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## **“But who here is not a villain?": *Richard III* at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow**

Directed by Avtandil Varsimashvili  
Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow  
Performance dates: October 7, 2017-present

Reviewed by NATALIA KHOMENKO

Avtandil Varsimashvili's modern-dress *Richard III* unfolds on a minimalistic stage bisected diagonally by a dais-cum-table constructed from interconnected boxes, with a tower-like platform to one side, and full moon presiding over the events. The actors perform in white face paint, eyes starkly outlined in black; their make-up is progressively smudged throughout the performance, blurring into distorted ghost faces by the final scenes. This production uses the text of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in Russian translation, with some textual emendations, cutting and reassigning lines as demanded by the director's vision. The play is re-imagined in two distinct ways: as an exploration of how brutally destructive political power can become when allowed to grow entirely unchecked, and as a domestic tragedy of familial love sacrificed to ambition. Both intensely compelling, these readings require significant changes to the characters and plot, and ultimately pull the play in different directions, weakening its dramatic form.

Most strikingly, Varsimashvili's production disposes with the Tudor historiographical vision of Shakespeare's play, in which Richard's reach is always limited – first by the mute resistance of the City, and eventually by Richmond, the future progenitor of Elizabeth I. Richmond, a strong opponent to Richard and his triumphant successor in Shakespeare's play, does not even make it onto the program at the Vakhtangov. Along with Richmond vanishes the understanding, made especially clear in the play's concluding speech, that England has now entered a golden age of peace, healing, and fertility. There is a strong sense in Varsimashvili's production that, rather than arriving at a resolution, the action of *Richard III* simply enters a new cycle of political power struggle. This cyclicity is further underscored when, in its concluding scene, the production returns to the same image with which it had started: a coronation tableau in the back, and two watchful men in grey trench coats, whom we now know to be Stanley and Brackenbury, looming downstage. Neither actively villainous nor subversive (Stanley's function as Queen Elizabeth's messenger and the fact of his son being kept hostage are both omitted), the two men are ready to back up the next person in power, supporting anything from political performance to assassination. The dynamic of this eerie visual, with two secondary characters taking over the stage, prompts the audience to consider the role of the other characters in bringing Richard to the throne and supporting his dictatorial reign.

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Throughout, we see characters actively (and sometimes gleefully) participating in Richard's political performance. Buckingham in particular emerges as someone who derives personal pleasure from operating in a world governed by brute force alone while maintaining a show of respecting the law and the church. We see this in Varsimashvili's treatment of Richard and Buckingham's meeting with the Mayor of London to justify their hasty execution of Hastings. Here, the character of the Mayor is dropped altogether, and some of his lines are redistributed to the Cardinal, producing a tension between secular and religious power that is painfully recognizable in present-day Russia. In this scene, Buckingham acts as Richard's thug, deploying interrogation-room techniques to secure loyalty. In response to the Cardinal's initial sneering doubt at Hastings' purported nefarious intentions, Richard and Buckingham embark on a chilling routine of physical intimidation, pushing and striking down the Cardinal, and methodically tearing off his vestments – all the while calmly urging him to recognize the justice of Hastings' death. This version of the scene leaves absolutely no room for doubt as to the effect of their persuasion: the terrified Cardinal, stripped to the waist and shivering on his knees, is ready to agree to anything in order to avoid being identified as the next traitor. At his agreement, Buckingham grows startlingly solicitous – helping the Cardinal to his feet, placing the balled-up vestments into his arms, insisting on kissing his hand – and then violently and unceremoniously drives him off the stage. This scene points to an absence of significant checks on Richard's growing influence in this production, as the Church is terrorized into supporting his political murder, and the City, in the absence of the Mayor character, offers no resistance.

Varsimashvili's production also eliminates all references to the citizens' open opposition to the usurpation, and even hints at the possibility of their support, in staging Richard's appearance to the crowd at the end of Act 3. In this scene, the audience is allowed a peek in the wings of Richard's political theatre: a fence (flipped-up box lids) runs along the stage, hiding the would-be king's clique from the commoners presumably gathered on the other side. Richard himself stands on an elevated dais to the left of the stage, visible to everyone, and here without the need to be physically propped up by churchmen. In a brilliantly metatheatrical moment, as Buckingham is pleading with the Duke to accede to the throne, we can observe his team passing the time until the inevitable conclusion. The crouched-down Cardinal is already waiting with the crown at the ready, and Brackenbury, openly bored with the lengthy proceedings, is taking this opportunity to have a snack while his assistance is not needed. The citizens' presence is signalled only by the St. George's Cross flags, waved high enough to be seen over the fence, and by the shouts in support of Richard. Is it only Buckingham's plants who are cheering? The speaker-amplified roar of the crowd seems to suggest otherwise. Unable to see behind the fence, anxious to have a strong leader, the citizens could potentially be wholeheartedly joining in on this quasi-election of an only candidate.

