

# RICHARD III

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



**Richard III may be Shakespeare's most evil character...**

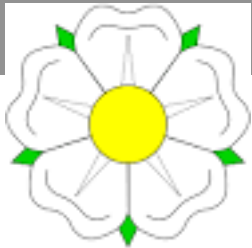
See an ensemble of seven female and gender-fluid performers tackle his rise to power in a story filled with familial manipulation, egregious murder, and political deceit.

**Central Park | June 13 - 25, 2023**

**Brooklyn Commons at MetroTech | June 27 - July 2, 2023**

**Carl Schurz Park | July 4 - 9, 2023**

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Sixteenth-century Portrait of King Richard III

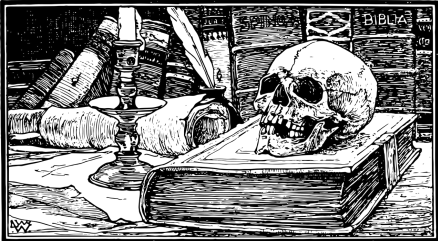
William Shakespeare wrote *Richard III*, a sweeping, tour-de-force history of the love-him or hate-him medieval supervillain, early in his career. The play would secure Shakespeare's reputation as serious playwright, a rival to the vaunted Christopher Marlowe whose plays in the early 1590s were all the rage. *Richard III* was a calculated addition to Shakespeare's budding repertoire, the capstone of his popular tetralogy of plays depicting the violent Wars of the Roses. Crafted to please Elizabeth I and her family with its ending that heralds the first of the Tudors in heroic fashion, it manages to delight everyone else with the titular character's outrageously depraved shenanigans.

*Richard III* would prove to be one of Shakespeare's most popular plays across the four centuries of its existence—it was published in five quarto texts during Shakespeare's life and was the first Shakespeare play to be performed in the early days of the American colonies. It was also, in 1821, the first play produced by a Black theater troupe in America.



Statue of Richard in  
Leicester

***Richard III* is the only Shakespeare play that begins with a soliloquy. Because our audiences have likely not seen the *Henry VI* plays that precede *Richard III*, we begin with some context to bring our audience up to speed.**



***Richard III* is Shakespeare's second longest play (*Hamlet* is the longest) and it includes a whopping 52 speaking roles. Director Stephen Burdman has winnowed that down to 15 for our summer 2023 production.**

Richard is every actor's dream role: he is a scene-chewing character whose closest ally is not a trusty henchman but the audience with whom he confides. In this meta-theatrical conceit, Richard is both the principal actor and playwright of his story: "plots have I laid," he tells the audience conspiratorially. Like every good actor, Richard has an exquisite sense of timing and can wield a prop with dazzling dramatic effect. Audiences can only gape in silent fascination as the mesmerizing, smooth-talking Duke slashes his way through his family members to become king.

This captivating main character also, famously, claims to be disabled—he describes himself as having a non-normative body, and among those who make negative comments on his body are his mother and his soon-to-be wife. The play is thus a fascinating examination of disability and how it signifies.

On top of that, there are ghostly visitations, feats of psychological gamesmanship, dynamic flights of rhetoric that include verbal parrying, cursing and counter-cursing, prophecies, and weighty omens and symbols. As the kids say nowadays, it is "so extra," but only in the best of ways.

## **Time Frame**

*Richard III* is the last of four history plays (a tetralogy) that chronicle England's Wars of the Roses, covering the years 1422-1485 when rival families—Yorks and Lancasters—battled for dominance in bloody and violent shows of power. The series of plays, *Henry VI, Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, and (you guessed it), *Henry VI, Part 3*, culminates in *Richard III*.

*Richard III* covers about 14 years of Richard's life from age 19 to his death at the age of 32. Shakespeare compresses the time frame to make the events seem hurried and the decisions hasty, with Richard a calculating virtuoso of timing.

