



Richard III

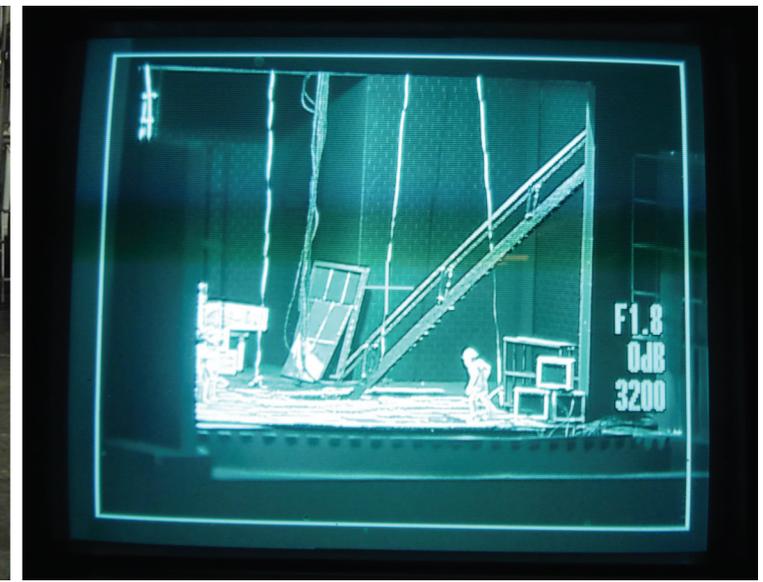
MATT GRAY

Theater has long been a virtual art form. Not only does the narrative and acting transport the audience to another place, but lighting, stage design, and special effects have long made stagecraft a central location for experiments in virtuality. In the Renaissance, linear perspective techniques were used to create illusionistic depth on shallow or flat stage backdrops. The late 19th century—anticipating the invention of cinema—produced experiments in projected imagery for theatrical audiences. For centuries, the theater was at the center of new applications of virtual technology. As part of the 2010 Wats:ON? Festival, Director Matt Gray toured guests backstage of his staging of Shakespeare's Richard III. Through the interaction of live actors with projectors, live camera feeds, mirrors, and pre-recorded imagery, this classic tragedy has been transformed into a contemporary essay in theatrical virtuality. —The Editors

On January 20th, 2009, I was sitting in the Phillip Chosky Theatre watching history happen. America's first Black President was being inaugurated. We at the School of Drama had erected a large screen to televise the event live to the campus community who could make it through the mountains of snow outside. No matter what anyone thought of the politics of this new president, the fact he was making history was unmistakable. As a community, and as a nation, we huddled together to watch a projected image validate our need for change. As soon as the ceremony was over, I was quietly ushered into the office of our Head, Peter Cooke. He had only recently been appointed, and I hadn't yet met him in person.

As soon as I sat down, he asked me if I was interested in Shakespeare's *Richard III*—“a modern, edgy Richard, Matt. Without velvet gowns or farthingales.” He continued on about why the production was relevant now, particularly on the day we had both witnessed the pomp and ceremony of a change of power in this country. After all, at its core, *Richard III* is a play about redefining a nation's identity—perhaps a bit like sitting in the Chosky Theatre fifteen minutes earlier, watching a new president be inaugurated on screen? However, my mind was stuck on the word I would keep at the centre of this production—“modern.” It can be a tyrannical word for an artist—and theatre is actually quite a slow art form, and what may be modern in the design phase





has become obsolete by opening night. How was I going to make this notoriously difficult play “modern”?

So, I started with the question many audience members ask before watching any Shakespeare play—“What’s it about?” The play’s title helps. But is that all there is to it? Is this a play *about* Richard? Surely he’s the “bad guy”? Who’s the “good guy”? In Theatrical Criticism (often called “Dramaturgy”), great lengths are gone to in order to best define the word “protagonist,” a much more acceptable term for academics rather than “good guy.” In order to identify the protagonist, we ask “which character changes the most throughout the play.” Hours of early rehearsals and design meetings confront this question, because to answer it is to unlock the entire production. And so when the design team, dramaturge and myself asked this question of *Richard III*, what became clear was that the protagonist of *Richard III* was not the man, but the country itself. England undergoes the greatest change, and so is our hero. The play is the last of a quartet of history plays about the War of the Roses, and like any great final chapter of a serial, *Richard III* must find a way to not only define the changes to England’s identity throughout the other plays, but also to celebrate those changes.

