

CINCINNATI
Shakespeare
COMPANY

PRESENTS:



Directed by

Brian Isaac Phillips

Between the Lines Audience Guide:
Insights and Reflections on the Production

THE HISTORY CYCLE AT CINCINNATI SHAKESPEARE COMPANY: THE STORY SO FAR

Richard II: King Richard II is a vain, aloof king, more concerned with acquiring money and power than ruling England, and so he is deposed by his younger cousin, who declares himself King Henry IV. Unrest ferments.

Henry IV (adapted from *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*): Henry IV's reign is marred by infighting and rebellion. Henry struggles to control his dilettante son and heir, Hal, until a revolt threatens the kingdom and Hal rises to the occasion. Unrest ferments.



Justin McCombs as
Henry V.

Henry V: The layabout Prince Hal has grown into the warrior-king Henry V, and leads a successful military campaign to capture a part of France for English rule. Henry is loved by his people and unrest, for a moment, is quieted.

Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 1 (adapted from *Henry VI, Parts 1 and 2*): Henry V dies young and England's crown is left to his infant son, Henry VI. The English court descends into infighting and chaos. English control over France is lost.

Another member of the royal family, the Duke of York, challenges young Henry VI's claim to the throne. Unrest ferments.

Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 2 (adapted from *Henry VI, Parts 2 and 3*): Civil unrest rages on under Henry VI's rule, as those loyal to him struggle to quell peasant uprisings and battle the Yorkists. Eventually, the Yorkists eke out a victory and install their leader as King Edward IV. Although their claim is contested and battles continue, Edward and his younger brother, the brilliant but deformed Richard, assassinate Henry and secure a definitive victory; the line of Henry V is wiped out, leaving Edward IV to rule as King of England.



Brent Vimtrup and
Sara Clark as Richard
II and Queen Isabella.
Photo by Rich Sofranko.



Darnell Pierre
Benjamin as Henry VI.



Billy Chace (center) as Richard III

RICHARD III SYNOPSIS

After the Wars of the Roses, the ailing King Edward IV sits on the throne, while his jealous and malcontent younger brother, Richard of Gloucester, begins to scheme his way to the crown. He woos the recently-widowed Lady Anne, the wife of the late King Henry VI's son, and despite Richard's hand in the prince's death, Anne agrees to marry him. Meanwhile, Richard has slandered his and King Edward's brother, the Duke of Clarence, with accusations of treason, and Clarence is put into prison, where he is murdered.

King Edward IV dies, leaving the kingdom in the hands of his young son. Richard and his supporters hatch a plot to suggest that Edward's marriage was unlawful and his children illegitimate, so it is agreed that Richard should take the throne as the rightful king.



Aiden Sims as Anne and Billy Chace as Richard

Even as he takes the throne, Richard fears for the stability of his kingship. He arranges the assassination of Edward's two sons, he has his wife Anne murdered, and he plots to marry King Edward's daughter to reinforce his claim to the throne. One by one, Richard's old friends come to fear his ambition and his ruthlessness, and Richard ensures anyone who leaves his fold is murdered or executed.

As England chafes under Richard's tyrannous rule, Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond, rallies an army and begins an uprising. Richmond is a charismatic leader with a distant but definite claim to the throne, and all but Richard's most loyal followers flock to him. As Richard sees his power crumble underneath him, he is plagued by a sudden attack of conscience, and is haunted by the many deaths he has caused. He and Richmond battle, and Richmond is victorious. Richmond ascends to the throne as King Henry VII, and thus rises the Tudor dynasty.



Grant Niezgodski (center) as Richmond

BEHIND THE SCENES: CHANGING SET, CHANGING LAND

Even as the actors play out Shakespeare's story onstage, the design tells a story too. Through the history cycle, the design of the set has stayed mostly the same, with new additions for each production to reflect how the events of the play change the land around them. In *Henry VI: The Wars the Roses, Part 1*, the set was natural wood tones and wrapped in lush vines heavy with red and white roses. By *Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 2*, war was scorching the land; the set was beginning to "char" from the earth up and the vines began to curl and wither as if from heat. At the start of *Richard III*, after years of battle, all the flowers have died. The set and the vines have blackened, and the stage itself has blistered and burned.



The English Court before the wars break out in *Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 1* (left) and after years of battle in *Richard III* (right).

A CONVERSATION WITH COMPANY MEMBER KELLY MENGELKOCH

(“QUEEN MARGARET”)



Cincinnati Shakespeare Company: So Margaret has had a pretty eventful arc over the course of the history cycle. Here we are in *Richard III* – can you catch us up a little bit, for people who didn’t see or don’t remember both parts of *Henry VI*?

Kelly Mengelkoch: Well, she’s had a juicy past. In *Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 1*, she encounters Suffolk and is bargained to marry Henry VI and become queen of England. She’s the daughter of the duke, and she’s resented by many in the English court for being an opportunist and grabbing the throne – and she is an opportunist! In Shakespeare’s story, she takes the throne while carrying on an affair with Suffolk, who arranged their marriage. Suffolk is executed by [the Duke of] York, who’s also trying to seize control. So in a nutshell, we see her rise to power and maybe move a little too fast in trying to secure her power. But then, when King Henry faces York in his parliament, and rather than continuing the wars and the bloodshed, decides he’s going to give the throne to York instead of passing the

throne on to Prince Edward, the son Henry has with Margaret. That sparks a new rage in Margaret and makes her seek revenge on York for both Suffolk’s death and taking the crown from her own son.

