



RICHARD II

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHE RAUCK

Your new play was born of actor Micha Lescot's desire to work with you again on a new project. Why *Richard II*?

Christophe Rauck: I can't imagine directing a play without picturing specific actors. My complicity with playwright Rémi De Vos was based on writing for specific actors and actresses. For *Départ volontaire*, we thought of Micha Lescot. He's one of those great actors who bring together masculinity and femininity in their art. As I wanted to continue our collaboration, I asked him what role he would want to play. He chose *Richard II*. I first experienced a "suspended" moment. *Richard II* was that great show at the Théâtre du Soleil in 1982, a period of mad creativity. I couldn't go back! But re-reading the text convinced me to adapt this unique play by Shakespeare, often eclipsed by *Richard III*, *Henry VI*, and other tragedies.

***Richard II* tells of the consecration of Henry IV, an unconventional king. How did you approach this play in which there is little action, yet where everything seems ineluctable?**

The power of this play is that everything that is predicted comes true. Directing *Henry VI* with the students of the École du Nord allowed me to better understand *Richard II*. The action often brings us back to the question of temporality. During the judgment scene, the audience first hopes for a duel, then a battle sword in hand. Which makes sense for a play written in the 16th century, based on a story that takes place two centuries earlier, but *Richard II* is first and foremost the story of a prediction. It feels relevant today, even if one should always be wary of trying to make Shakespeare modern. Let's just say that some elements echo our current situation. For instance how, by refusing to listen to his people, a President can find that same people marching in the streets... There's a symbolic dimension to speech. *Richard II* is the story of this king who won't listen to anyone anymore and who, against Henry Bolingbroke, beloved of the people, ends up losing his throne. Throughout the play is the question of the relationship between power and speech, until Richard's final transformation, when he ceases to be the king of a land, England, to become the master of nothing but his own words.

This relationship to language is everywhere. The characters are always expressing their resentment and surprised with this king who no longer hears them. Would you say *Richard II* is a play about the story of a man weakened by the exercise of power?

Richard II is a mature king. He is the heir to a lineage with many faults from which he cannot seem to extricate himself. That's the whole weight of the first act. He had Gloucester killed; he is responsible for a conspiracy. Two great scenes seem most important in this fascinating work: the return of *Richard II* to England, followed by his deposition. During that second scene, he becomes king of nothing, a jester-king (in the sense that he is now telling the truth in a different way). He becomes free to speak; he is the one who still holds power through his words, according to a vertical axis. As long as he lives, the future king Bolingbroke remains thwarted in his actions, incapable of making the right choice when it comes to this troublesome king. Bolingbroke is the embodiment of a certain form of weakness here.

Beyond blood and fury, like the intensity of *Richard III* for instance, the genius of this play resides in its use of shifts and postponements to create its own suspense...

The play is about how the people can't be heard by power and its representative, even one appointed by God. It has two main characters, one—*Richard II*—linked to the sky, the other—Bolingbroke, the future *Henry IV*—to the earth. When *Richard II* leaves England to suppress the Irish rebellion, Bolingbroke returns from exile thanks to a sort of immediate movement and goes all the way to London. One lineage has broken away from the land, from the people; the other advances with the people, in a very literal and physical sense. Recently, I listened to a radio programme about the grievances addressed to the government. What I heard had a very Shakespearean dimension: "We are the ground, you step on us, we support you, but beware of not becoming too heavy, for we will rise up against you."

All of Richard II's tension is there, in that fragile balance between a people who want justice and a king who can represent it.

This political dimension is also a reminder that *Richard II* features an impressive gallery of characters, with the eldest, Gaunt and York, striving to be the guardians of a power without conspiracy or violence...

Great writers are those who manage to contextualise complexity, to tell us about it in an intelligent and intelligible way. The challenge that comes with directing such a text is to find the same clarity. Gaunt and York are powerful and moving characters. The former bends to the king's will, according to a divine oath taken by his ancestors. This great servant of the State ends up telling the king what he thinks of him on his deathbed. It's a great lesson about power. To have such a great man for an adviser is something one has to earn. Which means to be able to see, to hear... As for York, he caves in. He is as devoted as Gaunt, but faced with a confusing situation, he chooses to rally Bolingbroke. But he remains the symbol of another form of clairvoyance, in response to Richard's irrational actions and refusal to listen.

Ambition, inability to listen, distance from the people: what other similarities do you see with the exercise of power?

What is the land? That's one of the questions Richard II asks. Aren't we ceaselessly told about territories, about borders? Another question is that of the concept of people, so weakened today. Richard's departure for faraway Ireland tells of this separation from the people. As the king, he is the sublime representative of the people; there is a verticality specific to his lineage. Shakespeare's critique of power makes sense to us because it tells us of the endogamy and calculations of power.

The desire to question the exercise of power and the truth of words means taking up the dramaturgic challenges specific to *Richard II*. Which are they?

There are many of them. Several axes intersect and clash. Family, betrayals, murders and twists punctuate the play. You have the character of Gaunt, who predicts Richard II's eventual failure. In order to get into the story, you have to make sure to make the first act comprehensible. Richard II is about the end of an era and the beginning of another, with a feeling of confusion conducive to upheaval.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet