



Theatre Reviews

***Richard II*. Adapted by Brad Fraser; conceived and directed by Jillian Keiley. Stratford Festival, Stratford, Ontario, Canada, 2023.**

Reviewed by *Cynthia J. Cyrus**

And Then There Were the Disco Angels: *Richard II* at the Stratford Festival

Imagine Richard II, divinely sanctioned, supremely self-assured—and strutting his stuff in a disco-club world of the 1980s. Surround him with an angel choir, with flat white wings, to frame and echo the king’s actions. Place them on the dance floor, with Richard’s dramatic shimmies and upward-reaching arms the most exaggerated, the most noticeable, the kingliest of actions. The Stratford Festival introduces us to a profoundly queer Richard II, one whose lusts and affections match his sense of the place ordained for him in the world. His costume is vivid, bordering on garish: vibrantly white leggings, bedecked with abundant white fringe; his also-white crop-tops which alternate with the swish of a negligée-like sheer ruffled robe (Image 1, below); and his platform boots. These match his grinding, thrusting, human-desirous dance moves. Yet, disco is here a kind of self-betrayal, for the habits of the club so distort the actions of the king that he must, as the story goes, be both unfriended and unkinged, his disco ball transformed into the dome of a prison cell. His friends—Bushy and Green in their fancy black costumes and a black-and-white garbed Aumerle who becomes the focus of the king’s amatory seduction—fall away as we shift to the prissier office subculture of grey suits with ironed creases and the more ordered actions of Bolingbroke, Lady (!) Northumberland, and a glitteringly-garbed Hotspur.

In this profoundly moving production, director Jillian Keiley commissioned a score from Rhapsodius (also known as Andrew Craig), a composer and omni-talented musician active in the Ontario arts scene. Rhapsodius founded and continues to direct the Culchahworks Arts Collective, with its strong emphasis

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on creating musical spaces for people of colour (“About Us”). In terms of his own musical style, he seeks a “nexus point at the centre of Black music genres that originated in North America and the Caribbean” (Craig). For the Stratford Festival production, Rhapsodius has provided a disco-centered score to match the disco-affiliated king. His score calls regularly on the tropes of club music: pulsing dance beat, the thrum of harmonic layering with its repetitive motivic patterns, and the superimposition of upper-register strings, voices, or electronica that add a sense of tunefulness without distraction. Voices are wordless, and tunes dissolve back into the texture without ever fully reaching preeminence. Thus, the audience is guided to watch the dancers’ movements, for gaudy costumes and visual displays ultimately surpass even the catchy auditory element that provokes them.

But disco is not the only kind of music in this production. The events that follow the invasion of Ireland in particular call forth different techniques. A simple melody over a drone expands into parallel moving thirds as Hotspur gives an (inserted) report of the dissipation of Bolingbroke’s cash legacy, for example, music that becomes the dirge of Richard’s hope as we come to his meditation that he must shift from “gay apparel [to] an almsman’s gown” (3:3:154). Most notable of these musical gestures is the choral tone cluster that accumulates as Richard gives up crown and scepter (4:1:212ff). The choir starts by adding voices below and then above a sustained reference pitch to create a wall of dissonance, an aural manifestation of the tensions of this act of self-undoing, as Richard forswears the “pomp and majesty” of his kingly office and releases “all duteous oaths.” Rhapsodius amplifies the intensity of this scene through varied instrumentation as Richard gives away one by one all the elements that formerly defined his world, until there is a release into the thrumming footsteps that accompany the debased king’s march to the tower. This unkinging is, significantly, a palindromic moment with the very beginning of the production. At the start of the evening, before we even arrive at the club scene, the thumping of a booted procession intersects with the high vocalizations gradually pulled outward by seconds into a tone cluster before giving way with an abrupt reveal to the disco language and dance-club energy of the nightclub crowd. From boot-stomps to sound walls to dance and back: Richard’s journey is acoustically managed.

