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PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, Volume 40, Number 2, May 2018 (PAJ 119), pp. 1-12 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press

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My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
King Richard III

One month before the 2016 election that would usher in Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States, Stephen Greenblatt, a Renaissance drama scholar at Harvard and prime mover in the New Historicist approach to literary studies, published an impassioned plea to readers to "not stay silent or waste your vote" in order to avoid "bring[ing] a monster to power." In this opinion piece, entitled "Shakespeare Explains the 2016 Election," Greenblatt draws numerous connections between Trump, the Republican presidential candidate, and William Shakespeare's arch-villain Richard of Gloucester/King Richard III. He examines the "psychopathology" that Shakespeare depicts in Richard, a "weird, obsessive determination to reach a goal that looked impossibly far off, a position for which he had no reasonable expectation, no proper qualification and absolutely no aptitude." Then Greenblatt examines the "nation of enablers" that help to bring Richard to his throne.[1]

Greenblatt doesn't precisely name these enablers, but their roles are clear for those familiar with the play, from the descriptions he gives. There is Lady Anne Neville, Richard's wife (and formerly the wife of a man murdered by Richard), whom Richard manages to convince, in one of the strangest seduction scenes in all of Shakespeare's plays, that he isn't quite as bad as he obviously, unabashedly is. There is Lord Hastings, a political man and ally of Richard's family who trusts in the systems of government, established precedent, and that hallowed institutions such as royal succession will be honored. When Hastings balks at Richard becoming King of England ahead of his nephew, Prince Edward, the son of Richard's elder brother, the previous King Edward IV, Richard has Hastings executed for uttering the word "if," noting that he won't have another meal until he sees Hastings's decapitated head.

doi:10.1162/PAJJ _a_00404

There are those in the room who witness Richard's order for Hastings's execution, terrified into submission as they fear that they might be next on the chopping block. There is Henry Stafford, the Duke of Buckingham, who believes that he can use the crass and obviously villainous Richard to climb to even greater power himself. When Buckingham proposes isolating the two princes from their relatives who might protect them and ensure Prince Edward's coronation, Richard calls Buckingham "My other self, my counsel's consistory, / My oracle, my prophet, my dear cousin."[2] Buckingham orchestrates the spectacle of Richard's fake piety that leads directly to his coronation. Yet as soon as he loses this usefulness, Richard discards his former ally. Finally, Greenblatt describes those who simply enjoy Richard's viciousness, or share in it, like the hired killers whom Richard orders to murder his own brother, George, Duke of Clarence. With such wicked people, Greenblatt suggests, Richard finds a natural affinity.

One doesn't have to look far to see parallels between these characters in Shakespeare's play and figures in the recent election. There are longtime Republican voters who held their noses or pretended that Trump isn't as venal, abusive, and morally bankrupt as he reveals at every turn. There are those from his own party who objected, and whom Trump verbally bludgeoned into submission: Paul Ryan, John McCain, and Ted Cruz, who refused to endorse Trump at the Republican convention. And, like Buckingham, there are those who were central to his victory and then abandoned: in his 3:00 a.m. acceptance speech on November 9, 2016, Trump thanked men like Steve Bannon, Chris Christie, and especially Reince Priebus, whom Trump called "a superstar […] like Secretariat […] the hardest-working guy," and who personally ensured Trump obtained the nomination at a Republican convention where some seemed prepared to rebel. None of these men are any longer associated with his administration; they were discarded as soon as their usefulness expired.

Richard's reign over England was exceptionally brief and disastrous: he was crowned on July 6, 1483, and died just a little over two years later at the Battle of Bosworth Field on August 22, 1485, as much of his country took arms against him. Trump's presidency has been similarly embattled, rocked by scandal and controversy, as he alienates foreign allies and enacts a heartless agenda that has disenfranchised children and shifted tax burdens from the wealthiest American citizens (like himself) onto the middle class, poor, and residents of Democratic-voting states like New York and California.

Considering these parallels, it is unsurprising that *Richard III* has been staged with significantly increased frequency since Trump was elected. Rebecca Mead, in the online blog for the *New Yorker*, called one such production, *Kings of War*, "The First Great Theatrical Work of the Trump Era."[3] For four years, I taught a course

at NYU entitled "Studies in Shakespeare," and during each semester, I compiled a list of professional Shakespearean performances and adaptations in and around New York City, picking one for the class to attend as a group and requiring each student to individually choose a second production of their choice. Prior to the election, there were a few such productions of *Richard III*: in March 2016, Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick (vaguely from Richard III)* reimagined Richard of Gloucester as a disabled high school student in a short run at the Public Studio, directed by Moriitz von Steulpnagel (*Teenage Dick* will be given a full production by the Ma-Yi Theater Company in the summer of 2018). Another production of *Richard III* was produced by the Gallery Players in Brooklyn in July 2016. However, around and after the election, the number of productions of *Richard III* expanded significantly.

