

# Enter Richard the Blackshirt

Michael Billington at the Lyttelton

**R**ICHARD Eyre's enthralling production of *Richard III*, which plays at the Lyttelton before going off on tour with *King Lear*, sets the play squarely in the twentieth-century. Instead of a Saturday-night melodrama about a Satanic joker, we get a deeply political study of the fascist instinct. It doesn't solve all the play's problems, but it is a reading pursued with admirable logic and clarity.

The first sight of Ian McKellen's Gloucester comes as something of a shock: this is no hobbling cacademon but a stiff-backed, uniformed survivor of the Somme who raps out his contempt for "this weak piping time of peace." He and Buckingham move purposefully through a world of wing-collared, Baldwinesque trimmers, but it is only after the death of Hastings that Richard shows his true colours. He appears in

Cabinet in Mosleyesque black shirt and comes before the Mayor and Citizens at the top of a microphoned podium draped with a hoar-decked flag. As the chants of Amen greet his assumption of power, he slowly and laboriously raises his right hand in an unequivocal Hitlerian salute.

It was Peter Hall, directing the play at Stratford in 1964, who pointed out a fundamental truth: "The political interest is that Richard and Buckingham take the greatest care when they're seizing the throne to act constitutionally: it's the classic coup d'etat with legal sanctions." Eyre's success lies in translating that insight into contemporary terms; and the pivotal scenes become those in Act Three when the government is ruthlessly hi-jacked. Hastings, instead of being accosted on his doorstep, is sounded out by Catesby over the red despatch-boxes as they shuffle the morning Cabinet papers. After a nightmarish insert showing the death of three nobles, we then return to



Clare Higgins and Ian McKellen in *Richard III* PHOTO: DOUGLAS JEFFEREY

Whitehall and Richard's systematic isolation of Hastings at whom the retiring Buckingham casts a wan, departing glance. It is a potent reminder that the legendary twentieth century dictators virtually all seized power from within the system. But Mr Eyre retains the idea of monarchy. There is an inspired scene where the newly-crowned Richard hurtles towards us on a gantry-like throne clad in black doublet and backed by an heroic, idealised mural: an exact reminder of the self-mythologising quality of fascism.

In Shakespeare, however, there is no directorial gain without some loss. By treating Richard as a politically astute

old soldier clamouring for action, Mr Eyre undercuts both his truculent deformity and sexual magnetism. McKellen is very good indeed. But it seems somewhat excessive for Queen Margaret to describe as "an elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog" this immaculate, evening-dressed figure at a state banquet. The great scene where Richard woos Queen Elizabeth to gain her daughter's hand also hangs fire: it misses the point that he is seducing the mother to gain the child and it is symptomatic of McKellen's asexuality that he cuts the tell-tale line defining the womb as a "nest of spicery".

McKellen's Richard is short on humour and hypocrisy.

What he gives us instead is a highly intelligent study of fascist power: its myopia, its concern with self-image, even its contradictoriness. McKellen makes fascinating use of his soldier's pocket-Bible brandishing it as a symbol of integrity and even thumbing through it, in mortal despair, on the eve of battle. With his slicked-down hair and dry parade-ground voice, McKellen offers us not a charismatic Richard but a beautifully executed study of the banality of evil.

There is striking support from Peter Jeffrey as a Clarence who vainly believes he is protected from murder by his nobility, from Brian Cox who plays Buckingham as a portly, overfed Machiavellian and from Joyce Redman whose Duchess of York reminds one of an Alan Bennett dowager about to go and put on another rope of pearls. Jean Kalman's fierce overhead working-lights evoke the interrogative barbarity of dictatorship. Bob Crowley's concrete-walled set is spare and effective, not least the backdrop of an idyllic rural England that heralds the arrival of Richmond. But the great virtue of the evening is that it turns a play that, in isolation, often becomes blood-boltered melodrama into a gripping study of the political cunning and spiritual barrenness of fascism.

## Billington on Dick The Shit

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