This is far from the first disco-inspired reimagining of a Shakespearean play. From the “discotheque atmosphere” of a 1981-1982 Finnish production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Mustanoja 239) to the Sydney, Australia original production of *Disco Nights*—Wesley Colford’s cross between *Twelfth Night* and the 1970s dance idiom—disco music has been a creative tool for what Colford characterizes as “flair and theatrics” (qtd. in Patterson D3). Disco seems to match well with Shakespearean comedy; it also situates Shakespeare as something relatively modern, as Kevin Wetmore argues. He believes that

the use of rock and disco brings Shakespeare into a seeming distance of decades rather than centuries, “making his work only twenty years distant in the past rather than four hundred” (59). It is a publicly approachable Shakespeare, in other words, adapted to modern sensibilities and appealing to the listening habits of a contemporary audience.

But the disco activity of the Stratford Festival’s *Richard II* takes a more serious approach to the popular genre, spinning out world centered on a hedonistic, queer disco. Set in the 1970s/1980s disco realm of New York City, the production is imagined in a world that post-dates the 1979 Disco Demolition Night at Chicago’s Comiskey Park, where an openly disco-hostile crowd was invited to smash disco records in an event that led to a riot. What had been the casual joy of the early disco movement was more fraught after the event, which had strong homophobic overtones (Finamore; Hubbs 231-232; Lawrence 242-243). Of course, continuities in disco culture from the 1970s to the 1980s include a three-fold emphasis: first, on a heterogeneous dance clientele (echoed here with the varied casting within the Angel Army), second, on what Tim Lawrence has dubbed “collective sociality” of club choreographies (234), and third, on the varied nature of the music sampled over the course of a particular evening. All three elements are echoed in the score and choreography of the Stratford production. But we see as well the open tensions of this post-Comiskey disco of the 1980s, in which a disco-club crowd would itself be aware of the disrepute of the genre among the stodgier members of society. The setting makes visible through choreography, costume design and lighting choices the aesthetic and political tensions which the style (and its social milieu) called to mind. Indeed, the Stratford production capitalizes on the resultant social marginalization of the disco crowd: we are fully aware that there’s an “in crowd” surrounding Richard, and a disapproving one looking on with disdain.

A second element specific to the 1980s iteration of disco is the sweeping impact of the AIDS epidemic. As part of his adaptation strategy, which shortens the play and shifts its footing to the club environment, Brad Fraser has chosen to borrow elements from elsewhere. He turns to *Henry IV, Part 2*, for instance, and inserts the claims of declining health of Falstaff’s recruit Bullcalf captured in a “cough [...] which I caught with ringing in the King’s affairs” (3:2:187). Shakespeare’s portrayal of illness maps neatly onto the pervading concern of the disco community, for, as Nina de Koning and others have discussed at length, AIDS as well as an emotive sexuality are each part of the psychological complexities of the disco experience of the 1980s.

In a similar scholarly vein, Adam Hansen has made the point that disco sits at the intersection of gay and black cultures (50), and the production here casts the leading roles accordingly. Like the 2020 production of *Richard II* by Saheem Ali, both Richard II and Bolingbroke are played by black actors in what Ali has characterized as “color conscious casting,” which adds a layer of racial

dynamic to the interpretation of the play (Dale 2020). In watching Stratford's Richard II (Stephen Jackman-Torkoff) transfer the crown to Bolingbroke (Jordin Hall), we watch a power transfer from one person of colour to another. But whereas Ali's production added gender to the mix by making Bolingbroke female, the Stratford production dwells on questions of human attraction—queer desire—, the visually enacted lusts of the king an external signal of his interior fallibility.

Yet the critique on offer here is not directed toward what amounts to the affirmational and upbeat club environment, that imagined land where dancing angels dwell (Image 2), but instead addresses the cruelty of bland bureaucracy. As the grey suits of Bolingbroke's faction (Image 3) triumph over the flashier world of clubbing, the petty meanness of having Richard enumerate his sins—his acts and even his identity—evokes the modern truisms of the “nothing to hide” argument. The Countess of Northumberland, played in this re-gendered role by Sarah Orenstein, shows us the political reality of a state which possesses the power both to decree an end to private detail and to force the individual to become complicit with telling on themselves. This strips away what philosopher Emilio Mordini frames as “an inner space, which is called ‘private’:

