

Seana's View of PLAYING RICHARD III

I am about to play Shakespeare's Richard III at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival this season. For any actor, this is a daunting task. It has been called "the character actor's Hamlet." It is the second largest Shakespearean role, and one that has fascinated people for centuries. He is a villain, a warrior and for a short spell, a king. And he is a he, while I am a she.

Gender Bending

We have all heard of, and some of us have seen, female Hamlets. Sarah Bernhardt had him in her repertoire for years. Kelly Fox played him a few years back. About 20 years ago, Fiona Shaw played Richard II. Helen Mirren recently committed her Prospera to film. Pat Hamilton has played King Lear. There have been female Ariels and Pucks.

At the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, women have played roles usu-

ally played by men: Charmion King played Mistress Quince in *A Midsummer's Dream*; Lucy Peacock played a female Grumio in *The Taming of the Shrew*; I played the Chorus in *Henry V*. Lords have been changed to ladies, and many a young woman has donned the gear of a soldier or page. And of course, all of Shakespeare's roles, including females, were originally played by males. So this gender bending is not new.

That being said, it is unusual. At Stratford, a woman has never played one of the great Shakespearean male roles. Years ago, Richard Monette once approached me to be one of six Hamlets, four males and two females. I did not see myself as a Hamlet. I told Richard "I can't see myself transforming into a virile young man grieving for his father. Now Richard III, maybe..."

One morning I came out of the shower with my hair flat and scrag-

gly over my face and my husband, Miles Potter, who also happens to be my best collaborator and favourite director, looked at me and said "You could pass for Olivier as Richard III." I was not offended, but intrigued. Miles and I began to talk about my playing Richard.

Why Richard?

Over the years, I have worked with students and actors on monologues and scenes and had marvelled at the mind of Richard. For years I had approached various artistic directors about playing a male role, if only to experience Shakespeare's writing for a male mind. I once asked to play Jacques in *As You Like It*, and the Fool in *Lear*, both parts that do not rely on their sexuality. But no director cast me.

Then, in a discussion with Stratford's artistic director Des McNuff about upcoming seasons, Miles and I suggested *Richard III*. Des was intrigued, even excited. Finally, our

Richard III was part of the 2011 festival line-up.

Playing Richard

And now, I have to play Richard. I am going to play him as a man. He may be a strange man, he may be an effeminate man, he may be a weak man.

Someone asked me how I can play him as a male, since I'm not big and tall? Neither was the real Richard. He was a small man. I know men more petite than I. But he is a warrior, you may say. So are women in our armed forces. This will be Seana McKenna's Richard, no more, no less. I have no idea what that will turn out to be. That terrifies and thrills me.

My being a woman can add to Richard's "otherness." Shakespeare's Richard is a "hunchback." Unfortunately, in our society we often neuter those with physical disabilities. We see them as sexually invisible. We define them by their "handicap." We see the wheelchair first. We underestimate them. I think many in the court underestimate Richard. I think many underestimate women.

Yet evil knows no gender. Shakespeare's Richard III is evil. I see him as an actor, someone pretending to be something he is not, to gain power. He is without empathy. He pretends to be humane. It is no accident his enemies refer to him as an animal, calling him a dog, a spider, a hog, a "bunch-backed toad." He is an "it."

After 30 years in the theatre, the undeniable thing I can bring to the character of Richard is my experience, not as a male, but as an actor. I look forward to the moment in rehearsal when I say "Ah, there he is." **EV**

The award-winning Seana McKenna is playing Richard III and the solo character in Shakespeare's Will this season at Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Both productions are directed by Miles Potter.

Seana McKenna as Richard III.

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