

THE TWO productions could not be more different. For Richard III, director Richard Eyre and designer Bob Crowley have set the ship of state in a vast steel container and have brilliantly reactivated the Shakespearean tensions between British royalty and politicians by invoking the rise of fascism in the 1930s.

For King Lear, director Deborah Warner and designer Hildegard Bechtler, less controversially, and in marked contrast to the current RSC abstract inventions, create a brutally simple environment for tragedy, with timeless costumes, two great tarpaulins, one white, one brown, and a 'rough theatre' storm drummed up on live percussion at Lear's command.

Both productions will bring credit to the RNT. For the second time, Ian McKellen has formed a company within the National, and not the least pleasure of this double-headed project is to encounter an established actor like Peter

Jeffrey picking his way lightly through doomed Clarence one night and the blinded Gloucester the next; or to see comparative newcomers such as Derek Hutchinson (Warner's Kent in her Kick Theatre Lear) and Hakeem Kae-Kazim tested in the first play by Catebsy and Tyrrell, and in the second, on a higher plane, by the rival sons of Gloucester.

The women are strong, particularly in Richard where Joyce Redman queens it royally as the Duchess of York and Claire Higgins's Elizabeth gives as good as she gets from McKellen in the magnificently pitched wooing by proxy interlude. Higgins is equally fine as Regan, savagely differentiating herself from Susan Engel's superior Goneril.

One notes with pleasure the contribution to both plays of such stalwarts as Bruce

Purchase, David Collings and Richard O'Callaghan. The sense of company pays off particularly in the set-pieces: Richard's nightmare on the eve of battle is the play's final social ritual, with healing and Hakeem Kae-Kazim tested in Lady Anne's dance with the saviour Richmond. Eyre's production throughout is strictly regimented, with such telling ellipses as the young prince's 'some little train', punningly represented as an electric toy, heralding the young duke's full-dress, red carpet arrival at a London station. Warner's control is over figures in space; although the storm and howl scenes tend towards the pedestrian, the overriding impression is of a hospital ward littered with aghast visitors.

For while Cox's Lear is undoubtedly moving and vocally extraordinary — the variations on a strangled Celtic wail are endless — the performance is primarily one of busy playfulness subsiding quietly into static, grants stoicism and simple fear. After John Wood's exhilarating explosions in his ascent to madness at Stratford-upon-Avon, the effect is earth-bound. Wood dreaded the wheelchair Cox is in it from the off, carting on with party hats and favours before switching comically to 'our darker purpose'.

Hunched and nimble, bearded like a prehistoric cave-man, Cox is a figure of pathos before he starts. Thus David Bradley's poignantly acidic Fool delivers his lines as an extended

epithet, with a shrug and a grimace; the RSC, in contrast, finds lyricism and example in the Fool's patter. The Cox/Warner RSC *Times* *Andresen* was a searing essay on the transforming emotional properties of grief, and an outline for a *Lear* they have now avoided.

Cox is both wonderful and curiously dull. It is something to do with a lack of spiritual and intellectual energy at the core of this production. Quite the opposite is the case with *Richard*. Following Antony Sher's exorcism of Olivier in the role, McKellen freely proceeds to both undercut and re-define the monster as a ramrod-backed, glacial officer with Sandhurst vowels and a suppressed

deformity: no hint of the warped spine until he marches off in profile, and the withered arm is only brandished at the turncoat Hastings as a sign, at last, of mental degeneration.

Like his RSC Iago, McKellen's Richard is a brilliant soldier in a new setting. Trevor Nunn's detailed and annotated Cyprus scenes in *Othello*, which extolled the power of positive anachronism in the American Civil War, are clearly Eyre's model as he stunningly locates the long, meandering scenes of political in-fighting first in the dining room of Queen Elizabeth (evening dress, cigarettes, candles, cures over the soup) and later in the cabinet office at Westminster.

Sher's sensational Richard operated in a nebulous medieval void; McKellen, whose performance is perfectly tailored to his

temperamental proclivities, indicates clearly how a political machinel, shutting experts among the *Three Estates*, turns political depot. It is a chilling progress, clearly marked at all stages and fully expressed in the overall staging. Army uniforms are exchanged for tyrannical black shirts and boots for the Lord Mayor's reception.

Another brilliant sequence in which rhetoric is suborned at a microphone on a cantilevered lift and McKellen descends to his destiny while his good right arm — a rapidly efficient instrument for bucking on and lighting up — creeps of its own volition to a sinister salute.

The lingering fetish of medieval pageantry in the ceremonies of monarchy is as potent today as in the 1930s. Hence the surprise appearance of the new king in glittering crown and

black hose beneath a strange, idealised portrait of a naked McKellen on his pale white horse, his Surrey with the king on top, for which the kingdom is finally on offer. At the heart of this play is a struggle for the heart of England, a fact triumphantly realised and expressed by actor and production.

The two lead actors save all their fire-power for the main roles. An important postscript to the enterprise is that Cox's Buckingham is a strangely muted, low-key performance buried in a heard and mumbled, while McKellen's Kent, a part for which he is entirely unsuited, comes across merely as a nodding simpleton.

But there is plenty of time for improvement. The productions play in the Lyttelton until 1 September, then visit Tokyo, Hamburg, Milan, Madrid, Paris and Cairo, with local stop-offs at Nottingham, Cardiff, Leeds, Belfast and Cork, before returning to the South Bank in the New Year.

Different faces of the National character

Michael Coveney reviews the new *King Lear* and *Richard III* at the Lyttelton Theatre.

Coveney on Dick Shit & Lear

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