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'Richard III'

By: Stuart Duncan, TimeOFF

03/10/2004

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Actors' NET of Bucks County kicks off its 'Murderer's Row' series with this Shakespeare bloodbath.

Each year, just about this time, Actors' NET of Bucks County in Morrisville, Pa., strings together a trilogy or perhaps four shows with a central theme.

The theme for this year's series-within-a-series is "Murderer's Row," four plays with blood, gore and even a few laughs for discerning audiences. And what better to lead off such an undertaking than Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

Unlike some local community groups that refuse to consider Shakespeare, even his delicious comedies, lest audiences shun them, Actors' NET regularly turns to the Bard, usually with great distinction. In recent years, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* played to sold-out houses and critical praise.

Any production of *Richard III* must recognize two facts: First, it is an excruciatingly long piece, well over four hours. Almost a full hour has been chopped from this staging, and it never will be missed. A knowledge of English royalty might very well help; a guide to that effect has been posted on the wall by the box office. The second point is that you need fine actors, not only to play the fascinating title character, but all of the bodies he must climb over on his path to the throne, plus the ladies he both scorned and lusted for along the way. Actors' NET is well-stocked with both. The company numbers two dozen, and while that might be daunting for some troupes, not so for this one.

George Hartpence plays Richard (for the first act he is Richard of Gloucester, and by Act IV, Scene II, he is King). He begins by establishing clearly both that he is "misshapen" and that he is "determined to prove a villain," and does so with relish. In an inspired bit of text juggling, a monologue that closes *Henry VI, Part III* is used here to introduce our evening's journey. And then we watch, almost in awe, as Richard grins at evil, soothes anguish and banters with assassins. It is a delicious performance from one of the area's most versatile actors.

And it is heightened by performances right down the cast list: David Swartz gives yet another strong portrayal, this time as Edward IV, brother to Richard. Dale Simon enjoys one of his best roles in years as the Duke of Buckingham, one of Richard's staunchest supporters, betrayed eventually by his conscience. Actors' NET favorite Steve Lobis plays Lord Stanley, Earl of Derby, one of the very few who makes it alive to the final curtain. Newcomer Michael J. Pastorok impresses in three separate roles, principally as a hardened murderer.

But the ladies are just as strong: Susan Fowler, who began with the group in musicals, has been growing as an actress with each appearance and here is most believable as Queen Elizabeth, the wife of Edward IV. Theresa Forsyth Swartz plays the exiled widow of Henry VI with great intensity. Carol Thompson plays the much-abused Lady Anne, widow of Edward (son of Henry VI), later married to the lecherous Richard. Eileen Luscombe has a wonderful time as the Duchess of York, mother of three prospective kings. There is a second-act scene (Shakespeare wrote in five acts, played here in two) with the ladies that illustrates just how clearly Shakespeare understood the helplessness of women to affect the politics in an age of primogeniture.

Cheryl Doyle has directed with her customary attention to detail and, in particular, with care to bring out the meaning of the dialogue. Audiences will get a nice grounding in English royal history.

As I suggested earlier, Shakespeare sells out at Actors' NET. Reserve early.

Richard III continues at the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through March 21. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 6 p.m., Tickets cost \$12, \$10 seniors/students. For information, call (215) 295-3694. On the Web: www.actorsnetbucks.org



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