Ivo van Hove's English history cycle, *Kings of War*, which to a large degree centered on Richard of Gloucester, appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music the weekend before the election. At the beginning of 2017, three productions of the play were announced for the summer: James Jennings's production at the American Theatre of Actors, Jonathan Hopkins's at Smith Street Stage in Brooklyn's Carroll Park, and Geoffrey Horne's production for Shakespeare Downtown at Castle Clinton. Then, in May, BAM announced that its 2017–18 Next Wave Festival would include Thomas Ostermeier's production of the play, which had premiered at the Schaubühne Berlin on February 7, 2015. It is no accident that directors sought to produce this play at the dawn of the era of Trump. *Richard III* has a particular relevance in today's world.

Three major productions of this play in recent times stand out: the Shakespeare's Globe production, starring Mark Rylance, staged on Broadway, which was produced years before Trump came on the political scene; van Hove's *Kings of War* staged on the eve of the election; and Ostermeier's production, given in New York almost a year after the election that catapulted Trump into the White House. Focusing on these specific productions demonstrates how alike Shakespeare's "abortive, rooting hog / . . . / slave of nature and the son of hell / . . . slander of [his] heavy mother's womb" is to our own pussy-grabber-in-chief.[4]

At first, it might seem strange to use a play written about medieval English history to comment directly on our current political situation. But in his landmark book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott notes the efficacy of drawing such connections. He writes, "if one wishes to interpret Shakespeare's world as the real world, one should start the reading of the plays with the Histories . . . by discovering in Shakespeare's plays problems that are relevant to our own time, modern audiences often, unexpectedly, find themselves near to the Elizabethans; or at least are in the position to understand them well. This is particularly true of the Histories."[5] In the abstract, the history of medieval England can seem

distant, murky, and morally opaque. But by producing Shakespeare's histories, directors have frequently shown contemporary audiences—and invested them in—a particularly clear vision of today's terrifying world.

The Shakespeare's Globe production of *Richard III* was presented on Broadway, in 2013, at the Belasco Theatre in repertory with *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, both starring Mark Rylance and directed by Tim Carroll. Carroll's versions of *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* replicated some of the stage traditions of Early Modern England. Even the titles indicated this: they were styled *Twelfe Night, or What You Will* and *The Tragedie of King Richard the Third*, reflecting how the plays are listed on their title pages in Shakespeare's First Folio of 1623. Designer Jenny Tiramani, a professor of historical dress, created costumes that replicated Elizabethan style. She won the 2003 Olivier for her costumes for *Twelfth Night* at Shakespeare's Globe in 2003, and this production offered a revival of that landmark staging to American audiences. Tiramani's set resembled the inside of Shakespeare's Blackfriars theatre, with its wood-paneling, onstage seats for some audience members, and chandeliers with real candles (a fire marshal had to be on set for each performance). Claire van Kampen's music, performed by onstage musicians, was also in Renaissance style. Most notably, all of the actors were male, a nod to the convention that women did not perform on the English Renaissance stage.

Undoubtedly, Carroll's productions were of the highest quality and Rylance deserved the lion's share of praise for his virtuosic performances as Richard of Gloucester and as Olivia. He was nominated for the Tony award for both performances (leading for Richard, featured for Olivia), and won the Tony for his role in *Twelfth Night*. As Richard, wearing a prosthetic deformed arm, he tromped across the stage with gleeful abandon, joking with onstage audience members and presenting the character of a brilliant tactician who is grossly underestimated by everyone around him. Angus Wright, who played the Duke of Buckingham (*Richard III*) and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (*Twelfth Night*) presented the two characters as essentially the same: attractive, overconfident knights who assumed they were the protagonist of each story, only to learn at the end that they were dupes. For Buckingham, this led to death; for Aguecheek, humiliation. Wright's doubling was one of many ways in which Carroll used casting to allow the plays to speak to one another, illuminating the web of connections between Shakespeare's works, even those of different genres.

