



Riveting experience: Cate Blanchett delivers an engaging performance as Richard II in War of the Roses



**THEATRE**

The War of the Roses  
 (Parts I and II)  
 Sydney Theatre Company  
 His Majesty's Theatre  
 Review: Ron Banks

Shakespeare's history plays begin with a snowstorm of gold leaf falling on to the actors standing almost motionless on a bare stage. The only one seated is Cate Blanchett's Richard II, her blonde hair topped by a gold crown, the symbol of power and its potential for quelling disputes among the factions that compete to become part of the monarchy in this warring, worrisome sceptred isle.

As she brushes away the gold leaf that continues to fall, or blows a flake perched on her nose with a casual sniff, Blanchett's Richard is by turns an amused, casual and wanton king — a kittenish, coquettish creature who believes fervently in the divine right to rule.

The effect of the gold leaf falling on to the actors throughout the entire first half of Part I is mesmeric to the point you would swear the actors are levitating.

But this first part of eight hours of Shakespearian history is the story of Richard's fateful decision to banish two of his warring noblemen, a

decision that literally costs him his life. Richard is forced to abdicate and is then slaughtered as Bolingbroke sets out to take the crown and become Henry IV.

Blanchett's performance is certainly an engaging one, suitably imperious, sly and knowing and with a mocking edge that communicates itself with looks to the audience as if for approval. It is edgy, mysterious and wonderful, a fabulous introduction to the many hours of action and dialogue that are to follow.

Richard gives way to the familiar tale of Henry IV and the worries over his errant son Prince Hal, who spends far too much time boozing on sherry with the debauched Falstaff (John Gaden, who in this version by director Benedict Andrews is portrayed in a graphic homosexual encounter with his young pupil).

Gaden gives full weight, as it were, to the excesses of Falstaff, with Ewen Leslie's Prince Henry bringing all the pent-up energy of youthful excess to this key role.

By the end of Part I, Henry V's bare, warrior-like torso is literally dripping with fluids, symbolic of the blood-letting and gore that comes from waging war against the French.

The symbolism is powerful and a way of letting the stage imagery reinforce the poetic language of

Shakespeare.

In Part II, the bloodletting reaches extremes of horror and garish, gory detail. Henry VI is the boy king with a slew of relatives who must be slain by the would-be King Richard before he can seize the crown.

It is in this final scene that Pamela Rabe takes the stage by storm as Richard III, literally in a continuous snowstorm of falling black dirt that piles on the stage in a children's playground that again gives the optical illusion of moving, shaky ground.

It is a fine metaphor for what is happening to the former garden of England, now a place strewn with wild weeds.

The presence of Rabe and Blanchett as the two Richards lifts this production into another stratosphere of invention and theatricality, if that is possible given that so much invention and daring have gone into the other very fine performances.

In short, the War of the Roses is a visual and verbal dazzler — a sensory experience that is riveting to watch and rewarding to listen to closely.

The power of Shakespeare's language is still a marvel, but combined with this kind of audacious modern-dress theatricality it becomes unforgettable. The



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production's riskiness, its confrontational style are well worth the investment of time and emotion for those who love their Shakespeare.

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**The War of the Roses runs until March 12.**