

Blanchett's regal role a theatre treat

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Tour de force ... Cate Blanchett dominates the stage in *The War of the Roses*.

The War of the Roses

By William Shakespeare

Adapted by Tom Wright and Benedict Andrews

Directed by Benedict Andrews

The image of Cate Blanchett as King Richard II sitting front and centre of His Majesty's Theatre stage, gold flakes raining down on her and her assembled court, is one that will stay with Perth theatre goers for a long time.

It is also the first of many acts of cleverness that runs through Tom Wright and Benedict Andrews' adaptation of eight of Shakespeare's history plays into *The War of the Roses*.

There is no denying Blanchett's celebrity, or her talent, so why not put them front and centre? In this highly stylised opening act, Blanchett's King Richard faces the audience, not her fractious court, and by addressing us, makes us her subjects.

For most of this act, the actors hold their places, the gold flakes accumulating on their heads, faces and shoulders as the argument that will ultimately decide Richard's fate plays out between Henry Bolingbroke (an excellent Robert Menzies) and Thomas Mowbray (Steve Le Marquand).

But as Shakespeare told us "all that glisters is not gold" and all the regality and pomp of Richard's reign cannot protect him from the political ambitions of Bolingbroke.

When he deposes Richard the golden rain/reign suddenly stops and the flakes are swept up to make an uneasy bed for Richard in his imprisonment.

Blanchett is brilliant in the role of Richard. Her command of the language and her ability to convey the doubts and follies of the flawed king are a pleasure to watch. Her star power is used knowingly as she sends flirtatious looks to the audience – appealing to us to support her as she argues for the divine right of kings.

But this is not a one-star show, and in the second act, it is others who shine. In this act the set is bare but for electric guitarist Stefan Gregory playing a feedback-laden solo that underscores the guilt that King Henry IV (Robert Menzies) suffers at his role in King Richard's murder.

Menzies is excellent, but this act belongs to John Gaden in the role of Falstaff – Prince Henry's drinking mate and 'false father'. Fathers and sons is one of the themes that Wright and Andrews used to guide their decisions on what to include and what to exclude of the eight plays and in this act it is the troubled relationship between Henry IV and Prince Henry (Ewen Leslie) and the corrupting relationship between Prince Henry and Falstaff that is highlighted.

The great battle speeches of Henry V are deliberately underplayed here as though there is no glory in the violence that accompanies the crown.

The third act (part two, act one) condenses the three Henry VI plays and covers the power struggles and the many, many deaths in the child-King's reign. Marta Dusseldorp plays Queen Margaret as a vicious, violent manipulator whose relationship with the Earl of Suffolk (Steve Le Marquand) is portrayed as a snarling, biting dog fight.

In this set the stage is strewn with flowers, but England's garden – a Shakespearean metaphor deliberately highlighted here – is soon muddied with the blood and flour the actors spray over each other as one brutal murder after another is executed.

One of the highlight scenes is two ordinary soldiers of opposing sides lamenting they have killed their own father and their own son. Their grief and remorse as they rock back and forth in each others' arms is in sharp contrast to the lack of it in England's nobles.

After so much gore it is almost a relief when the first murder of the fourth act doesn't involve a single drop of fake blood. This act covers the machinations of 'misshapen Dick' – King Richard III - played with malevolent delight by Pamela Rabe.

As black confetti rains down on a children's playground Rabe's Richard helps his father, the Duke of York (John Gaden), to claim the throne, then proceeds to murder his brothers, his brothers' children and anyone else who stands between him and the crown.

Blanchett makes a welcome return to the stage here as Lady Anne, the widow of the Prince of Wales and Richard's sorrowful wife. The scenes between Rabe and Blanchett are mesmerising as two powerhouses of the Australian stage battle it out.

Having Blanchett's Richard II and Rabe's Richard III bookend the play is the final act of cleverness in a very clever production.

Eight hours of theatre is a challenge for most audiences, but the Sydney Theatre Company reward the audience with a production that is challenging, thought-provoking and carefully thought out from the casting to the set and lighting design to the music. It is well worth the effort.