmond may not be the people's dreamed-of shining leader. Burying the white of Richmond's costume in shadow implies that he and Richard are more similar than expected. Further parallels are drawn between the two men in Richmond's first scene, which mirrors that of Richard's: Richmond is immobile, pushed forward step-by-step through the work of others to depict his growing power. Thus, the play comes full circle, ending with a blackout during Richmond's speech and a pinpoint light on his face. He beckons the audience into his private thoughts to foreshadow oppressive and violent leadership. Just as many dictators rose to power on the backs of people who hoped for positive change, this choice suggests that the citizens may have brought down one tyrant only to usher another onto the throne.

Although Richmond's potential tyranny as a male dictator ends the play on an ominous note, double casting his actor Porscha Shaw as Lady Anne simultaneously provides a more hopeful, subversive reading of female resistance to dominant patriarchal power structures. Lady Anne is a woman who has suffered immeasurably at Richard's hands. He murders her beloved husband and father-in-law, then seduces and manipulates her while she is in the midst of performing their funeral rites, not even waiting for her to finish mourning her former husband before proposing that he fill the now-vacant role. Finally, once Richard ascends the throne, he spreads false rumors of her illness and has her murdered, bringing a painful end to her life of suffering. However, in casting Shaw as both Lady Anne *and* Richmond, Richard's killer, the play supplies Anne with the ability to exact her revenge in ways she was unable to in the original text.

Not only does this double-casting make innovative use of the all-femme actors, but their racial diversity adds complexity to this dynamic. Richard, portrayed by a Caucasian actress, Sarah Harlett, symbolizes the White male tyrant who heavily mistreats Porscha Shaw's Black feminine Anne. Yet their positions are reversed when Shaw is resurrected in the role of Richmond, who ultimately defeats Richard, imposing his dominance by placing his foot on a prostrate Richard's neck. The visual of a Black woman standing over the dead body of a White tyrant adds a layer of interpretation and social commentary to the fall of Richard that would not exist without a recognition of the actresses' bodies. Therefore, Richmond/Anne's rise to power represents both tyranny and the

## Reviews

defiance of it. This complex conclusion offers a final note of hope, a flame of female resistance that refuses to die out even under the shadows of male oppression.

### How Elements of Production Design Tell the Story of a Tyrant

In the upstart crow collective's production of *Richard III*, scenic designer Shawn Ketchum Johnson, lighting designer Geoff Korf, and sound designers Meghan Roche and Robertson Witmer combine their work to create a cohesive depiction of the tyranny inside the world of Richard III. Characterized by a sharp and rigid set, harsh lighting, and jarring sound design, Richard's world becomes more and more involved throughout the course of the play and the display of his power becomes both more intriguing and frightening as audience members watch the characters become victims of the physical stage itself. Below we will outline specific instances wherein each of these elements of production design assist in highlighting central concepts of the text.



*Figure 2:* Sarah Harlett and Suzanne Bouchard in *Richard III* presented by Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crow collective. Photo by HMMM Productions.

## Reviews

Johnson's set design for this production consists of a seemingly unbreakable structure and is accented with angular elements including cables and their triangular bases. These coarse steel cables stretch diagonally across the stage and characters interact with them throughout the play using motions associated with puppetry, which convey that the stage belongs to Richard and that the world is his subject. Sarah Harlett's detestable (but impactful) Richard plays the stage as if it were a stringed instrument, malevolently plucking the cables and caressing them in a fashion that also evokes someone sharpening a knife. Eventually, certain executions take place upon these cables as well, such as those of Buckingham and Hastings. Each piece of the set is sturdy both in appearance and in build, from the tethered cables to the platforms that form Richard's throne and the gurney used as both Edward IV's deathbed and a table (5.3). This sturdiness creates a compelling visual wherein the world that Richard is confined to is built with strict limits for the players themselves. In this production, the staging conveys that Richard's influence could potentially be limited by the boundaries of his world, meaning that he must interact with these boundaries to the best of his ability in order to fully exert control that will limit civilians and other threats to his power. The pathways that the actors are able to walk on are restricted to narrow spaces due to the presence of the cables, and Richard is not exempt from these limitations.

