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Crackerjack

Classic play crammed with talent

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Crackerjack rating: 9 / 10.

AFTER Hamlet, Richard III is the longest of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Thankfully the production by Theatre Raconteurs at the Alma Tavern kept us all on the edge of our seats with its tale of betrayal, deceit and death.

Richard, played brilliantly by Rob Benson, was every inch the twisted, bitter Duke who longs to be King and craftily dispatches everyone in his path.

In fact I was reminded of evil Archie in Eastenders as Benson "seems a saint but plays the devil" by switching loyalties to get what he wants before unveiling his true self to the audience.

Every time he flashed his icy blue eyes our way, a frost seemed to descend. I loved him. Dressed in a suit with just one rather sinister black leather glove, Richard should have been a hideous hunchback — "Dogs bark at me when I pass" — but instead wore a built-up shoe which caused him to limp like Herr Flick. He also bore a painted birthmark on his face.

The rest of the characters donned 1920s-looking costume — no ruffs or muffs here.

Just how they got the 19-strong cast to fit onto the tiny stage at the Alma was anyone's guess but methinks some spectacular set design, that saw a table of food turned into a dead body, made it work.

The action opened on a party scene, complete with cheese and pineapple and Twiglet offerings.

Edward IV sits on the throne looking ill, not long for this world.

Fast forward through quite an impressive death toll of siblings and kings and Richard has what he wants, the crown. But you can never be that horrid without getting your just deserts.

Support comes from the excellent Tony Rowlands as Buckingham and Matthew Roberton as Hastings, both actors former members of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Three hours and two breaks flew by. Your kingdom for a ticket.

AMY OLIVER