



Blood flows freely in Bard history lesson

THEATRE

The War of the Roses

Adapted from Shakespeare by Tom Wright and Benedict Andrews. Sydney Theatre Company. Part 1 and Part 2, Sydney Theatre, January 14. Tickets: \$120-\$150. Bookings: (02) 9250 1777. Until February 14. Perth International Arts Festival, His Majesty's Theatre, February 27-March 12.

FROM the stunning opening, with gold filling the air and falling continuously on the luxurious court of Richard II, to the grim conclusion, with the dead lying in a bleak field, this epic story of warfare and civilisation carries us, completely gripped, through eight hours of superb theatre.

There are no battle scenes in Tom Wright and Benedict Andrews's powerful and concise condensation of the eight plays that tell the story, just a relentless series of one-on-one killings. The violence of sovereignty and ambition is here always enacted on the individual human body.

The gold in Act I (*Richard II*) falls on a vast open stage with still figures standing around the pale white figure of the king. Cate Blanchett, as Richard, is imperious, but there is a fragility there (betrayed in a reticence of the body as the events pile up) and almost a petulance as it gradually becomes clear he is about to lose everything. Blanchett's superb voice, with its extraordinary range of tones and registers, moves from regality, through confusion, to the magnificent self-doubt of the final speeches. The first crime of the new regime is his murder.

The second act conflates the two parts of *Henry IV* with *Henry V*: the story of the rebellious Prince Hal, his troubled relationship with his father Henry IV (Robert Menzies) and his eventual reformation, here deeply compromised by the expectation of the violence to come.

Ewen Leslie's Prince is feverish and twitchy, as if his dissolute ways had already ruined his young body. What in conventional productions are riotous tavern scenes — highly curtailed here with a bit of hysterical drunkenness and a shocking scene with Falstaff (John Gaden) — contain no humour at all.

In an astonishing end to this act, the whole of *Henry V* — when Hal, now king, defeats the French in what is supposed to be the most patriotically heroic of all English dramas — is told in a series of speeches in front of a lavish half-curtain, with Henry emerging drenched in honey, then in pitch, then in blood. The war rages somewhere behind.

Part 2, Act I conflates the three *Henry VI* plays: the bloody series of killings as the Lancasters and the Yorks conduct their futile conflicts, betrayals and slaughters — futile because they are all going to die, as has been foretold in Part I.

This act is set in a field of fallen flowers, including the red and white roses that give the epic its title. The style is almost, but not quite, comic. An electronic news banner announces the scenes. We need this to guide us through the tortuous reversals of the wars.

The killings are all marked by a spraying of blood from the mouths of the killers, and then a shower of white powder. The effect is cumulatively eerie: the banality of death represented by the endless little plastic bottles of fake blood and the big bag of flour the actors use to perform these effects. By the end of the act the field of flowers is a bloody red and white mess.

On the York side in all this bloodshed there is the gawky figure of Richard, the most gormless of the gang of York kids. This, of course, is the central figure of the final act, *Richard III*, played by Pamela Rabe.

This act opens with what appears to be light snow falling on a children's playground. As in the opening act it falls throughout, until just before the end, but as the light changes it starts to look more like falling ash, and as it settles over the corpses of Richard's many victims, it accumulates like the mud of a battlefield.

The playground is eventually covered over with funereal drapes. Two of the children playing in it are the young princes in the Tower whom Richard murders.

A third is supposedly the daughter of one of the murdered Yorks, but she is on stage for the entire act, a silent and oddly complicit young witness to the collapse of a world.

Rabe as Richard prowls these terrible scenes, gloriously and comically exultant in evil, but also, like a child, wickedly mischievous and, towards the end, suddenly frightened. It is a magnificent performance.

The great design team is Robert Cousins, Alice Babidge, Nick Schlieper and Max Lyandvert. This is the final production by the STC Actors Company before it is disbanded, and all the cast deserve praise. I have never tired of watching them perform together.

But the triumph of this production is Wright and Andrews's extraordinary vision of these plays. It takes us from a golden age to a new era of grey ash and mud: something to ponder in the 21st century.

John McCallum





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Stunning range: Pamela Rabe as Richard III
in *The War of the Roses*