## Embodying Richard

The coveted role of Richard has been performed by titans of the stage including Richard Burbage (Shakespeare’s leading man), David Garrick, Edwin Booth, Alec Guinness, Laurence Olivier, Ian McKellen, Kenneth Branagh, Al Pacino, and Denzel Washington. Recently, the role has gone to women such as Kathryn Hunt and Danai Gurira and to actors with visible disabilities such as Arthur Hughes.

Disability activism has brought much-needed awareness to the importance of fair casting practices and disability representation on stage. Even so the number of non-disabled actors pretending to be characters with disabilities far exceeds the number of disabled actors playing disabled characters. Delaney Feener is performing Richard in our production, telling his story with the knowledge, experience, and compassion of someone with a disability.

Actors with disabilities should be considered for non-disabled parts, which is one reason we are thrilled to have Pamela Sabaugh playing the Duchess of York and Stanley—juvenile macular degeneration has given Pamela low-vision, but the roles she plays in *Richard III* are not disability-specific.

## Richard’s Body

Richard invites the audience to examine his body closely from the outset. In his opening speech, he draws upon body parts metaphorically, referencing a “deep bosom,” “brows bound,” and “bruised arms,”—but then he shifts into a soliloquy that is more personal and literal:



David Garrick playing Richard III

**Towards the middle of his career, Shakespeare penned a second tetralogy that chronicles the English kings from an earlier period (1499-1422), covering the troubled reign of Richard II through to the triumphs of Henry V.**



**Actor Colley Cibber adapted and simplified Shakespeare’s *Richard III* in 1699—keeping only about 25% of the original play; it was the dominant version of the play for 200 years. The Nahum Tate *King Lear* we presented in 2020 and 2021 was similarly abridged and included a happy ending.**

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# RICHARD III

The Management respectfully announce that Mr. Booth's engagement is for TWO WEEKS ONLY. RESERVED SEAT LIST FOR EITHER OF HIS NIGHTS NOW OPEN.

ON MONDAY EVENING, MAY 12th, 1862

The Performance will commence with the Overture. "Der Frieschutz".....WEBER  
Leader and Musical Director.....Julius Eichenberg

After which, the Celebrated Tragedy, in 5 acts, entitled

# RICHARD III

BY WILLIAM SHAKSPEARE.

DUKE OF GLOSTER.....	Mr. J. WILKES BOOTH
King Henry VI.....	Mr. F. Hardenburgh
Earl of Richmond.....	Wm. Whalley
Lord Stanley.....	Whelock
Duke of Buckingham.....	E. F. Keach
Tressel.....	L. Menapier
Norfolk.....	Whiting
Prince of Wales.....	Miss M. Thompson
Duke of York.....	Miss C. Thompson
Casely.....	J. Wilson
Stafford.....	J. H. Ring
Lord Mayor.....	H. F. McClannin
Lieut. of the Tower.....	G. F. Keachm
Oxford.....	W. J. Hill
Brandon.....	Jamson
Perret.....	Henry
Sir Walter Blount.....	Blake
Nobles, Soldiers, &c.....	Blake
Queen Elizabeth.....	Miss Kate Reynolds
Lady Anne.....	Miss Josephine Orton
Duchess of York.....	Miss Emily Messenger

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,  
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty,  
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,  
Deform'd, unfinished, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up—  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.

(2023 New York Classical Theatre performance script)

This extraordinary speech positions Richard as a man mentally tormented by unspecified congenital disabilities. Tudor propagandists who wrote Shakespeare's source texts had claimed that Richard III was born with a physical disability and then linked that body difference to his malevolent nature. Aside from the evidence of portraits, some of them doctored, and heavily-biased narrative accounts, historians did not *really* know much about Richard III's actual body until 2012, when archeologists discovered his skeleton underneath a parking lot.