In addition to the visual imagery of power that is created by these stark structures, the cables onstage are used to increase the severity of Richard's tyranny, particularly in their display of how those whose lives are in Richard's hands interact with their world. In particular, Act 2 Scene 3's conversation between three citizens discussing Edward IV's death makes thoughtful use of the set's cables. As the citizens go back and forth between acknowledging the potential dangers of their new child king and dismissing these concerns, they use wrenches to pull the cables taut, enforcing their structure and securing them in place. Only once these cables are tightened is it possible for the executions of characters like Hastings and Buckingham to take place over the course of the play. Once the cables are pulled taut they are able to sustain the movements that the actors use to drop their heads onto the strings. The dialogue of Act 2 Scene 3 portrays complacency and the dangers of false hope; once it is staged via Johnson's set designs, it becomes impossible to ignore the fact that the citizens are enablers, creating Richard's weapons of destruction.

The lighting of Richard's soliloquies is a beautiful, terrifying amplification of Richard's deformities, internal and external. Sarah Harlett portrays Richard's deformity as a right arm, twisted backwards, and a slightly forward-hunching back. During Richard's soliloquies, practical lighting illuminates him: a production member runs out onto stage and shines a flashlight directly into Harlett's face. This works with Harlett's bent arm and hunching back to form disjointed, threatening shadows, heightening the audience's fear and providing another visual representation of Richard's tyrannical, nightmarish power. These shadows follow Richard throughout all of his speeches as he rises to power, mirroring how Richard uses fears about his body to gain power over his peers. In Richard's final soliloquy, as he begins to feel remorse for his actions and reflect upon the damage he has

## Reviews

done, the lighting is changed. Instead of one flashlight, two shine from opposite ends of the stage, effectively eliminating all shadows. Because the fear-inducing shadows are removed, the audience receives a visual representation of Richard's loss of power as he descends into paranoia. As Richard loses his grasp on his kingdom, the shadows, so essential to his creation of the fear which allows him to govern, vanish completely along with it. Richard's deformed body no longer aides his creation of fear. Instead, the power his body once held has abandoned him, along with the rest of his support.

The production partially depicts Richard's antagonistic actions and nature through sound, which was designed by Robertson Witmer and Meghan Roche. Just as Richard could never have achieved his crown (nor his inevitable doom) without the support of surrounding enablers and enemies, the play as a constructed entity relies on the influences of sound created by the cast itself—both in and out of character. The horrors of the plot are dependent on both Richard's manipulations of others and their fear-driven compliance. The ending war, in which Richard is slain, is a product of the surrounding characters' responses to Richard. During the final battle, the cast members wear what appears to be weighted gloves with metal in the palms, which function similarly to tap shoes (5.8). The jarring noise created by the actors slamming their gloved palms on the floor and onto each other's hands mimics the sound of war and armor. The gloves had what appeared to be metal at the end of the fingertips. The characters have sewn their fate in their relations to Richard, and are then faced with due consequence, conveyed through a deadly sound effect. The sound of these deaths is depicted by a wire being struck, and are strewn through the play. This noise, orchestrated by Aimee Zoe, signifies the executions of Richard's enemies and friends. The process involved characters stepping onto a wooden block, hanging their necks over the floor-to-ceiling cables, and having the cables struck harshly by Zoe, onstage with a metal pipe-like instrument. This jolting noise emanates from the stage after a character is sentenced to death. Because the noise became so hauntingly familiar, the audience became accustomed to Richard's barbaric habit of murder. The repetition of a piece of metal hitting the thick cable triggers a guttural feeling of disdain for Richard's actions.

### **Bystander Complicity and Deception in the Bishop Scene**

The deception of the masses that Richard uses to usurp the crown is best illustrated in the bishop scene in Act 3 Scene 7, which is a pivotal moment in Richard's ascent as he finally gains the public support—through Buckingham's manipulation of the Lord Mayor and public opinion—that he needs to justify his claim to the throne. In Joshi's production, this support is not just given by the characters of the citizens onstage, but also by the audience as the staging takes deliberate steps to cast audiences as passive viewers to Richard's tyranny and deception. By defining the audience as the English public Richard and



## Reviews

Buckingham are trying to deceive, the production portrays how deception and complicity are a tyrant's greatest weapon.

The placement of bodies within the scene strategically casts the audience as English citizens. The scene begins with a private collaborative conversation between Richard and Buckingham. They decide to deceive the citizens and Lord Mayor who stumble in soon after. When the citizens exit, Richard ascends to the balcony in the audience, where he is standing between two unnamed bishops. The mob of English citizens enters again from the back of the house, using the same entrance the audience used to get to their seats. The mob choreographs their movement towards the stage and the rise of their voices as they shout about the current crisis and pass out political propaganda. In the midst of this chaotic spectacle, the audience's attention is drawn to a balcony that would normally seat audience members on the left side of the theater, where Richard stands slightly forward and sandwiched between two bishops with his back to the majority of the audience. When Richard replies to Buckingham's pleas to take the throne with false modesty, he speaks out from the balcony as if he were giving a speech at a podium to a crowd of his supporters.

