

THEATER REVIEW

'Richard III' boils and bubbles at Act

By ANITA DONOVAN
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Once again, Morrisville's Actors' NET has commandeered all the best male actors in Bucks and Mercer counties to put on a blockbuster rendition of William Shakespeare's bloodiest history play, "Richard III."

Led by George Hartpence as the murderous Duke of Gloucester, later Richard III, the cast of nearly 25 charges through a mercifully edited three hours of betrayal, family feuds, cut-throat politics, internecine homicide, and down-home villainy.

The action of 25 years is telescoped into 20 scenes stretching from 1461 to 1485, and according to script adaptor George Hartpence is an hour shorter than the Globe's audience experienced. In snapshot fashion, Shakespeare's scenes play fast and furious, making the mayhem appear to be non-stop.

According to Shakespeare, Richard is responsible for the murder of Henry VI and his son Edward; then his own brothers Edward IV and George, Duke of Clarence, plus his own wife Lady Anne, former daughter-in-law to Henry VI. In the process, he wipes out a few minor enemies, such as Edward IV's stepson and brother-in-law;

Lord Hastings, Chancellor of England; and most famously, the "little princes," Edward Prince of Wales and his younger brother Richard Duke of York. What makes it somewhat confusing — no, let's face it, very confusing — is that there are so many people and too few names to go around.

In a controversy that resembles the current rage over "The Passion of the Christ" movie, Shakespeare's view of Richard III is in question; there is even a Richard III Society that maintains he is innocent of the claims against him. History may confirm that Richard III was maligned by Shakespeare, but the playwright was, after all, writing for the descendants of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, who defeated Richard at Bosworth Field. It was politically expedient — perhaps even necessary — to support the legitimacy of Richmond's claim, rather than to aim at any objective truth.

That said, Shakespeare's Richard is a piece of work. He tells the audience from the get-go that he is a bad guy and will do anything to wear the crown. He does provide some motivation for his nefariousness — the mortification he has suffered over his physical deformities: a withered arm, crippled leg, and crooked back. In the NET

production, Hartpence wears a built-up boot to compensate for a stunted leg, and a vicious looking glove to mask a withered hand, but he shows restraint in having only a small protuberance on his shoulder that makes the other characters' terming him "the hunchback" seem pure meanness indeed.

Any sympathy for Richard evaporates once he launches gleefully on his course of bribery, extortion, subornation, bullying and murder. His crimes become more heinous and flagrant, until we realize we are in the presence of madness. Richard does get his moment of realization in the early morning hours before the battle at Bosworth Field when, a la Brutus in "Julius Caesar," he is visited not by a "monstrous apparition," but by all his victims — from Henry VI to the little princes — accusing him from the grave.

Director Cheryl Doyle sets a fast moving pace and injects a humorous tone — even if it is gallows humor — wherever possible, making the increasing horrors more shocking. Hartpence makes Richard repulsive to the moral intellect while keeping him plausible as a human being — not an easy task.

Good work is contributed by all the principals: Jamie Bradley as Lord Hastings,

Actors' NET

Jim Perri as Earl Rivers; Dale Simon as Buckingham; Aaron Wexler as Clarence; Steve Lobis as Lord Stanley; David Swartz as Edward IV; Chuck Donnelly as Richmond; Steven Christy and Kevin Delaney as Edward IV's young heirs, and Marco Newton as Bishop Ely. Doubling in small roles, Matt South, Ed Correale, Ed Patton, Philip Katz, Michael Pastorok, John Russell, Barry Clements, Matthew Whiteside and Walter Smyth work with precision.

However, highest kudos must go to the women in the play: Carol Thompson as Lady Anne; Susan Fowler as Queen Elizabeth; and especially Theresa Forsyth-Swartz as Queen Margaret and Eileen Luscombe as the Duchess of York. The scenes with these women are riveting; their language and interchanges are among the clearest and most passionate.

The handsome production features excellent period costumes by Doyle and her henchwomen Evelyn Fletcher and Elizabeth Bartlett, plus some kindly lent by Trenton's Shakespeare '70 company.

Performances continue at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 6 p.m. Sunday through March 21. Tickets are \$12-\$10. To reserve, call 215-428-0217 or e-mail ActorsNet@aol.com.



George Hartpence brings the right touch of evil to the role of Richard III.