**In 1855, John Wilkes Booth debuted on the professional stage in a performance of *Richard III* in Baltimore, MD. He played the white knight, Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond. Later, as above, he played Richard.**

The discovery of Richard's remains on the Greyfriars site in Leicester, England, constitutes a whole other story, equally as fascinating as Richard's eventful but short life. After the Bosworth Field battle, it had been rumored that Richard's body was taken to the Greyfriars Priory and hastily and unceremoniously buried in the churchyard. During the Reformation, that church was destroyed. For years, historians had been advancing theories that Richard's body was still there at the site. Eventually, archeologists began to unearth what had been the church grounds. The odds of finding Richard's remains were close to zero—but find them they did. Carbon dating and DNA analysis confirmed that the skeleton was Richard's. Scientists were also able to determine that Richard did indeed have a disability—he had had a condition called scoliosis (a curvature of the spine) but not a hunchback or one of the many other bodily differences attributed to him by the Tudor chroniclers.



For literary scholars, the question of Richard's disability centers on whether the text suggests his body preordains him for villainy, a medieval, ableist notion, or whether the text suggests his body, and the way it has been treated, has frustrated and angered him to the point of seizing power through violence, a more modern, but still ableist viewpoint. It is worth mentioning that Richard's body does not prevent him from riding a horse and wielding a sword; in fact, he finds distinct power in his body.

## Tudor Myth-Making

The historical figure of Richard III has inspired haters and lovers. In Shakespeare's storytelling, the king is an outright, unrepentant villain with a "monstrous" body who murders his way into power, killing his own family members, including children. Shakespeare's sources for the play were written by propagandists eager to reinforce the Tudor claim to the throne by juxtaposing the villainous Richard with his killer and successor, Elizabeth I's paternal grandfather, Henry VII. Shakespeare's primary source was Sir Thomas More's *The History of King Richard III*, a 1513 prose tract that calls on Christian themes to celebrate the accession Henry VII as a moral inverse of a wicked, devilish Richard—Richmond (as he is called before he accedes as King Henry VII) becomes a Christ-like savior of England, which he redeems from the clutches of a tyrannical cacodemon whose disfigured body analogizes his disfigured soul. Later chroniclers followed More's precedent and it became difficult to separate fact from fiction.

**Good things come in threes!**  
**This is the 3rd *Richard III* for director Stephen Burdman and also the 3rd *Richard III* for actor Brianna Gibson Reeves who plays King Edward and Catesby.**



Myths inspire counter-narratives, and unsurprisingly, Richard has spawned an avid group of vindicators: the Richard III Society, "working since 1924 to secure a more balanced assessment of the king and to support research into his life and times." The society is supported by the current Duke of Gloucester, has its own historical journal, *The Ricardian*, a magazine published quarterly, *The Ricardian Bulletin*, and regular meetings of the members. It has branches in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the European continent. Richard III Society member Philippa Langley was the engine behind the recovery of Richard's body at the Greyfriars site.

## Gender

No woman trusts Richard, not even his mother. The female characters are on to him from the start. [Note, spoilers ahead!] They are also the only people to outsmart Richard. First his mother and the former queen avoid his murderous rampage by “seeking sanctuary,” whereby they remove themselves from court and cloister in the church where Richard cannot harm them. Then they secretly arrange for Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, later Henry VII, to marry the young princess Elizabeth whom Richard hopes to wed to further solidify his claim to the throne. The outspoken, crafty female characters in this play are one reason it is so much fun to have women and gender fluid actors playing all the roles in our production. It was only through a female relative of Richard’s that scientists were able to identify his remains, since the king left no living descendants. A line descending from Richard’s sister, Anne of York, led to a woman in Canada by the name of Joy Ibsen (!). Her son, Michael Ibsen, provided the mitochondrial DNA for comparison with the DNA of the parking lot skeleton.



Anne Neville, Richard's Queen, from a 15th-century drawing

## Animals

Richard's emblem was the white boar. Shakespeare uses this association to remind us that Richard was rumored to have been born with teeth. Characters in the play call upon a veritable bestiary to dehumanize the king. In addition to boars, listen for references to dogs, horses, toads, spiders, a cockatrice, and even a hedgehog!



## Richard III in America

*Richard III* was the first Shakespeare play by a professional theater staged in New York City, and it has remained popular on our side of the Atlantic ever since. Was it the play's celebration of rebellion against tyranny that made it so hard to resist?

