

Richard III

By William Shakespeare

Produced by The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, D.C.

Directed by Gale Edwards

2002-2003 Season

Program Note

The Seductive Quality of Evil

Shakespeare's *Richard III* dramatizes events that occurred between 1471 and 1485 beginning with the coronation of Edward IV and ending with Henry Tudor's victory at Bosworth. The play dramatically compresses these events, focusing upon the murderous actions of Richard as he seizes the throne and ultimately loses it.

Based upon accounts in Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard The Third* (1513) and Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577), *Richard III* is obviously a biased account of English history that trumpets a Tudor version of events. Literary critics and historians have long debated the accuracy of the play, but in doing so miss its point. The work is not a historical treatise, but a play about a larger-than-life figure that haunts our collective imagination. The body count mounts steadily during the course of the play as Richard kills his brother, his nephews, his wife, and a host of enemies. He is by any measure a vicious mass murderer yet as Richard spins his webs that ensnare his enemies, he simultaneously magnetizes the audience, making us complicit with his actions and daring us to look away. The enduring success of the play is testament to the seductive quality of evil. We may find the actions of Richard reprehensible but we secretly cheer him on deriving joy in the genius of his machinations. Finally, however, we are

able to sleep at night: we forgive ourselves for enjoying the play because Richard gets his comeuppance in the end.

Richard III was written in 1592 and was a huge success for its young and relatively inexperienced author. The play marked a turning point in Shakespeare's career and in the development of Elizabethan drama. Prior to writing it, he had composed only two minor comedies—*Love's Labor's Lost* and *The Comedy of Errors*—as well as a long, disjointed trilogy about the failed monarchy of Henry VI. Shakespeare had attracted a modicum of attention with these plays, but had not yet achieved great acclaim. *Richard III* was his breakthrough play, and it was revised and reprinted repeatedly during his lifetime. The eight existing quarto versions are evidence that it was wildly popular among his audience.

Shakespeare labored at this point in his career in the shadow of the true wunderkind of Elizabethan theater, Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe had established himself as the premier author of that period, having notched great success with *Dr. Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*. Marlowe's plays always featured sadistic, violent villains who captured the imagination of Elizabethan audiences weaned on late 15th-century and mid 16th-century morality plays. Morality plays, as the name suggests, were intended to entertain and educate through illustrating moral exemplars by allegorical means. They were basically dramatized sermons that provided clear, easily digested moral messages. Characters such as Mankind or Everyman confronted evil figures that sought to lead them astray and snatch their eternal souls for the devil. The Vice became the most popular of these villains, a comic character that used subterfuge and slapstick to win over his

hapless victims. Marlowe transformed The Vice figure into a potent dramatic force who gleefully and sadistically wrought destruction.

In *Richard III* Shakespeare took The Vice to a more sophisticated level by combining this easily identifiable type with Classical and Renaissance models. Richard becomes a tragic figure who is destined, or condemned, to fulfill a great historical drama: not of his own creation; the resolution of the War of the Roses and the establishment of the Tudor monarchical line. The great crime of regicide promulgated upon the Lancastrian monarch Richard II in 1399 disturbed the very fiber of nature and ultimately set in motion all that occurred. The successes of Henry IV and Henry V were merely interludes before the failed monarchy of Henry VI led to the events that are dramatized in *Richard III*. Richard becomes a vessel of historical necessity whose evil actions are required to wrought divine retribution upon the House of York.

Though Richard III may be a tragic figure, he is not Oedipus Tyrannus. He is a thoroughly modern political man, a “Machiavel”—a clever politician who uses deception to mislead, seduce, and ultimately destroy his victims. Richard is a comic devil who makes us laugh as he prances about the stage pulling off the most outrageous feats. He winks at the audience as he lies to the fools around him. He switches characters in the blink of an eye to play upon their weaknesses: In turn, he becomes the loyal brother, the ardent lover, the peacemaker, the faithful subject, the kindly uncle, the religious acolyte and the sensible ruler. Yet at the core he remains a killer who believes in nothing and is loyal to nothing but his own will to power.

Shakespeare's final great triumph in *Richard III* is his creation of a believable psychology to underpin the evil of the title character. Richard is a fearsome, respected warrior who plays an integral role in garnering the throne for his brother and in maintaining his kingdom. He is a man among men during times of war and periods of civil strife, but in peacetime he is less than nothing. Physically deformed, lacking social graces, unloved by his mother, he is a completely alienated figure who is unable to function in normal society. Richard's only pleasure is the sadistic one he derives from creating terror, particularly among women. He revels in the sadomasochistic seduction, of Anne, whose husband he has murdered, and takes great pleasure in convincing his sister-in-law Elizabeth to give him her daughter in marriage. As the true horror of Richard's character shines forth brightly in these scenes, the audience watches in utter disbelief, unable to look away for an instant.

Richard III is one of the most compelling characters in all of Western drama. Shakespeare would later create variants upon him in plays such as *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*; numerous other authors have sought to emulate him (e.g. Thomas Harris in the Hannibal Lecter novels). But Richard remains the granddaddy of them all—the essence of unmitigated evil presented for your pleasure.