One of the principal ways Shakespeare does this is to fill the play with a cast of (what feels like) thousands. *Richard III* has the longest character list of any of his plays. And that alone is a clue—Shakespeare has the evil and unrelenting Richard at the centre, but spins around him the entire social order of the nation—soldiers, scribes, wives, children, lords, ladies, former queens, murderers. Shakespeare is presenting us with the nation. And Richard’s great talent is to manipulate that nation. The more we see him corrupt the nation, we are first compelled and shortly thereafter repulsed by the ease at which someone so ill-fitted for leadership ascends to the throne. It is a caution to the nation. So confronting a nation with its identity and its leaders seemed to be a key design choice Danielle Laubach (the set designer) wanted to focus on. Involving

the audience, confronting the audience and implicating the audience were all important qualities we needed from the set. Which meant our set had to not only service the characters of the play, but was itself a character, with a developmental “arc” throughout the play, changing and evolving by the end of the show.

The set Danielle designed began with our interest in Richard’s life as a soldier and his leadership style—he draws his opponents out of their entrenched positions and attacks. We wanted a similar sense of danger with our set, so we started by opening up the orchestra pit (falling 20 feet) and opened up the entire stage, rather than filling it with scenery. Instead, we favored one principle element—a 65-foot staircase, joining the catwalk to the stage. It was a bold metaphor of the ascent to power—steep, daunting and yet magnetic. And as Richard begins to ascend this staircase, we introduced the element of TV’s, TV cameras and televised images from a live camera—even the coronation of Richard is televised, rather than staged in front of the audience.

This led us back to that word Peter had mentioned “modern.” Specifically, what “modern” world did this play happen in? Were we in England? Were we in ancient England? Were we in America? I was keen on involving surveillance and surveillance technologies in the design, firstly because it is a defining element of *any* modern society. But the *other* reason was because surveillance technologies epitomize the leadership “style” of Richard. He is, at heart, a spy. He is not the bombastic hero of Henry V. He is not the religious zealot of Henry VI. He is a soldier, but an outcast one. He is a brother, but an outcast one. This “outcast” nature of his enables him to speak directly to the audience in soliloquy, confiding in us in lieu of any character in the play he could confide with. This implicates the audience and makes them complicit with his plans. It is the past (in the form of a play hundreds of years old) challenging the future (the live audience of 2010).

If we were going to use technology in the performance, however, we needed to be very specific with the instances of when it would work best in the action. Technology

was not our message in the play, but it was certainly an accelerant to the message. We honed in on Richard's rise as the facilitator to technology overtaking the nation. When we first meet Richard, media designer Riley Harmon used a machinima game engine hack to project onto the entire stage, filling it with digital reproductions of war, while Richard himself records his soliloquy on camera, which is also appearing on a TV monitor. I wanted this image of Richard appearing in a partly digital, partly imaginary and partly real world to get the audience to begin the play by asking "what is real"? By having a live Richard, filming himself and being shown on a TV furthers that question—"who is Richard?" And in the scene where Richard's sickly brother Edward attempts to reconcile his warring nation, we staged it in front of three TV cameras and a live mixing board. So Richard introduces himself to the entire nation, through the lens of a camera....

Our bravest use of technology in the production was in the sequence where a sleeping Richard is visited by the ghosts of all he has killed. This happens in a dream, and yet is an essential plot point the audience must invest in. I consulted my colleague Golan Levin (School of Art) about an inventive and "modern" solution to the scene. He suggested an infra-red tracking system connected to a projector that would project only onto the actors playing the ghosts. Crystal Gomes (the costume designer) would dress the actors in white, making them moving projecting screens for the infra red tracking system to find easily and project on.

The costumes that Crystal Gomes designed were very much the "thread" that joined all of the design and dramaturgical elements together. Crystal quickly arrived at a fantastic solution to the dilemma of "which world" we were in—she used the silhouettes of traditional Elizabethan costumes (the period the actors would have been dressed in when *Richard III* was first performed) and yet have modern cuts and fabrics that are the substance of that silhouette. She used modern patterns and fabric to make gowns that were Elizabethan in basis. This "bridging" of styles also reinforced our core message in the production that this was a nation trying to define itself, using both its' past and its' present.

Ultimately, this was an incredibly rewarding production to work on. Some artists get very antsy and damning when they heard I had neither chosen the play, nor the "modern" theme of the production. And yet, these directives were not so much artistic edicts I was forced to follow, but a path towards decisions we as an entire design team could call our own. Every choice made stemmed from a collectively agreed upon core of the play, based on the excellent dramaturgy of Corinna Archer. Each artist within the team was able to define their contribution to the production, while allowing other designer to make their own choices. Jordan Groves lighting, for example, beautifully and mysteriously illuminated Danielle's set, but not all at once. And Jordan's lighting had to merge with Riley's media elements. This was not a production for one artist to tyrannically imprint their vision, disregarding the artistic response of others. Instead, we were a collective of artists stumbling through this amazing play, trying to figure it out together.

