

REVIEW: Riverside's gripping 'Richard III' chillingly good

By Rob Cline, Freelance writer – June 21, 2009

IOWA CITY — Ambitious and complicated: Both words describe Richard III the character and “Richard III” the play.

The words evil and good, however, must be ascribed separately. For while evil describes the character, good describes Riverside Theatre's production of Shakespeare's history play. Performed for a fairly small crowd on opening night at the outdoor stage in Lower City Park, the dramatic tale of intrigue and betrayal was almost wholly satisfying.

Directed by Kristin Horton, Dennis Fox stars as the conniving and charming Richard, a man determined to rule England no matter the cost and despite his deformity. Fox — who wears a leg brace and keeps one hand curled behind his back — navigates the changes in tone and loyalty that mark his troubled character, commanding the stage whether wheedling or raging.

He is supported by a cast that offers many fine performances. Saren Nofs-Snyder chillingly hurls curses as the deposed Queen Margaret. Steve Cardamone movingly relates a haunting dream as George, Richard's doomed brother. Patrick DuLaney resolutely accepts betrayal as William, Lord Hastings, Richard's discarded ally. Mallory Portnoy as Lady Anne wholeheartedly rebukes Richard as a devil even while succumbing to his charms. Martin Andrews rousingly calls his troops to arms as Henry Tudor.

Tim Budd delivers an excellent performance as the Duke of Buckingham, who is determined to make Richard king in hope of personal gain. Fox and Budd are outstanding together both as allies and as antagonists.

The true highlight of the performance is the nightmare sequence late in the play that finds the ghosts of people he has murdered haunting Richard just before he goes into battle. Simply yet brilliantly executed, the scene is among the most memorable ever staged in the Shakespeare Festival's 10 seasons.

The battle that follows is less compelling, however.

Because the play's action has been moved to the early 20th century — facilitating wonderful costumes by Colleen Combs McConegle — the clash features guns rather than swords, though Richard takes the field armed with only sharpened steel. As he shouts out the famous line, “My kingdom for a horse!” one cannot help but reflect that a gun would serve him far better.

Nevertheless, “Richard III” is gripping theater, and it is a credit to the cast and director that the lengthy production — two hours and 50 minutes, including intermission — never drags and never flirts with incomprehensibility despite its knotty plot.