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Richard III - Notes

Director Richard Loncraine

Producers Lisa Katselas Pare, Stephen Bayly

Written by Ian McKellen, from the play by William Shakespeare

Music Trevor Jones

Cinematography Peter Biziou

Editor Paul Green

Cast: Ian McKellen (Richard III) Jim Broadbent (Buckingham) John Wood (Edward IV) Annette Bening (Queen Elizabeth) Nigel Hawthorne (Clarence) Maggie Smith (Duchess of York) Robert Downey Jnr. (Rivers) Jim Carter (Hastings) Kirsten Scott Thomas (Lady Anne) Edward Hardwicke (Stanley) Tim McInnerny (Catesby) Dominic West (Richmond) Adrian Dunbar (Tyrell)

1995/UK/USA/103 minutes/15

‘Playful’ is an unlikely word with which to describe a Shakespeare film, especially one in which the protagonist is a multiple murderer, but here it seems appropriate. Ian McKellen, repeating a role he played at the National Theatre in 1992, joined forces with film and TV veteran Richard Loncraine to create a film that combines verbal dexterity with constant visual invention.

Like the stage production, directed by Richard Eyre, the film locates the action in an alternative British 1930s, with Richard evoking the Fascist leader Oswald Mosley, or an imaginary member of the House of Windsor, a psychopathic third brother for a womanizing Edward and an introverted George. McKellen, adding another to his portrayals of Shakespeare’s peacetime soldiers (also including Macbeth, Coriolanus, and Iago) de-emphasises the character’s

physical disability; taking a cue from his self-reference as ‘scarce half made-up’, he gives Richard a weakened left side. This Richard’s malevolence comes not from his physique, but from people’s reactions to it; he learnt to hate from his Queen Mary-like mother (Maggie Smith).

The film adds the directorial skills of Richard Loncraine – his debut *Slade in Flame* (1975) is arguably the best rock movie made by a British director (Richard Lester, director of *A Hard Day’s Night*, is an American). Loncraine, neither a Shakespearean nor a theatregoer, is responsible for some of the film’s most striking visual sequences, including the death of Robert Downey Jnr’s Earl Rivers, which uses the same method as that of Kevin Bacon in *Friday the 13th* (1980).

The film version develops the period setting. In Shakespeare (and history) the Woodvilles, Edward IV’s in-laws, are outsiders to the London court: McKellen and Loncraine wittily reimagine them as American, with Annette Bening’s Elizabeth inevitably suggesting Wallis Simpson. At times the parallels are more international: Jim Broadbent’s Buckingham, with his Himmler glasses and Goering smile, puts us in mind of Hitler, with whom this Richard shares a sweet tooth and a fondness for early morning meetings.

McKellen and Loncraine’s method is epitomized in the opening sequence. A small budget is used skillfully, with the Wars of the Roses evoked by a single interior set (recycled from a BBC period drama). Richard is introduced in a gas mask, his heavy breathing providing a subliminal introduction to the iambic pentameter. A jazz song, played by a Glenn Miller/Henry Hall lookalike, with lyrics by Christopher Marlowe, takes us into the world of Dennis Potter (incidentally, look out for the initials on the music stands), as the characters’ relationships and attitudes are set up in a series of visual vignettes, so that we know who everybody is before the first ‘Now’ of Richard’s opening speech.

McKellen recasts this speech as a public oration – again, easing in an audience unused to the formal language - before switching to a gents’ toilet, where Richard goes into soliloquy, catching sight of the camera

(and therefore, the audience) in a mirror. Here, McKellen's performance echoes that of Laurence Olivier, whose 1955 Richard had a similarly flirtatious relationship with the camera, at one point even beckoning it closer.

At times, the Shakespeare film that this most resembles is the Vincent Price horror movie *Theatre of Blood*; both feature a series of imaginative deaths, a charismatic, role-playing protagonist, and an eclectic collection of London locations. Loncraine made an early decision not to use iconic buildings like Buckingham Palace and Downing Street, so the film takes place in an alternative geography of decayed industrial and imperial grandeur – Battersea Power Station, St. Pancras Chambers (also the location, around the same time, of the Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' video), and Strawberry Hill, home of the Gothic novelist Horace Walpole.

Like *Theatre of Blood*'s Edmund Lionheart, this Richard dies in a conflagration and Lucifer-like fall, with Loncraine adding an Al Jolson song that echoes James Cagney's dying cry of 'Top of the world, ma!' from *White Heat* (1949). As Richmond takes over the throne (and Richard's relationship with the camera), the film reminds us of the time of its making, towards the end of the John Major government; if the story began with a winter of discontent, it ends with us questioning whether, under the new regime, things really can only get better.

David Cottis