Another unlikely source of support in this production is Lady Anne. Despite her initial resistance, she transforms not only into Richard's devoted lover but also into his enthusiastic partner in political crime as soon as he puts a ring on

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her finger. This Anne, who stops periodically in the subsequent scenes to gaze at her own beringed finger in mute delight, would have been a fitting target for Richard's contempt. And yet for most of the production theirs remains a loving, harmonious, and physically affectionate union. She listens, amused, as her husband plots the murders of the young princes (not on the list of characters), and the removal of Hastings; she sits to the side of the stage during the council scene, silently watching and taking careful notes. As Hastings' head is brought in, Anne and Richard re-enact a touching homemaking mime: he, the caring husband, tries to mount the head in different spots around the stage, while she, the discerning wife, watches thoughtfully and approvingly, motioning for adjustments. It is only when Richard removes Anne's crown, regretfully announces the politically necessary decision to marry his niece, and attacks her with a knife that she finally gives voice to some of her conventionally familiar railing in a dying speech.

Anne's role as a willing accessory points to a larger argument of the production: that almost every character is implicated in Richard's rise to dictatorial power, through actively assisting or at least silently acquiescing. Some characters fall in with Richard's plans because they are drawn by the lure of political influence and potential control, while others passively let these plans proceed. To maintain this vision, the production excises nearly every instance of female resistance. Margaret's role is reduced to the initial curse-shrieking appearance. The Duchess of York is a nearly silent character, no longer speaking indignantly with Elizabeth and Anne about her son's intrigues. In fact, all instances of the women speaking among themselves have disappeared. In her final encounter with Richard, Elizabeth, previously set up as a power-hungry consort, appears in manacles, which she is dragging with visible difficulty. Her objections against the Richard's plan to marry his niece seem token, and easily quelled with a promise of influence restored. Walking off the stage, Elizabeth exudes defeat – and painful hope that one more compromise might yet fix her desperate situation; the omission of the subsequent message she sends to Richmond only serves to reinforce the impression that she is ready to deal.

At the same time, Richard's love marriage to Anne, and his need to sacrifice their marriage to strengthen his position, brings to the foreground his role as the protagonist of a domestic tragedy. Varsimashvili's production downplays Richard's dehumanizing disfigurement: while limping and indicating potential spinal problems through his posture, this Richard is both physically robust and able to form emotional connections. His tragedy lies in considering his loved ones expendable when political gains are at stake, and in the erosive loneliness and despair that follow on the heels of his pragmatic decisions. Richard's emotional bonds with his family are made clear as early as the initial meeting with Clarence being led to prison, when, just before parting, he involves his brother in a musical duet. As Richard pretends to play an imaginary keyboard, Clarence, after some hesitation, joins in with an imaginary violin, in what reads as a reference to their childhood together. At this point in the play, Richard's performance can be still interpreted as a cynical jab at his brother's trust in him. But as the play progresses, we see that this Richard feels genuine affection for his family and is grieved by their deaths. A torturous sense of loss is apparent when, after Anne's death in his

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arms, Richard attempts to re-enact their earlier homemaking sketch, this time with Anne's body as an unwieldy prop, and no partner to advise him on the most advantageous placement. Several unsuccessful tries later, he manages to sit the dead Anne at the table and plays an imaginary keyboard, echoing the earlier scene with Clarence, in a grotesque parody of a quiet family evening.

Despite forming strong emotion bonds with other characters, Varsimashvili's Richard does not hesitate to do away with them when politically expedient. In fact, he is now implicated in some additional family-member deaths. It is strongly hinted that he is involved in Edward's demise, with the death blow delivered by Tyrrell (whom Richard, here, has hired to murder Clarence and continues to employ, as the perfect dispassionate political executioner, throughout the production). Finally, we see Richard killing the Duchess of York on stage in a silent and poignant mime of familial love and hate: they embrace and kiss; she attempts to choke him and then slowly dances away from him, unfolding loop after loop of rope that leads to the noose on her neck. Her son, tearfully, holds on to the other end of the rope.

Ultimately, Varsimashvili's production of *Richard III* depicts the protagonist less as a seductive sociopath and more as a man whose ambition finds no constraints in the unprincipled world around him and grows unchecked, until eating away all he has ever held dear and leaving him with no will to exist. This Richard explicitly attributes his crimes to the influence of his society, exclaiming in the revised version of his dream monologue: "Yes, I am a villain, but who here is not a villain? I'm simply honest..." Paradoxically, his tragedy lies precisely in this perfectly sustained villainous honesty. By the end of the play, he has reached the pinnacle of power (having removed all enemies, and seemingly secured a union with Princess Elizabeth), but feels profoundly abandoned by everyone. As the ghosts wander the stage at will throughout the second half of the play, Richard spends a great deal of time crawling about and calling out to them piteously in an unfortunately repetitious display of regret. The scene leading up to his death takes place not on the battlefield but at a dinner party held by all those murdered in the course of the play. The dead coldly reject Richard's attempts to join them, and eventually walk away from him, while the lonely king stretches on the table and succumbs to his spiritual malady. This somewhat simplistic resolution makes for an uneasy fit with the vibrancy of the earlier political satire, reducing the production to an argument that even dictators should take care not to kill everyone, or they will literally die of loneliness (but another dictator will always come along).

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