

Venue

Review Richard III**Date:** 04.12.2009

Theatre Raconteurs' 'Richard III' is pacy, effervescent, populous, and nicely irreverent; it also captures brilliantly the tight knots of intrigue and suspicion in Shakespeare's tale, in which one Machiavellian eccentric wheedles and bludgeons his way to the throne. The Raconteurs also make the very best of the Alma's space: flooding the stage with characters and using simple, atmospheric tricks with staging and sound, this 'Richard' effortlessly converts the tiny space into battlefield or cathedral - while losing none of the theatre's unique, whites-of-her-eyes intimacy. The cast of 20 is solid virtually throughout, and contains a few gems. Happily, Rob Benson's Richard is one of them. Sickly, misanthropic, quick-witted, louche, camp, fastidious - he's forced by his withered arm and unprepossessing demeanour to live at the court's margins, and he clearly revels in his outsider role. Tony Rowlands excels as Buckingham, Richard's right-hand man - urbane and conniving, a Mandelsonian spin guru. Niki Felstead's Queen Elizabeth exudes regal hauteur, even in the blackest moments of Richard's emotional torture. The two Princes are played by girls (Amy Clifton and Kitty Randle) angelic, high-voiced creatures in prep-school outfits, making their eventual death in the Tower all the more haunting. And there are fine touches of mordant humour throughout, leavening what can be a heavy evening's lesson in late Mediaeval bloodlust. Adam Young is an awkward, weasly, Cockney urchin of a contract killer; a finger buffet is hastily draped with a bloody sheet to become a corpse. The final battle at Bosworth, where Richard is ousted by the armies of good young Richmond and the history of England lurches off in a new direction, is beautifully presented: there's an eerie quietness about the night before battle. Everywhere there is agility, modernity, a nice touch of frivolity and a lack of pompousness or grandstanding. Rich, inventive, atmospheric stuff.



Steve Wright