It is not essential that this space holds anything, yet it is essential that each individual has the impression that they own the keys to enter this space and have the power to open and close the door of this private realm. Privacy is not in what we hide but in having the power to hide something. (257)

With the loss of his kingship, Richard has lost the power to defend this inner sanctum; he is compelled bureaucratically to “read / These accusations and these grievous crimes / Committed by your person and your followers” (4:1:232-234). Such a tolling-out of sins, demanded repeatedly by Lady Northumberland, ineluctably attempts to reframe Richard's dance-energized disco persona as a failure. He has neglected to construct an interiority appropriate to the kingship. Yet even in this moment of undoing, this Richard, once proud in white fringe, still possesses something of his own: that grief which “lies all within” (4:1:307), with reverberations from his earlier breakdown at the death of friends Bushy and Green. But just as the partisans in grey suits lacked an appreciation of Richard's club scene, they are equally indifferent to his losses, “the unseen grief / That swells with silence in the tortured soul” (4:1:309-310). Bureaucrats, as both Shakespeare play and Stratford production show, lack empathy. Grey on the outside; equally grey on the inside: costume can be a powerful metaphor.

Throughout the production, imagery is handled through moveable but sparse staging. Mirrored boxes move about to shape the spaces of the stage. Similarly, plastic sheeting can unfurl to become the surface of a pool, can cover a character to make visual the pressure of a coughing fit, can become a shroud.

A few props—the disco ball, the mirror, the sticks which, hooked to the former disco ball, form prison walls—enhance the story, but often the physical positioning of characters tells us who is “in” a conversation and who might be overhearing it. (The Duchess of York’s wheelchair is not a prop but a mobility tool, which speaks to the inclusive casting of the production.) More memorable are the costumes, closely tied to political identities; costume designer Bretta Gerecke deserves a special shout-out for these important visual clues to character type and affiliation as the images (below) show.

Given the affirmational queer disco setting of the Stratford production, there are visual parallels to queer productions from an earlier generation. Chad Allen Thomas’s research on Citizens Theatre (Citz) from Scotland, for instance, has explored the ways in which their productions were simultaneously queer and “Shakespeare.” Thomas finds that Citz productions were “typified by young actors, outrageous actions, raw sexuality, irreverent tone, and frenetic energy” (246), and much the same could be said of the Stratford performance. Both the Citz production of *Cleopatra* (1972) and the Stratford production of *Richard II* (2023) share a focus on the body, clothed and unclothed, as a focus of desire, and on the sexual energy of the young cast. The Citz, Thomas notes, “puts [the actor’s] masculine body on display, exposing his bare torso, pectoral definition, and flat chest” (260). This could equally well apply to Jackman-Torkoff’s costuming, with its strikingly androgynous clothing and ample glimpses of skin. There is a generational difference, however. Whereas queer strategies at the Citz often focused on “cross-gender casting [...] and a coarse acting style” (Thomas 248), the Stratford approach is more comfortable with queerness and more self-consciously inclusive in its approach. Rather than the testosterone emphasis of Citz’s mostly-male casting, Keiley has opted for a comfortably queer Richard, a seducible Lord Aumerle, for women as wives and mothers, re-gendered roles for Northumberland and Scroop, and for the passionate, energized omni-sexuality of the disco floor.

In *Shakespeareer*, Judith Brown characterized Richard II a “superficial king, the king of glam.” For her, King Richard wants “a world tailored to his desires,” but the play, in her reading, “only just *alludes* to Richard’s pleasures—what it actually narrates is their loss and Richard’s painful struggle to understand, then inhabit, this loss” (287, 288). The Stratford production, in contrast to the reading Brown provides, pulls Richard’s pleasures into both visual and acoustical focus. We revel with the revelers, and take our joys from the joyous, carnivalesque milieu. And then we, alongside the once-mighty king, watch and listen as glamour is curtailed and the notes of the vibrant, invigorating score come to an untimely end.