**Lord Mayor:** Do, good my lord, your citizens entreat you.

**Catesby:** O make them joyful, grant their lawful suit.

**Gloucester:** Alas, why would you heap these cares on me?

I am unfit for state and dignity.

I do beseech you, take it not amiss;

I cannot nor I will not yield to you. (3.7.182-87)

The house lights in the theater not only illuminate Richard in the balcony, but also the seated audience, making them a visible part of the impromptu political rally. Richard's elevated position above the crowd means he must literally speak down to the audience and citizens and they must look up to him, indicating a power differential that makes Richard appear untouchable, god-like, and superior. While the citizens onstage cheer out for Richard and proclaim that he is England's true king, it is the audience silently sitting and watching the spectacle that provides the passive support needed to affirm Richard's ascendancy. When cast as the English citizens, the audience predictably provides no resistance, even though they have witnessed Buckingham's fraudulent orchestration of the moment.

Some of the most interesting effects of the all-femme cast become visible here. The contrived nature of this scene is emphasized by the gender of the actors and makes the audience more aware of the performativity of gender. Richard's position between two Catholic bishops signals the clerical power that publicly supports his claim to the throne. However, the feminine bodies performing clerical roles forbidden to women creates a new layer of deception, one that disrupts the authority that is associated with the title of bishop and adds to the performativity of the scene as Richard surrounds himself with false positions of power to support his false claim to power. This appropriation of a masculine clerical role forces the audience to question whether certain bodies can inhabit positions of power as their

## Reviews

bodies are not compatible with the roles they claim. Because the gender of the bishops is brought into question, Richard's legitimacy to claim the title of king with the feminine body of Harlett is also interrogated.

The use of a simple prop, papers printed with political propaganda, becomes crucial in involving the audience in Richard's rise to power. The scene

opens with the cacophony of the citizen's voices as they rush onstage, waving crumpled sheets of paper in their hands and yelling about the current political crisis in England. The scene is amplified by the mob mentality of the citizens as they act as a collective body with a single will; none of their voices are distinct in the loud roar of anxious yelling. Several citizens appear in the aisle of the theatre and pass out stacks of political propaganda to the audience as they make their way onstage. Audience members on the aisle are encouraged to pass down the flyers that boldly proclaim "Edward the Lecher" and "Sinning and lechery were Edward's vices." While the audience knows the printed flyers are lies created by Richard to discredit Edward's rule and the legitimacy of his heirs, they visibly and audibly experience how the lies have caught on with the public. With the same prop in hand as the actors onstage, the audience becomes citizens susceptible to Richard's political campaign.

The prop of the Bible also works as a way to highlight the deception of Richard. Harlett begins the scene hunched over the Bible. Her bent body alludes to the heftiness of the text but also to the weight of religion, a gravity we know Richard merely performs rather than feels. Not only does it suggest the supposed importance of religion to Richard, but also it highlights Richard's deformity, accentuating his hunchback appearance more than in any other scene. However, rather than isolating Richard negatively, it evokes a positive origin for his deformity, a hunchback created by years of physical sacrifice and caused by his attentiveness to religion and the physical power of the Bible as a material object. Soon enough, Richard nonchalantly tosses aside the Bible, easily straightens up and accepts the title of king. As the Bible is tossed aside, it is revealed as a very obvious prop: extremely thin, too thin for an actual Bible, and completely blank. Such a deliberate choice highlights the fact that it is all a façade, an illusion to deceive the people in the theatre.



*Figure 4: The cast of Richard III presented by the Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crowd collective. Photo by HMMM Productions.*

## Reviews

### Notes

1. Program for William Shakespeare's *Richard III* at the Seattle Shakespeare Company, Seattle. Encore Media Group, 2018. Subsequent citations in text.
2. All quotations from *Richard III* refer to William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. Thomas Cartelli (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

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**Ivy Jong, Emily Boynton, Caroline Craighead, Mina Gibbs, Mary Lawrence, Sydney Haas, and Emily Brown** are students of Dr. Allison Machlis Meyer at Seattle University. They collectively authored this review of Seattle Shakespeare Company and upstart crow collective's *Richard III* after studying it as part of an English class, "Early Modern Drama on the Modern Stage," that focused on all-femme performances of Shakespeare.