Most professional critics preferred Carroll's *Twelfth Night* to his *Richard III*. *Twelfth Night* was nominated for the Tony for Best Revival of a Play; *Richard III* was not. The celebrity comedian Stephen Fry, the only actor who did not play a part in both productions, was featured as Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. But part of the criti-

cal dismissal of *Richard* may have had to do with genre trouble: despite being styled as *The Tragedie of King Richard the Third*, the play was essentially staged as a comedy. Rylance's Richard was waggish as he committed his atrocities. Carroll, Rylance, and the whole cast satirized not only Richard's childish tyranny but also the entirety of English society that allowed—or even helped—him to seize power. Towards this end, Carroll cut the part of Margaret of Anjou, the widow of Henry VI, who anachronistically hounds Richard throughout the play (the historical Margaret was exiled from England by the time the play opens, and she predeceased Richard). But the reason Carroll excised Margaret was probably less historical and more to support the overall vision; he likely felt that she didn't contribute to the comic spirit of the play he intended. She is bitter and viciously vituperative, not in spirit with the comedy of his version, or of the repertory productions, which were ultimately meant to delight.

In the abstract, Richard can seem funny. Of course, killing children, one's spouse, and anyone who dares get in one's way is horrifying. But perhaps in 2014, in an America where the president was a scholar of constitutional law and where it might have been hard to imagine someone with Trump's moral deficiencies even declaring a candidacy, Richard of Gloucester certainly felt distant enough to be laughable. Trump had been, during the early years of Barack Obama's presidency, a prime mover in the so-called "birther" theory that suggested that Obama might not have been born in the United States. But Obama had released both his short- and long-form birth certificates, and, at the April 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner, proceeded to ridicule Trump as a peddler of conspiracy theories, suggesting that now Trump could focus on other issues like "did we fake the moon landing, what really happened in Roswell, and where *are* Biggie and Tupac?" Roger Stone, one of Trump's advisers, has suggested that this event may have been that which led Trump to run, thinking, in a Richard-like fashion: "Maybe I'll show them all." But Carroll's production came when Trump seemed more of a ridiculous figure than a dangerous one. It would be more than one year after the production before he even declared his presidency. At this point in time, *Richard III* could indeed viewed as a comedy.

The same could not be said for the presentation of Ivo van Hove's *Kings of War* at BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House the weekend before the 2016 election. A sense of dread lay over the New York audience at the performance; the audience, for the most part, fervently wishing that the anxiety and constant debasements of the Trump candidacy, from his insults toward people of color to the recording of his prideful acknowledgment of sexual assault, would be over and give way to the presidency of the first female candidate—probably the most qualified statesperson and public servant to run in recent years. But less than one week earlier, James Comey, then-Director of the FBI, sent a letter to Congress noting

Top left: Joseph Timms as Anne and Mark Rylance as King Richard III in the Shakespeare's Globe production of *Richard III* at the Belasco Theatre, 2014. Photo: Courtesy Joan Marcus.

Bottom left: Hélène Devos as Lady Anne and Hans Kesting as Richard of Gloucester in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Kings of War* at BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, 2016. Photo: Courtesy Richard Termine/Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Below: Lars Eidinger as Richard of Gloucester with the cast of *Richard III* in the Schaubühne Berlin production at the BAM Harvey Theater, 2017. Photo: Courtesy Richard Termine/Brooklyn Academy of Music.

that more Clinton e-mails had been discovered, and Trump declared his pronouncements about "crooked Hillary" vindicated. We were sitting on a razor's edge. Into this landscape, van Hove thrust his *Kings of War*, a parable about the dangers of autocratic rule.

Van Hove's *Kings of War* was a conflation of the last moments of *Henry IV, Part 2*, *Henry V*, all three parts of *Henry VI*, and *Richard III*. The plays were presented in Dutch (with English supertitles) in a translation by Rob Klinkenberg and were cut and adapted by Bart van den Eynde and dramaturg Peter van Kraaij so that what Shakespeare had written as five plays would run only four-and-a-half hours. Together, these works showed the cyclical nature of war and government and how a society's descent into unconscionable tyranny, personified by the self-aggrandizing narcissism and ruthlessness of Richard III, can seem almost inevitable. Yet, despite van Hove's title for the work, there were no battle scenes onstage, not a single sword lifted or gun fired. Instead, van Hove's production depicted only the discussions and back-room negotiations of rulers and their advisers, largely leaving the wars and masses of dead to the imaginations of the audience. Unlike many productions of Shakespeare's English history plays, there were no intense battle sequences, no armies of supernumeraries: the cast was composed of fourteen actors, with each performer playing multiple parts—with the exceptions of Janni Goslinga, who played only Margaret of Anjou, and Hans Kesting, who played Richard. Van Hove's production depicted the back-room dealings of an inner circle of kings and advisers, making decisions that have an immense effect on entire nations of people whose lives (and deaths) are only obliquely understood.

