

***Richard III* @ Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, Lisbon, Portugal**

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The opening and closing moments of this *Richard III* framed the defining features of the performance. At the start, dancer Romeu Runa established the contours of the performance space by running at breakneck speed in a circle around the stage. Then he placed a red ball on his shoulder beneath his black fur coat and began “It is now” as if to simultaneously lead us into the world of the drama but at the same time relocate the action in the present. At the end of the performance, a mist encircled a virtuoso sequence where Runa’s Richard transformed himself jerkily and grotesquely into the horse he called out for while the triumphalist closing of the play by Richmond (António Fonseca) was heavily cut.

The casting of a dancer as the lynchpin of this performance was a bold and successful move which reinforced the energy and physicality of the production’s take on the play. Yet Runa was not the only performer playing Richard here. Starting from the idea that we are all in some sense Richard, the role was taken on consecutively by different actors to whom Richard’s detachable hump was passed in various imaginative ways. Each performer brought to the role an individual performance style and bodily presence that fragmented a character who is already textually multiple and made this a drama where all were seeking some form of centrality. As the actors remained on or near the stage throughout the performance, this also meant that characters such as Hastings (Miguel Loureiro) could return after his death to become the figure who had been responsible for it, further complicating boundaries between villains and victims as well as referencing Richard’s claim at the end of the play that his conscience “hath a thousand several tongues/And every tongue brings in a several tale,/And every tale condemns me for a villain.”(5.3: 196-98) ¹ It should be said, however, that the actresses in these performances did not play the main role to the same extent. After being refused access to the princes in the tower, the three actresses playing the Duchess of York (Márcia Breia), Elizabeth (Sofia

¹ Both quotations from the New Cambridge 1999 edition of the play, edited by Janis Lull.

Marques) and Anne (Raquel Castro) came to the front of the stage to play the princes' murderer. One held the red ball, another the crown and the other the sword which had been acting as Richard's prop. While this triplication of Richard and the emblems of power keyed into the choric function of the women in the drama and echoed their premonition of the princes' death, it contrasted visibly with the individual performance of the main role by the male actors. There was however a wonderful moment within this sequence where the Duchess of York, on Richard's line "I wish the bastards dead,/And would have it suddenly performed" (4.2: 19-20) counted rapidly down from ten to one to reinforce the idea of the "suddenly." The actress playing Margaret (Teresa Sobral) did play Richard on her own, but only for a very short period in comparison with her male counterparts. In the rest of the performance, the fact that Margaret was played by a much younger actress rendered her challenge to Richard simultaneously political and sexual, but there was more concentration in this performance on the tortuous relationship between Richard and his mother, symbolised by a stage moment when she had him pinned to the floor in a double-edged gesture of anger and maternal care. Margaret appeared often with her suitcase, referencing her anachronistic presence in the play as well as her marginality in the unfolding drama. While Buckingham (Miguel Moreira), Hastings and Catesby (Raquel Castro) were given more prominent roles in the performance, it was left to the onstage percussionists to double up the roles of the minor characters in what were little more than incidental presences in the play.

The stage itself was strewn with shredded black car tyres which one of the actors swept into piles before each death. The dead bodies themselves were dragged through this space by Runa, who functioned throughout as Richard's shadow – alternately embodying his deformity, his dark private self as opposed to his public polish, the dog-like alter-ego conjured up by others and the murderers under Richard's control in a series of comments on Richard's performance as himself. The thick black covering of the stage, resembling both a graveyard and a battlefield, gave a sense that the characters were all walking on the remains of the dead, whether those murdered within the play or the many more killed during the Wars of the Roses. It also referenced the macabre recent

discovery of Richard's skeleton in a Leicester car park and the way in which such anonymous spaces hide the remains of a bloody but ultimately inaccessible history.

Richard III has only had a more consistent stage history in Portugal during the new millennium, when its focus on faction-fighting in struggles for power has chimed with notions of the ways in which such dangerously charismatic figures appear in the political vacuum left by such in-fighting. This production was especially topical at the moment when the post-election scenario in Portugal remains unclear and depends on whether the Socialist Party decides to align itself with a reinvigorated left or the diminished right. This version of the play, based on a highly performable translation by Rui Carvalho Homem, was very much an ensemble piece, which relied on the physical energy of the group to sustain a two and a half hour production without an interval. Its focus on physicality also emphasized the speed with which Richard attains power and then loses it, while the quick changes between the different Richards bought out the sense of a Richard who continually interrupted the action to recast it in his favour. The changes in lighting designed by Daniel Worm were also particularly memorable, ranging from moments of semi-darkness to occasional intense lighting to the mist of Bosworth Field. While the notion that Richard is all of us could have represented a lame attempt to spread notions of individual responsibility thinly, here the sense of individual responsibility was reinforced by its collective performance, reminding us that the desire to be in the foreground of power was by no means confined to one central figure.