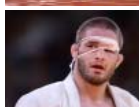




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'Richard III' goes to prisons, senior centers

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This Monday, July 30, 2012 photo shows actor Ron Cephas Jones playing Richard III in a performance of the Shakespeare play at the Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, N.Y. The Public Theater's stripped down production, performed by a nine-member cast that play some 20 roles, has made more than 15 stops across the city, from a recreation center on Staten Island to a facility for homeless adults with mental illness in Manhattan. (AP Photo/Mark Kennedy) (Mark Kennedy)

BEDFORD HILLS, N.Y. — It got a standing ovation. Then again, it was a captive audience.

The hair-raising tale of William Shakespeare's "Richard III" was performed this week for about 75 inmates at the Taconic Correctional Facility, leaving many wide-eyed spectators in the medium-security women's prison.

"It was phenomenal," said 23-year-old Lorraine Bennett, serving time for attempted robbery. Another prisoner, Jessica Lazore, 29, convicted of

vehicular manslaughter, gave it a thumbs up: "I actually think I would pick up the play."

Mission accomplished for The Public Theater, which is wrapping up a three-week tour of its "Richard III" after more than 15 stops across New York City and surrounding areas, including a recreation center on Staten Island and an army base in Brooklyn to Rikers Island prison in Queens and a facility for homeless adults with mental illness in Manhattan.

Ron Cephas Jones, who plays the physically deformed title monarch with a brace on his left leg and a fingerless glove on his left hand, leads a stripped-down production performed by a nine-member cast that plays some 20 roles.

There are no lights, no makeup, no backstage and only a few props — a mirror, a bedsheet, a few metal folding chairs, coils of rope, five wooden boxes and a few wooden sticks that double for swords.

"There's nothing to hide behind," said Suzanne Bertish, a former member of the Royal Shakespeare Company who plays three characters in "Richard III," including Queen Margaret. "In one way, it's very liberating. But it does mean you have to concentrate 110 percent."

The mobile Shakespeare unit is a reinvention of a push in the late 1950s by legendary theatrical producer Joseph Papp to bring Shakespeare to the masses, which evolved into the New York Shakespeare Festival and ultimately became The Public Theater.

Exposing Shakespeare's power and relevance by taking his work to new audiences — from homeless shelters to prisons — has always been a core mission, said Oskar Eustis, the Public's artistic director.

"If our thesis is true that Shakespeare really is for everybody and that Shakespeare can be a binding force for society, these are the places we should be taking it," said Eustis.

He got a reminder of the Bard's genius while watching the troupe perform at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, the state's largest maximum-security prison for women, across the street from Taconic. The audience, he said, watched with rapt concentration. And it was, by definition, a tough crowd.

"You could tell they cared about issues of betrayal and the seeking of power over everything else. They were following that with absolute attention, absolute understanding," he said. "It's invigorating because you feel the truth of the proposition that Shakespeare really can speak to everybody."

The production, directed by Amanda Dehnert, lasts about 90 minutes without intermission, which has meant sections of the play have been excised and characters dropped. It is taut, almost guerrilla theater in which the actors sit among the audience between scenes and hisses are welcome.

The costumes are minimal, with heavy use of leather jackets and peacoats. The actors often must bellow over air conditioners and Alex Hernandez, who plays Richmond, Prince Edward and Lord Rivers, plays the violin.

The result is a blistering, funny and inventive production that arrives at the Public's downtown home from Aug. 6-25 after its unorthodox tour ends this week.

At the Taconic prison, inmates dressed in green jumpsuits fanned themselves with the show's programs in a sweltering common room but none wandered away as the play unwound. The actors had to perform over the crackle of corrections officers' radios.

"Who knows what impact this has on them," says Bertish, who has been deeply moved during each stop, especially the first one at a facility for homeless veterans. "If it has an impact on one person, then one's doing something worthwhile."

Richard III's venal nature wasn't hard to gather, despite the passage of 400 years and the play's thick, flowery language. "He's something else!" one inmate shouted after the newly crowned king slaughtered still more innocents. The inmates also recoiled when the king spit into a courtier's face and giggled at the Elizabethan insults such as "monstrous witch" and "hedgehog."

The watchful prison staff, metal detectors and rows of razor wire outside gave the production an added jolt of paranoia. A cardboard cutout of Barney the purple dinosaur on one wall added a dose of despair.

At the Theodora G. Jackson Adult Center in Queens, about 60 seniors gathered to see the play in the mustard-colored dining room with cinderblock walls, which competed for attention with ringing phones, the scraping of chair legs and the occasional thwack from a nearby game of pool.

The audience — either seated in rows surrounding the center of the room on three sides or lounging at plastic-covered tables further away — politely listened. There were ooohs when Richard successfully and improbably wooed Lady Anne, the wife of a man he had just killed.

"It was really something different. Really a change of pace," Queens native Cecelia Castillo said afterward before returning to the broiling city.

The unrelenting study of one man's murderous quest for power was somewhat undercut by the glittery stars and moons that dangled festively from the ceiling. Many of the women in attendance wore colorful sun hats.

Tracy Reaves, director of the center, which is part of the Jamaica Service Program for Older Adults, said it was the third consecutive year that Shakespeare has been performed at the center.

"We love it. The seniors look forward to it every year," she said. The general reaction was fitting: "A lot of them said that Richard III was crazy. That was pretty much the sentiment."

The play was performed during a month in which the center featured nutrition workshops, arthritis pain management workshops, a talk about diabetes and trips to the Bronx to play bingo.

"Richard III" is a supremely bloody play that ends with a high body count, and Castillo was asked if it wasn't too grim a diversion for an audience in their golden years.

She laughed and said it was no different than anything she'd seen in movies and TV shows lately: "It just goes to show that human nature hasn't changed much over centuries."

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Online:

<http://www.publictheater.org>

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