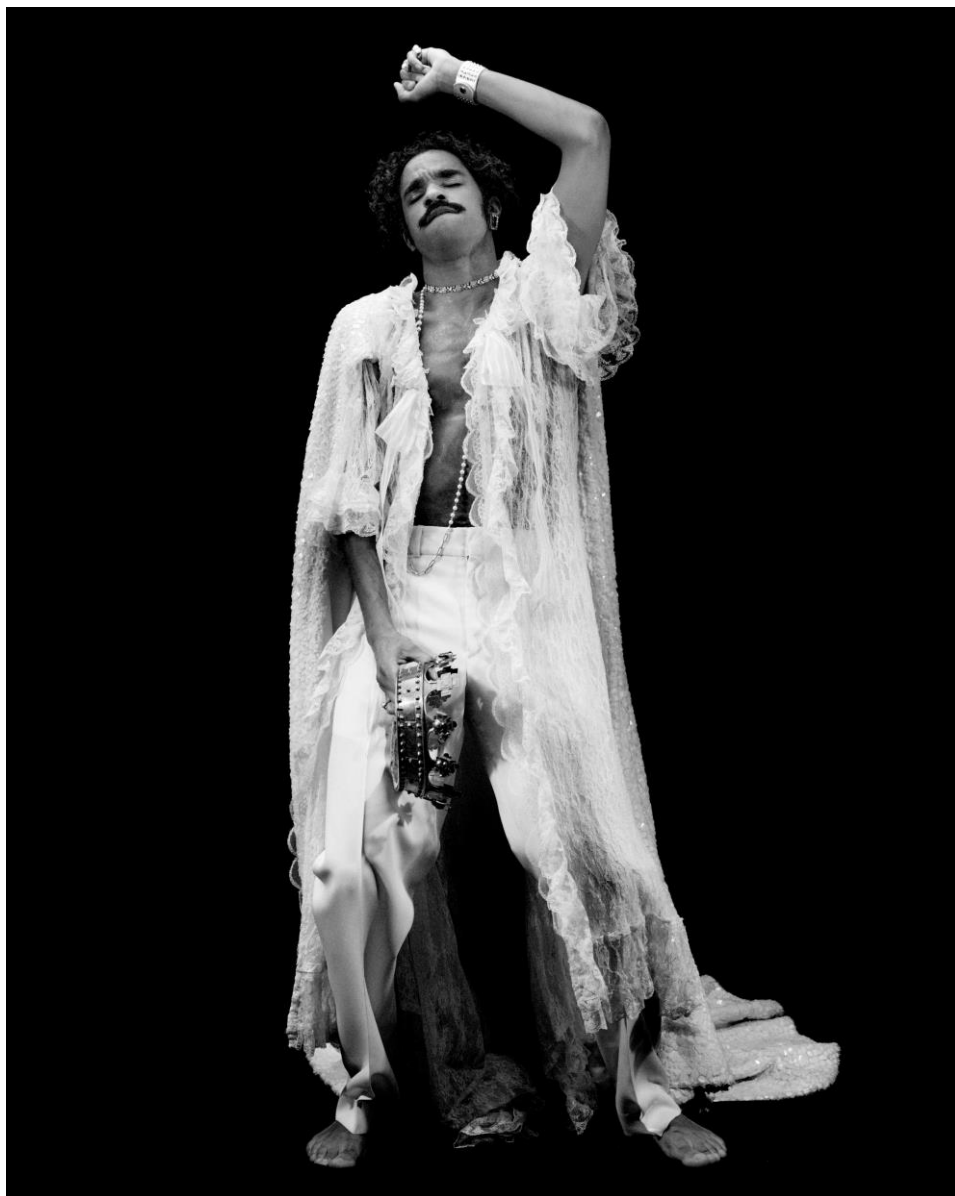


Image 1: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff as King Richard II
Photograph by Ted Belton



Image 2: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff (centre) as King Richard II with members of the company. Photograph by David Hou



Image 3: Stephen Jackman-Torkoff as King Richard II, Jordin Hall as Henry Bolingbroke (centre-left), Sarah Orenstein as Helena Percy, Countess of Northumberland (left), Olivia Sinclair-Brisbane and Alex Wierzbicki as angels
Photograph by David Hou

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