



In the garden of gore and evil

■ THEATRE

THE WAR OF THE ROSES

Sydney Theatre Company,
 Sydney Theatre, January 14.
 Until February 14.
 Reviewed by Bryce Hallett

THE director Benedict Andrews's stark and disquieting production of Shakespeare's history plays begins with the glistening spectacle of cascading gold and comes to rest in an ominous, steel-grey children's playground.

The rise-and-fall cycle of inheritance, greed, back-stabbing connivance and eye-for-an-eye warmongering culminates in the blood-and-bone wasteland glimpsed by Cate Blanchett's commanding and capricious Richard II in the first part of Act I. In a moment of sour-sweet reverie about graves, worms and epitaphs, the diminished, cornered ruler talks of writing with "rainy eyes ... sorrow on the bosom of the earth" and of "the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king".

The War Of The Roses is performed on a mostly bare stage in two parts lasting about seven hours. Eight of Shakespeare's history plays, including *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, have been adapted by Tom Wright and Andrews in a

version that is lucid, immediate and bright. It is far less truncated and populist than the Bell Shakespeare Company account of 2005.

The War Of The Roses is essentially a star-vehicle for Blanchett and for Robert Menzies as Henry Bolingbroke, later King Henry IV. It is a rare pleasure to see them together on stage. Although

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the unsentimental, challenging production salutes the soon-to-be-disbanded STC Actors Company, it emerges less as an ensemble piece than as a showcase for two of its best-known members, John Gaden, who is especially memorable as a decadently indulgent Falstaff, and Pamela Rabe, who crowns the play as the loveless, wickedly gleeful and juvenile Richard III. She elicits many a laugh for her monstrous swagger and shamelessly diabolical desires, and relishes a little overkill.

But back to Blanchett. Her melodious voice, adaptability, elegance and ease make for a great performance, not only as the spiteful, manically sly and eloquent Richard II but as the young Prince Edwards's widow, Lady Anne, who falls prey to Richard III's dubious charms and hangs herself from a swing. Her stage presence is such that audiences are sure to miss her in the middle two acts.

Despite the austerity and drabness, Andrews gives each act a different flavour and pulse. The

glorious ceremonial stillness is shattered and reduced to small piles of gold rubble; a near-empty, hard-edged realm that continues in the second act is underscored by the guitarist Stefan Gregory's rising and falling music. It is a long solo and it is surprisingly effective as Menzies holds court amid duplicity and quarrels while war continues in Scotland and Wales. Menzies excels at wringing out paranoia and unease while Luke Mullins, a resourceful actor, contributes an engaging performance as Hotspur. Ewen Leslie and Eden Falk equally impress.

The second instalment is bloody and bold. The fighting between the House of Lancaster, led by Falk's Henry VI and the House of York – with Gaden as its leader, Richard, Duke of York – erupts in vengeance. The actors spit water the colour of blood at one another and throw flour bombs in a neatly contained rose-garden-cum-killing-field. It is chilling yet childlike. The music whips the viciousness up into a partying lather.

Andrews's spare production celebrates the splendour and poetry of Shakespeare, and affirms the imagination. It leaves us to ponder the nature of good leadership, the abdication of responsibility, and lessons being perilously ignored. Cold and calculating, *The War Of The Roses* speaks of the hell created when there is an absence of love.



Lessons of history ... Cate Blanchett wears "the hollow crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king". Photo: Tania Kelley