The production opened with a prologue taken from *Henry IV, Part 2*, and soon segued into the coronation of Henry V on a red carpet, backed by a line of lords in ultra-modern business suits. The coronation was broadcast on a live feed screen overlooking the stage, demonstrating that, just as the theatre can be political, effective politics is always *theatrical*. Ramsey Nasr's Henry was every inch a king, not personally interested in the trappings of royalty as much as in what he could do as a leader. As soon as he was crowned, he locked the crown away in a glass case and got to the business of winning a war in France. After his victory in France, van Hove dramatized Henry's sudden death and the coronation of his infant son, Henry VI. Eelco Smits played the adult Henry VI as a sniveling mamma's boy who had neither an interest in nor aptitude for leadership and seemed almost glad to give the throne to the revolutionary York.

The three *Henry VI* plays were the most compressed of the cycle, with *Richard III* the least cut, as we saw the evolution of a chillingly familiar political monster. Kesting's Richard seemed pitiable and laughable at first: wearing an ill-fitting suit

and looking into a large mirror, examining the purple birthmark on his face that was the most visible sign of his deformity. Why this Richard wanted the crown was never entirely clear: perhaps just so he could be the biggest man in the room and spite the whole world. As an example, in one simultaneously hilarious and horrifying gag, Kesting's Richard picked up a phone in a prank call to Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and a few other world leaders, only to slam down the receiver as soon as they answered. And spite the world Richard did: during the final hour of the production, the stage was transformed into a locked bunker, with the paranoid king determined to hold onto his rule for every possible moment. Richard revealed himself to be adept at seizing power and silencing his enemies, but wholly inept as a ruler, leading his country and those who followed him to ruin. His last minutes were highlighted by a metronome that ticked away until Richmond successfully invaded. Richmond, played by Nasr, once again took the throne as a "good" king of war, but this cyclical doubling reminded us that there was inevitably another Richard waiting in the wings to wreak more havoc. The audience was left knowing that, although this Richard had been deposed and killed, it was only a matter of time until another Richard again seized power.

In her *New Yorker* blog post reviewing the show, Rebecca Mead draws explicit connections between Richard and Trump, noting how Richard was a man "born to great privilege [who] has yet to be granted the absolute dominance that he craves . . . who cuts a ruthless path to power by violating the bodies of women, and who incites others to violence on his behalf, heedless of any consequence but his own elevation." She observes, "It is no accident that *Kings of War* was scheduled to run immediately in advance of the election, but even Joseph Melillo, the executive producer of BAM, could not have foreseen how crucial, and illuminating, it would turn out to be."[6] How right she was. Only five days after I saw the production, Trump was elected president.

Like *Kings of War*, Thomas Ostermeier's *Richard III* was, in fact, created in Europe well before the election of Trump, yet took on new and obvious meanings in the era of Trump. *Kings of War* was created in June 2015 and was previously staged in Amsterdam and London. Ostermeier's German-language *Richard III* premiered on February 7, 2015, at the Schaubühne Berlin, where Ostermeier is resident director and member of the artistic direction team. It was brought to BAM almost exactly a year after the election and *Kings of War*. If van Hove's production was prophetic, Ostermeier's was designed to be a harrowing reflection of the historical moment we were now wholly a part of.

The production was unflinching: two-and-a-half hours long without an intermission. Quite a few audience members walked out during the production, often heckled as they did so by Lars Eidinger's Richard. Marius von Maynburg's German

translation was written in prose with a smattering of English phrases—both from Shakespeare's text and elsewhere. Jan Pappelbaum's set was a dirt-filled arena, while Florence von Gerkan's costumes were vaguely jazz-age modern pieces that utilized almost exclusively dark colors, suggesting some sort of monster's ball. As the production opened, glitter fell from above the stage as the Yorkists celebrated their final victory in the Wars of the Roses. Into this space stomped Eidinger as Richard of Gloucester—half-child, half-man with braces still on his teeth, and part demonic clown, determined to force everyone around him to join him in filth. Richard frequently spoke directly to the audience with a microphone suspended from the rafters. Richard used this microphone to let us in on his plans, ad-libbing in English, quoting popular recording artists, and making us unwilling co-conspirators in his crimes, but the prop was also rigged to be a spotlight and live-feed video camera, utilized in marvelously different ways in each scene by the central character as he grotesquely cemented his power. Grotesque he was: during his perverse seduction of Lady Anne (Jenny König), he stripped completely naked. Once he finally attained the crown, he dusted his face with white flour, appearing even more ghostly and monstrous and, later, he urinated on stage.

