



King Cate is the real deal

By JAN HALLAM

ROYALTY becomes Cate Blanchett.

Playing a queen in 1998 made her a film star and this weekend, the crown was out of storage and back on her head when she took to the stage at His Majesty's Theatre as Richard II in the Sydney Theatre Company's ambitious epic *The War of the Roses*.

But it's not acting when it comes to Blanchett's mastery of her craft. She is the real deal, with an aura and assurance that hushes sycophants and critics alike.

Had she emerged on stage on Friday night bedraggled and scratching her nose, chances are she would have had the crowd cheering.

Blanchett was simply but immaculately turned out in high-waisted pants, which had

a whiff of her close friend Armani about them, when the curtain was lifted on her seated as Richard with his court around him.

This first half of part one of a near eight-hour cycle of eight of Shakespeare's history plays — from *Richard II* to *Richard III* — was remarkable for its lack of action. The drama swirls in a war of words as Richard's inaction to control his nobles isolates and destroys him.

Benedict Andrews, director and co-adaptor of the cycle with Tom Wright, creatively symbolises this fatal flaw by gold glitter building up around the motionless cast in drifts almost ankle high.

Blanchett's Richard captures his effete haughtiness and his blind faith in his right to rule, no matter how badly. Only when Bolingbroke (Robert Menzies) is at the head of an army of 20,000 of Richard's

nobles and subjects, does he put his mind to what kingship and ruling really mean — and it all comes too late.

If it ran rivers of gold in the first half, Richard's murder turns them to blood in the second.

Blanchett makes a cameo as Richard's bloodied ghost, reminding Bolingbroke (now crowned Henry IV) that his reign will be for ever cursed.

The second half encapsulates Henry IV (parts one and two) and Henry V and the world is given the enduring characters of Falstaff (a brilliant John Gaden), Prince Hal (an even more brilliant Ewen Leslie) and Henry Hotspur Percy (Luke Mullins).

The English crown has morphed into a political prize.

It's fabulous stuff and this great cast of actors brings these enormous ideas into the sharpest focus.



ROSE HUE: Cate Blanchett and Steve Le Marquand in *The War Of The Roses* .