

RICHARD III

An incarnation of absolute evil, as ugly of body as he is dark of soul: so is King Richard often perceived. Able to seduce with his words, this student of Machiavelli is a genius manipulator who positions himself at the heart of all the bloodiest political machinations that take place at the court of England.

A poisonous and perverted hero, he is as fascinating as Iago or Lady Macbeth, and the centuries haven't made him any less mysterious. Thomas Ostermeier is the latest to tackle Shakespeare's play, in a new translation by Marius von Mayenburg that changes English verses into German prose to keep as close to the text's meaning as possible and paint the portrait of a Richard III who, more than just a serial killer, also reveals the instincts hidden inside every man. This king-actor, played by Lars Eidinger, uses his gifts to do on the stage what we might want to do, sometimes, in our lives. He creates with the audience a troubling complicity that gives another meaning to this bloody, disturbing, and overwhelming epic. Once again, Thomas Ostermeier manages to turn the theatre stage into the place where the past can become the present.

Show premiered on 7 February, 2015 at Schaubühne, Berlin (Germany).

THOMAS OSTERMEIER

After studying direction in Berlin in the 1980s, Thomas Ostermeier's name first appeared on the map when he was appointed artistic director of the Baracke at the Deutsches Theater, where he worked from 1996 to 1999. There, he directed plays by modern German and English-speaking playwrights, to great acclaim. In September 1999, aged 31, he became co-artistic director of the Schaubühne, where he continued his work as a discoverer of new texts. Marius von Mayenburg, Lars Norén, Sarah Kane, Jon Fosse, and Caryl Churchill joined Georg Büchner, Bertolt Brecht, Henrik Ibsen, Frank Wedekind, and William Shakespeare in the repertory of the theatre. Classic or modern, those texts are always reinterpreted and integrated to the reality of post-reunification Germany and of an officially-united Europe. Yet those plays, like the German and European states, remain splintered, echoing the reality of a world in which conflicts are multiplying and barbarism hasn't disappeared. Thomas Ostermeier's engaged, living, critical, and generous theatre is just as concerned with the role of the individual within society as with great questions.

RICHARD III WITHIN THE WORK OF SHAKESPEARE

Richard III was written early in William Shakespeare's career, between 1592 and 1593, right after the *Henry VI* trilogy, of which it could be seen as a sequel. Its story is that of the end of the civil war known as the Wars of the Roses, which raged in England between 1455 and 1485. The rivalry between the Lancaster and York families indeed comes to an end with the battle of Bosworth; in the last scene of *Richard III*, the eponymous king is slain by Henry Tudor, who will ascend the throne as Henry VII.

INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS OSTERMEIR

Why did you choose to direct Shakespeare's *Richard III*?

Thomas Ostermeier: There is never just one reason. For this *Richard III*, there is the presence of actor Lars Eidinger, with whom I've worked for a long time, and it seemed to me that this was the right time for him to play this role. There is the play, of course, its themes, its construction, its language. I wanted to direct a play where the border between good and evil wasn't as clear. So I chose a completely amoral play to force myself to face the abyss that exists within every single one of us. I wanted to understand how Richard can charm the audience when he introduces himself very frankly as a man whose actions are particularly dark. He is a devil with whom the audience can nevertheless sign a pact.

Is this pact created by the seduction of the audience by Richard?

Richard seduces the audience with his words, through an incredible feat of manipulation. He lies and tortures within a world that gives him the opportunity to do so. Richard removes the various masks he wears one by one, but at no point we glimpse the truth of what he is, the truth that could be hiding behind those masks.

Is this seduction made easier by your scenography, which, on the set originally created for the Schaubühne, puts the actors very close to the audience?

Ever since I started working as a director, I've always been interested in the relationship between the stage and the audience. My theatre isn't a theatre of images, I don't need a distance so that the spectators perceive its composition. I want the audience to feel as if they were among the actors and the characters they play, right alongside them. On top of that, I can't stand when actors recite their texts, as if it were a declamation. I want them to act "truthfully," in a very intimate setting. A Russian critic who came to see the play said: "We are at once in a bedroom and in a cathedral." I like this idea; I think that Shakespeare needs to be heard sometimes in an intimate setting, and at other times in a sort of sweeping and majestic movement.

Because of this feeling of intimacy, does the audience become an accomplice to Richard, himself a very human character because of his very inhumanity?