Richard's most hideous moment of all came in Act IV, when Buckingham (Moritz Gottwald), the crony who has helped Richard to the throne, but is no longer useful, finally asks for his promised reward of an earldom. Eidinger's King Richard had been eating something that looked like chocolate pudding. He stopped, looked at Gottwald's Buckingham, and then smeared the food across the Duke's face and clothes. Buckingham stood there, hoping the humiliation was complete, but it had only begun. Richard then taunted him, in German: "Hey, you look like shit! Have you eaten pussy yet today?" He began running into the audience, repeating this line, now in English, encouraging us as audience members to repeat the line. He became more frenzied, demanding that we join in, abandoning our silence to help him debase his former friend. A few audience members, caught up in the glee, did so, but most were dead silent, and this seemed to enrage him. It wasn't clear whether Eidinger the actor was pissed his scene wasn't working, or if Richard was angry he couldn't coerce us. Finally, an audience member shouted "No!" at the production I attended. Reactively, Eidinger screeched terrifyingly, "Who said that?!?" The audience protest ended, and the scene moved on. According to theatre critic Jonathan Kalb's review, audience members were more compliant the following night: "Eidinger pushed it further. He dashed into the audience repeating the lines in German, then switched to English, pumping the crowd to get them to shout the lines along with him as a jeering cheer. That's when I gulped. A hundred or more presumably liberal, sophisticated, evolved and enlightened BAM-goers gleefully took up the prompt, shouting those foul words aloud again and again like twelve-year-olds on a dare. Who the fuck were

these people? I thought I knew. And what else might they do in the anonymity of a crowd?"[7]

Ostermeier concluded his *Richard III* with a tour-de-force solo movement piece, abandoning crowds of soldiers to depict Richard, alone onstage, battling an army of invisible enemies. His rage was unfettered as he battled his adversaries, using the microphone rigging as a weapon. He wound up hoisted by his own petard, hanged, suspended upside down, alone onstage. It was a fitting end to a king who had used this microphone to turn crowds into mobs, who had promised, like our current president in his convention speech, that "I alone" can provide order and rule. "Richard loves Richard, that is, I am I" opines Shakespeare's King Richard before the Battle of Bosworth Field, finally acknowledging that his primary trait is egotism. Ostermeier's *Richard III* showed us everything we have to fear most from the current presidency, from individual degradations to a society turned into a pit of dirt and piss.

In trying times, there are plays that seem to speak to our society with particular force. Today, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is clearly one of those works. But it is not the only such play. Around the inauguration of Trump, some artists planned protests using Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, and Lauren Gunderson licensed her play *The Taming* for free readings on inauguration day. A year after Trump's inauguration, a number of artists and scholars are planning readings of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* set in the White House as a continuation of the resistance, much like the second annual Women's March. This may be the era of our own *Richard III*, but the theatre seems to be a place of resistance and hope to move the country back toward a society that can look toward more optimistic works, and perhaps once again—as Carroll and Rylance did only four years ago—see Shakespeare's tyrant as something more distant, a figure of ridicule and not terror.

NOTES

1. Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare Explains the 2016 Election," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2016.

2. Quotations from *Richard III* come from the Arden Third Series edition, William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. James R. Siemon (London: Methuen Drama, 2009).

3. Rebecca Mead, "The First Great Theatrical Work of the Trump Era," *The New Yorker*, online at https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-first-great-theatrical-work-of-the-trump-era. Last accessed February 1, 2018.

4. Margaret's description of Richard as a "hog" is not purely an insult. Richard's royal insignia was a white boar.

5. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary,* trans. Boleslaw Toborski (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 3, 6.

6. Op. cit. 3.

7. Jonathan Kalb, "Shadows of Collaborationism at BAM," *Something the Dust Said*, October 15, 2017. https://www.jonathankalb.com/single-post/2017/10/15/SHADOWS-OF-COLLABORATIONISM-AT-BAM. Last accessed February 1, 2018.

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