Charles Taft was the first Black actor to play Richard III in America or elsewhere. Taft had been enslaved and was working as a waiter at the Shakespeare Tavern (situated right across the street from New York Classical's office on Nassau Street in lower Manhattan). Miss S. Welsh played Lady Anne and the Prince of Wales. They were actors in William Alexander Brown's African Theatre Company, which for a short time, gained attention and box office from early nineteenth-century New Yorkers until the actors were brutally harassed off the stage. Taft was succeeded in the role by James Hewlett, who may have learned the part by watching English actors play Richard at the Park Theater. Hewlett went on to tour the country with his songs and sketches. Richard III was always part of his repertoire



James Hewlett as Richard III in the 1820s

## Enjoy the Show!

**Dramaturgy by Dr. Sid Ray, Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Pace University, and proud New York Classical Theatre Board Member**

## Historical Timeline

1452—Richard is born, son of Richard, Duke of York, and Cecily Neville, Duchess of York. He has two living older brothers, Edward and Clarence.

1471—Richard, age 19, leads the vanguard for the Yorks (House of the White Rose) against the Lancasters (House of the Red Rose) at the pivotal battle of Tewksbury during the War of the Roses. Deposed king Henry VI dies, leaving Edward IV, Richard's elder brother, unchallenged as king. The historical Richard finds himself 6th in line to the throne.

1472—Richard marries Lady Anne Neville, who had been betrothed to Edward, Prince of Wales, heir to Lancastrian Henry VI's throne. Edward had been killed at the Battle of Tewksbury. It is a politically advantageous match for Richard.

1477—Clarence is executed at the Tower of London, perhaps drowned in a wine cask (a butt of malmsey). His children are subsequently barred from inheriting the throne because of their father's supposed treason. The historical Richard jumps to 3rd in line to the throne. Our Richard is second in line behind the Prince of Wales.

April 1483—Edward IV dies and is succeeded by his 12-year-old son, Edward V, leaving the historical Richard two young heart beats from the throne. Edward's death leaves our Richard III one young heart beat away.

June 1483—Edward V and his younger brother, having been sent to the Tower, are declared illegitimate, and are never seen again. Our production features only the twelve-year-old Edward. Richard III is crowned king.

March 1485—Queen Anne dies. Of what? We are not sure.

August 1485—Battle of Bosworth Field



1485—Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond is crowned King Henry VII and marries Elizabeth of York, ending the Wars and ushering in the Tudor era, which lasted less than 100 years.

1513—Sir Thomas More begins writing *The History of Richard III*, a Tudor propaganda piece defaming Richard III.

1548—Edward Hall writes *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, much of it based on More's tract.



1577—Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Wales* is published and available to Shakespeare.

1587—*The Mirrour for Magistrates*, another of Shakespeare's sources, is published.

1591—Shakespeare writes *Richard III*, concluding his popular tetralogy of plays covering the Wars of the Roses.

1592/3—*Richard III* is likely first performed.

1597—*Richard III* is published in quarto (pocket-sized form) as a tragedy. It is published in 4 more editions during Shakespeare's lifetime, a testament to its enduring popularity with audiences and readers.

1623—*Richard III* is included in the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, this time denoted as a history. This year—2023—marks 400 years since the publication of the First Folio.

1633—*Richard III* is performed for King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria. King Charles is beheaded in 1642.

1741—David Garrick plays Richard III. Garrick's acting style is natural and realistic, less declamatory than that of other actors.

1944—Laurence Olivier plays Richard III on film, rolling every "R," limping, with a hunchback and a prosthetic nose. It is campy and indelible.

2003—The Globe mounts an all-female production of *Richard III* in London, with Kathryn Hunter as Richard.

2012—A skeleton is discovered under a car park, bent, with clear indications of scoliosis at the excavation of Greyfriars Priory in Leicester, England. The skeleton bears evidence of sword and dagger injuries, including deep cuts to the pelvis and scalp.

2013—Announcement is made that the skeleton is that of Richard III—after extensive review including carbon dating and DNA analysis.

2015—Richard III's remains are reinterred at Leicester Cathedral.