So Margaret tortures York with news of his youngest son’s death and then helps to kill him. He curses her that she should encounter such pain as he does with the loss of his child, which she does by the end of *Henry VI* when she sees her own son’s murder and King Henry’s murder, all at the hands of York’s sons. So we come into *Richard III* with her bearing all of the once success and glory of being once a queen on top to this destroyed woman whose vengeance only led her down a path of her own defeat and the loss of her own son, seeing a new era on the throne in York’s eldest son Edward, and his queen, who’s come from even lower status than Margaret’s, rising just like she did. So she was banished to France, but chooses to remain in England – this is Shakespeare again, not history – to pray and curse and eventually witness the demise of her new foes.

CSC: It’s been a rollercoaster for Margaret! When you tell the story, she really sounds like a tragic hero, with so strength and pride but then she brings about her own fall. Do you see a tragic hero in Margaret?

KM: Oh, there’s some hubris in there. I have a lot of respect for her, as a woman who’s protecting what’s rightfully hers. Everything that’s hers, she’s gained legitimately – her marriage to Henry, her son to the rightful king. But she, like anyone else, lets personal emotions and grudges blind her to intelligent choices. There’s a taste of tragic hero, but I think it’s more that she gets lost in emotion and vengeance.

CSC: What's it been like for you, as a performer, to play this woman across three productions? You've spent more than a year with Margaret at this point.

KM: I think the most advantageous thing for me as an actress is that a lot of people know Margaret as the weird crazy mad lady in *Richard III* without knowing the story of *Henry VI* because those plays are so rarely performed or read in schools. She's often either cut entirely or played as "just crazy" without any explanation for her behavior. So as an actress, I get to experience the justification of how she's evolved to the point where she is in *Richard III*. Her curses are genuine, and they stem from experiences she's sorely felt, so that's the best part. Having known and seen the queen of strength that she once was empowers the woman who can now use curses with just as much bravado as she had when she ruled.

CSC: You mentioned she's frequently cut from *Richard III*. For people who are just seeing this one play, what do you think she brings to the play, even if you haven't seen the whole story play out?

KM: I hope that based on the past performances, even if the audience hasn't seen it, Margaret doesn't come off as just a crazy, mad old lady so much as there's a humanity that is built through the arc of her scenes. Storytelling-wise, she has this beautiful opportunity to tell everyone exactly what's going to happen to them, and then Shakespeare reminds us of that throughout the play – every time one of her curses come true, characters speak back to how Margaret was right. She receives her own kind of victory in seeing this new regime fall, just as she hopes it would. So I think it's fun for the audience to see her superworldly wishes come true.

CSC: Do you think Margaret is somehow tapped into something supernatural, that she can make these predictions and be so accurate? Or do you think she's just got a very keen understanding of how the world works, and what is inevitable?

KM: Well, I don't think she's the only one who can do this, because she was cursed by York before her downfall, so I think she really understands the power of these curses – religious prayers, really. She uses the word "curse," but she's asking for it from a holy source, a wrathful, vengeful god. She just goes Old Testament on all of them. I suppose you could say she is the inspiration for others in the power of curses, but it's something that she echoes from her own past.

CSC: *Richard III* is a history that we go back to a lot. If we're doing it in this time and place, what feels relevant to you?

KM: What I love about *Richard III* is how Shakespeare has written this story as a whirlwind of rise to political power. It's about a man who acts quickly and draws people along with him, and he plays advantage to advantage instead of playing a long game. He goes from plot to plot, and through his surety that he can win the throne, he takes his supporters along with him to the very end where they all realize that it's a terrible thing, he's killed everyone. I think in our current climate, our world is constructed in a way where you can't help but be swept up in how you choose to see the world, and so Richard's rise to power is still very relevant to how we, as people, can get swept along with things without trying to look more deeply. You can pick your side and get swept up in it – even social media is so finely tuned that you can pick a political side, and that's



Ms. Mengelkoch as Queen Margaret with Billy Chace as Suffolk in *Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 1*.

all you'll see. So Richard is really adept at that game, and he picks advisors who know how to manipulate the people around him so they will lift him to power.

CSC: Richard is pretty abhorrent, and yet lots of people love that character. Why is he so fascinating, even as he's doing these abominable things?

KM: I think there's something so charming in his own discovery of his successes, and his balance of self-loathing and self-loving. He has this genuine surprise at all he's able to get away with, and he shares his dissatisfaction and joys so honestly with us. The soliloquies keep us engaged with him more than any other character, and you have no choice but to ride the ride with him, even as you know he's going down a bad path.

CSC: In working on *Richard III*, what about this production has surprised or delighted you?

KM: I really love Billy Chace as Richard III. I think his work is just wonderful, and we got a nice taste of him in *Henry VI: The Wars of the Roses, Part 2* when Richard was a young man rising to this conqueror that we meet in his own play. Billy's work is humorous and evil, and Billy's work is honest and textually chewy. I think people will be really delighted by him.



Ms. Mengelkoch as Margaret with Sara Clark as Queen Elizabeth

CSC: One last question! Margaret has so many powerful lines in this. Do you have a favorite line you get to say in this?

KM: There's a few times when I get to cut down Queen Elizabeth, by calling her "poor shadow, painted queen, the presentation of but what I was." I love every time I cut her down - "vain flourish of my fortune" - reminding her that I was the better of us two. And Sara [Clark, playing Elizabeth] is a dear friend of mine, so it's really fun getting to play with her. And yet, there's a lovely moment when she takes away all her rage and venom and simply tells Elizabeth "the way to curse is to think thy babes sweeter than they were, and he that slew them fouler than he is" - it's a really honest moment.

Production photography provided by Mikki Schaffner Photography, except as indicated.