That is exactly what we've tried to do with Lars Eidinger ever since we started working on the play. To ask the audience: "Have you never wanted to do what Richard is doing? Have you never wanted to commit morally reprehensible acts? All those actions that social and moral constraints fortunately prevent. But we are at the theatre, in a space of freedom where catharsis is possible, where we can play with our darkest instincts in order to, maybe, purify and free ourselves from them.

***Richard III* is a historical tragedy which follows the Henry VI trilogy. Is the historical context important for you?**

We studied the historical context and decided we wanted it to appear in our work, in spite of the complexity of the story, in terms of both family relations

and politics. At the heart of our work on *Richard III*, though, are the two themes that seemed to us the most important: power, and desire. Richard uses desire to reach his political goals. We needed the audience to be fascinated by this human being who, in spite of his ugliness, wields an undeniable erotic power, has this incredible aura. It's the mystery of the play, which I believe is about all the handicaps we can have, that we have accrued during the terrible moments of our lives (lost loves, professional and personal frustrations, etc.). From there, we can identify with this version of Richard.

Richard's world is often presented like a world of madness, that of a dangerous psychopath prisoner of his own fantasies. Do you find that reading convincing?

Not at all, because one has to be highly intelligent to get where Richard is. If he was nothing but a lunatic, he couldn't charm with his words, with his presence alone. I would say he's more a nihilist than a psychopath. Of course, madness works on the stage because it is easier for actors to play it as a series of external symptoms than it is to try to find its deeper mechanisms. What drives Richard? What are his contradictions?

You asked Marius von Mayenburg to translate the play. Did you want him to write a modern version of it?

Not really. I don't think it's possible to translate Shakespeare's English verses into German verses, since German words have more syllables than their English counterparts. If you try to keep verses and rhymes, you end up sacrificing meaning. We therefore decided to use prose in order to better delve into the characters' psychology, to get as close as possible to the complexities of those characters. We never tried to make a "modern" translation, but rather one that would be understandable, that would make clear what is at stake in the play. We decided to have our version translated into French to use surtitles for the Festival d'Avignon, to keep the prose intact.

In some of your shows, in particular in Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, which played at the Festival d'Avignon in 2012, you've added new texts to the original text of the play. Did you do that with *Richard III*?

No, we didn't add anything. We actually cut almost forty percent of the original text. Some moments are so important, so striking, that they cannot be ignored. You can't not have Richard say "My kingdom for a horse!" There is a reason it's such a famous quote. If it's so troubling, it's because here we have this man who has spent his entire life desiring power and glory, and who is ready to give it all up for nothing but a horse. It's a philosophical approach to this question of power, an echo of "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Life is more important than power, surviving by fleeing is more powerful than dying bravely.

Interview conducted by Jean-François Perrier / Translation Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

AND...

THE PLAY WILL BE BROADCAST on 13 July at 10:40 pm on ARTE and will be available on ARTE Concert

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Site Louis Pasteur de l'Université, free admittance:

- 9 July at 01:00 pm, Radio creation week: *Richard III* or "*Shakespeare wrote Game of Thrones*", organised with Radio Campus Avignon and Radio Campus France
- 13 July at 03:00 pm, *Dialogue artists-audience* with Thomas Ostermeier (subject to change), encounter hosted by the Ceméa
- 18 July at 11:00 am, Télérama dialogue: *Shakespeare, again!*
- 18 July at 03:00 pm, *Dramatic transfert*, with, among others, Thomas Ostermeier, organised with Goethe-Institut Paris

Cloître St-Louis, free admittance (please sign up on recherche-creation-avignon.fr):

- 9 July at 10:00 am, Encounter Research and Creation: *Power, morals and seduction*, with, among others, Thomas Ostermeier, organised with ANR

THE NAVE OF IMAGES

Église des Célestins, free admittance

- 8 July at 02:30 pm *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner / Direction Thomas Ostermeier (2004) / Realisation Hannes Rossacher
- 11 July at 04:30 pm, *Richard III* by Peter Verhelst after William Shakespeare Direction Ludovic Lagarde (2007) / Realisation Roberto Maria Grassi

SYMPOSIUM FAITH AND CULTURE

Shakespeare and the faces of power / 11 July at 11:00 am
Chapelle de l'Oratoire, free admittance

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#THOMASOSTERMEIER @SCHAUBUEHNE

69th
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In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.